Jongdae dreams of becoming a singer and quitting his job at the bakery, but on the day his dream could finally come true things take a turn for the worst. He comes across a trail leading to his best friend, who had gone missing over a year ago traveling between different worlds. Jongdae is determined to get his friend back, but along the way he finds far more than he’d bargained for.
It's done!
When I signed up for this challenge, I did it on a whim, having read so many great entries of last year's round. Back then, I had absolutely nothing of this planned. I only had two betas and one test reader - I'm specifically emphasizing the 'only' part, cause that's not a lot of people for such a monster *pun not intended*, and that makes everything they did to support me all the more precious.
Thanks to texturedjeans, my confidante no.1, who encouraged me to sign up and accompanied me from scratch, watching all the odd stages this fic went through and listened to me whenever I whined about my characters being outta control and Chen being too good of a person. You can mainly thank her for not having to suffer from my non-nativeness.
Another big thanks goes to holylipsusmini, who tolerated me being clumsy with the time difference, always listened and encouraged me and was generally available at an alarming amount of time (yet still told me to go to sleep more than once).
I'd also like to thank byunshaeckery for test-reading and nudging me into the right direction regarding punctuation, and my boyfriend, though he'll (hopefully?) never get to read this, haha~ I learnt a LOT from all of them.
Last but not least, I'd like to thank the mods for organizing this whole challenge - your professionalism is highly impressive and I hope you enjoyed this challenge, cause I sure did!

While this work is far from perfect, I truly poured my life into it for about seven months, so I hope you'll enjoy my addition to the far-too small number of Chen-centered fics! c:

You can find my playlist with specific character themes here:
http://www.asianfanfics.com/blog/view/1154456

This fic may deal with a few thought-provoking or complex themes - if you have any questions at all or just feel like sharing your own thoughts on anything, feel free to do so, anonymously or not! I'll be delighted to read them~

Love,
Sugar_and_Salt♡

"Are you sure you don't want me to accompany you to the council?"
Jongdae graciously dismissed his friend's worries with a wave of his hand.
"Don't worry about it. You've still got a lot of work to do, don't you? I'll be fine."
He gestured at the table in front of him where Yifan was currently stacking up various piles of paper, creating an organized mess threatening to fall off on either side of the teacher's desk; just how he
liked it. There were a few drawings while others contained clumsily written essays or a mixture of both. Despite the obvious load of work Yifan hesitated since he was a nice friend like that.

"If you say so..."

"I do say so."

Jongdae left his feet to dangle back and forth as he steadied his weight on both hands and enjoyed a few early sunrays as well as the fresh breeze entering through the opened window. If only one kid would have been around, his friend would have forced him to move his behind from the desk but as it were, the room was deserted with all the children still milling around outside.

"Yeah, you'd rather take Minseok with you, wouldn't you?" the blond mumbled deprecatingly.

The moment it had been said Yifan stilled in the midst of gently placing another drawing in its rightful place, the words already catching up to prick him with guilt.

He hurried to take it back with a weak grin.

"Sorry, I-

"Minseok's not coming either." Jongdae softly said, looking out of the classroom's window into the tiny yard below.

"Oh. Why not?" Yifan quickly asked, trying to make up for his earlier mishap.

Jongdae flashed him a reassuring smile. He knew exactly what was going on in Yifan's mind and trying to sound like a jealous prick surely wasn't it. It wasn't that he had a problem with him hanging out with Minseok per se. It was true that he had known Minseok for far longer and Yifan only entered the picture roughly about three years ago when a tipsy Jongdae had invited the lost-looking boy to join his 16th birthday party on a whim. Back then Minseok had only laughed at his antics in resignation but in the end he was the one suggesting they should stay in contact. That was just the way Minseok was. People often mistook him for a dispassionate person since he was the quiet type. And Jongdae knew that the emotions he expressed publicly weren't necessarily the ones he actually felt.

Yifan, on the other hand, was an open book the moment he realized that he was born with this strict-looking features (then again Jongdae had felt so from the moment he saw him so he liked to think he had an eye for people).

Even now he could see the insecurity flickering across his eyes and he so willed his voice to sound casual.

"He's out of town." he remarked and with a huff he jumped off the table, stretching his arms above his head. Yifan only nodded faintly and even flinched as Jongdae's hand landed on his shoulder.

"Anyway, I'm going now! See you later. Don't let the kids get the best of you."

The tiny smile he got in return only confirmed him in thinking that he was the one needing protection and not the kids. Yifan's heart was soft as a kitten's fur, after all.

"Yeah, see you."

He was already half-way down the hallway when his friend called after him one more time, standing in the door frame.

"Jongdae!"

He hesitated for only a second under Jongdae's questioning gaze.

"...You can do it. I know you can."

He only smiled and gave him two thumbs up, his step decisively lighter as he left the school.

Knowing that Yifan would brush aside all his little insecurities in favor of supporting him made him feel eternally grateful. After all, it wasn’t exactly a secret that Yifan would never get over his jealousy towards Minseok.

The sound of Jongdae humming under his breath was drowned out by the sound of cheap carriages bumping against the cobble stones. His eyes absently ran over the coarse bricks, mostly polished by nothing but the steady feet, tires and hooves stomping over it.

He'd heard that other Layers had floors so polished one could see their own reflection in it while women would wear pointed heels, viciously clicking with every step.

It sounded ridiculous, obviously, but Jongdae had no doubts about his sources. After all it had been
Minseok himself who told him these things, eagerly whispered into the night after returning from his very first trip.

Another thing Jongdae was deadly curious about aside from the architecture were the people. Were they any different from here? They had to be. After all, not everyone was granted a visit on another Layer, much less a permanent visa.

Alright, it was admittedly easy to get to the next one. But the one Minseok had been to - the one Jongdae was headed to - lay three spots above their current one in the official rank.

Of course the Layers weren't physically higher, though Jongdae remembered his naive days as a little kid where he had drawn exactly that - an orange platform marking their home with many simple houses and another platform hovering in the air full of intensely blue sky scrapers with his dad flying up there in a flash like a superhero. He'd love to forget this drawing and maybe one day his grandma would actually take down the framed version.

Back then his kindergarten teacher had even praised him for the drawing, not for its orthographic accuracy but rather the social one who Jongdae understood much later.

If one aimed to step into a Layer scoring higher on the ranking, he or she had to pass the evaluation first and foremost. Each Layer handled the actual content of evaluation differently but from Yifan and Minseok he'd already heard that it was fairly easy, nothing but a questionnaire regarding his behavior in various situations. The higher the destination lay however, the higher the standards that had to be fulfilled.

And he clearly remembered Minseok saying that the evaluation for the blue Layer consisted of a personal talk where he had to be the one asking the right questions to prove his intelligence.

Needless to say that he had passed without breaking into a sweat. In the case of Minseok who had already had his job at a well-known architecture company confirmed it was probably more of a formality than anything.

Today Jongdae wouldn't be taking the evaluations though. He was technically allowed to, had been since his 16th birthday, but faithful to the promise his mother had forced out of him he was determined to restrain himself until the end of his traineeship.

Maybe any other teenager would have made a fuss about it but Jongdae wasn't any other teenager and after his older sister had gotten her visa and left to never return he had enough pity to outweigh the curiosity.

No, today he was going to get a temporary visa since he had signed up for an audition at one of the most well-known talent agencies managing singers. It had taken him two pre-auditions at their local theater and about two weeks of relentless talking to persuade his mother but now the day had come and there were no more tests to be passed until he could step in front of the audience he had seen over the square's public screen every so often. Or that's what he would have loved to say.

He was just crossing said square and looked at the big screen set up to permanently inform them about the happenings in the world as well as entertain the bunch of people settled in front of it. He'd also heard that technical stuff like this wasn't as rare over there as it was here. For a moment he stillled, turning yet again into one of those less financially blessed people who couldn't afford a small screen for their home. At the moment it showed the news, talking about the latest political issues with the yellow Layer as well as reporting the damages a storm had caused on one of the darker ones. He still had a lot of time to spare so he stood there, waiting until the hourly news overview was over and the entertainment program was introduced by a music video. Jongdae instantly felt the anxious churning in his stomach turn into one of excitement as he saw his favorite music group sing and dance on screen. He wasn't merely lucky to see them now - in fact the guys and girls of WhiteHeart were shown so frequently that most people were either sick of them or utterly in love by now.

Jongdae obviously belonged into the second category and seeing them gave him the necessary boost of courage he direly needed. So he sucked in a deep breath, eyes fixated onto the screen before closing them, trying to burn the image into the back of his head.

I want to do this, he thought.

That's where I wanna be.

That's where I'm going now.
"Are you alright?"
Jongdae almost jumped at the sudden question, opened his eyes and looked to the side to be met with big brown orbs that were entirely too close for comfort, making him jump for real this time.
"Woah," he mumbled, blinking the shock away, "I mean yeah. I'm alright."
The stranger merely laughed, drew back and straightened his posture, revealing himself to be much taller than Jongdae himself.
"Okay then. Thought you might feel sick or something."
He felt slightly offended at this, crossing his arms as he scrutinized the guy. Something about him seemed familiar.
"Sick? That was my 'I'm mentally preparing myself face'." he gave back before he realized it, making the guy laugh even more. Normally Jongdae wasn't keen enough on a conversation with a stranger he'd never meet again anyway. Must be the nerves.
"Really? I'm so sorry for interrupting you then." he said with amusement twinkling in his eyes.
"You're forgiven. Seriously now, thanks for the worry. Gotta go though."
The tall guy saluted mockingly.
"Gotcha. Good luck on whatever you were preparing for."
"Thank you." Jongdae replied slightly perplexed as he turned to finally head for the council building. What a rare thing to be approached by a stranger like that, he thought. He would have probably shot him down more noncommittally if not for his 'one hair-width from having a panic attack'-state. Still, now was not the time to try and recall where he had seen this guy before. The council was already in sight and he had to scrape together every ounce of courage he could find.
After all, the evaluations weren't the only hurdle to overcome.

Half an hour later Jongdae found himself leaning back in a chair, his eyes roaming casually over the sterile pale orange of the walls. They gave the otherwise windowless room a rather warm feeling. There were two machines in the room that looked pretty high tech, their constant buzzing comforting him in his current solitude. He had never grown fond of examination rooms. Neither did he find them particularly interesting though this one had the orange and the machine going for it.
Minseok had once told him that any medical institution hosted by the council was clad in the Layer's official color. He was now pretty glad that only a thin stripe below the ceiling had been painted in the intense orange his home was known under. Or else he'd probably be teary-eyed by now. The dull sound of a door opening ripped him from his thoughts and he quickly sat up to greet his doctor. He'd guess him to be in his mid-thirties and while his statue was rather robust, his expression showed nothing but gentleness.
"Good morning Mr. Kim. I'm Bang Yongguk and I'll be the one to take care of you today."
"Good morning." Jongdae gave back, returning the handshake with a happy smile and effectively concealing his nervousness.
The doctor took a seat on the simple stool next to him and placed a few papers on the table before turning his whole body to him.
"You are here to get your compatibility tested, am I right?" he inquired calmly and Jongdae nodded, humming in agreement.
"That's right."
"You know how the process works?"
Jongdae made a vague sound, tilting his head from side to side.
"A friend told me about it so... Kind of? I guess?"
The doctor didn't seem perturbed, the gentle smile never fading.
"Alright. I know it may seem like a bother to you but it's my duty to tell you a thing or two before we start. Just for the protocol, so you know what you're getting into."
"Okay."
He must have sensed the minuscule tension behind the two syllables and lifted his hands in a soothing motion.
"Don't worry. This is a routine check up and I can assure you that while some people don't show
compatibility -only very few at that- we have only recorded about two people in a million to show a negative reaction."
Two in a million. Jongdae had just begun to run the subjective estimation of the bad luck he'd had throughout his life when the doctor went on, rustling with one of the papers in his hands without looking down at them.
"Alright then. Let me tell you what we're about to do. You are most likely aware of the fact that all the Layers humans have access to are overlaying each other."
Jongdae nodded. Everyone knew that. You saw it on TV all the time - people standing in a run-down council room only to shift into another area where everything looked completely different and advanced. The process would usually be depicted by many lights and sparkles though and that's where Jongdae wasn't too sure on whether he had the right idea.
"And yet you're sitting here, both feet firmly standing on this orange Layer. What is stopping you from stepping into another Layer right this second?"
"The fact that I'd probably shift right into a mountain?" Jongdae joked dryly and the doctor chuckled in response.
"That may be true. We're extremely below the normal null height. What else?"
"My body is missing the substances that enable me to do so?" he tried carefully, wondering whether the expected answer was just that easy.
"Exactly. Your body is not aware of any other structure. You need the injection to enable your body to feel them and ultimately cross over. I'm sorry if I'm boring you right now." he interrupted himself, an apologetic smile on his face. Jongdae hurried to dismiss the worry.
"No no! It's alright. I'm listening closely. I'd take notes but I don't have a notepad so, yeah. I'm all ears."
He realized that he probably sounded sarcastic about it but it was just his way of coping with nervousness; a bad habit that the doctor seemed to understand.
"It's always good to be appreciated." he added with a playful smile before launching back into the lecture.
"The substances' composition varies on the Layer you're heading to, obviously. But the most basic active component, the one enabling you to feel structures in the first place, stays the same. No matter whether you wanna go to some high society, the darkest war zone or right into the Yellow palace - you need to be receptive to this substance."
"And this is the one you're testing me on." Jongdae concluded, slowly getting impatient.
"Exactly. There are always patients claiming that they weren't aware of this fact and now you are definitely not gonna be one of them, hm? Great."
He turned to his desk and clicked his pen once, ticking off a few points on his paper.
"You're informed about the ridiculously low risk, the fact that no shifting will be possible if the compatibility isn't given, not just shift from anywhere, bonus point for the knowledge about our geographical position-"
"You're kidding, right?"
The doctor didn't even look up as he placed his signature at the bottom.
"U-huh. I'd give you the points if there were any though. Anyway - now that we're done with the educational talk, let me re-check: you're 18 years old, height is 173 cm, weight 65kg?"
"Yes. That's correct."
"Alright. You can roll up your sleeves, the crook of your arm should be visible."
"Right or left?"
The doctor didn't even look up as he prepared the injection with his back to Jongdae.
Jongdae obliged, baring his right arm which was still void of any markings but the one right over his pulse point, signalizing his birth place. The orange symbol was about the size of his thumb's nail and showed a clean semi circle, barely ornated with the roundish side pointing towards his palm. He was actually quite fond of it, even after comparing it to other Layer's crests in his school book. It symbolized the setting sun and was supposed to mirror warmth and a welcoming attitude. For some reason the guy from earlier popped up in his head. Going out of his way to ask a stranger about his
well-being was certainly a good representation of their values. "Alright, I hope you're not scared by needles or anything," the doctor calmly said as he took a seat by his side once more.

He only shook his head in response and placed his arm on the rest, feeling the cool sensation of antiseptic being wiped on the skin over a clearly visible vein.

Usually Jongdae liked to avert his gaze, preferring not to see how deep a syringe needle could reach into his arm. This time he kept his eyes focused on the process though, attentively watching the clear liquid disappearing from the chamber.

The doctor's nonchalant demeanor confirmed his security about this being a routinary task and while he threw the disposable items into a trash bin Jongdae kept staring at his arm as if waiting for a miracle to happen right this instant.

Noticing this, the doctor chuckled. "Just lean back and relax. It's gonna take approximately fifteen to thirty minutes until the effect's gonna be noticeable."

If they're gonna kick in, Jongdae thought anxiously but he followed the advice nonetheless, leaning back to once again stare at the ceiling.

"How am I gonna notice it? Like, will it hurt or anything?" he asked as he closed his eyes, letting the sounds of the doctor's bustling distract him from the churning feeling in his stomach.

"That would be an alarming signal. It's difficult to describe it but I've heard patients saying it felt like standing in the middle of an intricate spider web."

"Really? Ew." he mumbled involuntarily and the calm chuckle distanced itself, telling him that the doctor was leaving.

"I personally don't think it's that bad of a sensation. I'll tend to another patient now but I'll be back in half an hour. If you experience any discomfort, don't hesitate to call out, the nurse is gonna hear you."

"Okay."

The following 18 minutes were probably the longest in his entire life and Jongdae began to wonder whether the effect would kick in early with the way his heart was erratically pumping the blood through his veins. There were indeed a few people who just didn't show any reaction at all and were damned to never leave the Layer they were born on. One such example would be his mother.

Please don't let it be hereditary, pretty please... The minutes ticked by and when a faint prickling set in Jongdae waited another minute to confirm that his mind wasn't playing any tricks on him. It was an odd feeling of warmth traveling up his arm and spreading until it reached his lungs and throat, advancing into the fingertips of his other hands. The heat was a little uncomfortable and he sincerely hoped he wouldn't break into a sweat since he had no time to return home before going to the audition. The thought was pushed aside by the impending feeling of wariness. This felt nothing like a spider web.

Maybe he was allergic? Maybe he was one of the two in a million-

The first time went by unnoticed by Jongdae who absently rubbed his arms to get rid of the hair that in retrospective couldn't be there since this was a sterile room and his hair wasn't exactly long. After the third failed attempt at brushing away a non-existing hair, he perked up. He tried to lie as still as possible and closed his eyes once more to fully concentrate on the feeling. Now that he had stopped fidgeting he could feel it more clearly and also saw where the spider web metaphor was coming from. It felt as if long strings of something really fleeting and thin were settling down on his whole body, regardless of the fabric protecting him. The more he stirred, the more he lost them. So he tried to breathe as shallow as possible and waited, felt more and more strings settle softly like tiny snow flakes or powdered sugar. Minuscule as the feeling was, it was hard to tell whether the strings were short or long, curved or straight. It was plain weird. A little uncomfortable, a little titillating, very foreign but not suffocating. For a while he pressed his eyes and mouth shut as if fearing these imaginary spider webs that also covered his face might land in his mouth. Which was utter nonsense of course.
He was wondering when the accumulation would stop. By now he felt like a mummy completely covered in spider webs. Trying to pass the time he attempted to make any kind of sense of the situation when the door opened, and while the boy was ripped out of his thoughts, the webs had been ripped away as well.
"Everything alright with you? Are you feeling a difference?"
Jongdae rapidly sat up, staring at the doctor with wide eyes.
"Yes! I mean yes. I do. It does feel like spider webs."
Smiling at his stunned expression Mr. Bang nodded in encouragement.
"Congratulations then, you're compatible."
It was definitely his turn to be stunned when an overenthusiastic Jongdae jumped up to shake his hand in gratitude.

He had been advised to wait at least an hour before receiving his actual injection and Jongdae spent it outside, behind the council building, strolling around deserted areas. Being a little eager he had asked his nurse whether the process couldn't be sped up in any way. After all, the neutral substance in his body was making him so aware and sensitive to his surroundings - logically speaking it should be much easier to shift then and there. But she had gently put out this hopes on his, stating that his body was confused enough by this sudden rush of awareness and that he should give it some time to settle down.

The feeling of those strings on his skin was indeed becoming weaker with every minute much unlike his fascination for them. His steps were slow, tentative as he tried to get a feeling for them. All these Layers, each being a whole world on its own, being in the same spot, all happening at the same time... it was a concept so natural yet had it never felt so foreign before. Jongdae had always understood this, accepted it even. Spent days of his life wondering whether somewhere something miraculous or horrible might happen right in front of him. But now that he felt these strings, those outlines of other worlds, it felt so real. And Jongdae was almost too scared to get excited about it. Because the real test was still lying ahead and it was quite frankly the one he was most wary about. The actual 'crossing over' part.

"Alright sweetie, there we go..."
Jongdae barely felt the prick, too captivated by the intense electric blue color of the substance the syringe held. He found it to be quite a befitting color. He began to understand why people named the Layers after the colors of their respective injection. It was a color to remember - magnetic, fascinating.
The nurse hummed lowly to herself while placing a tiny band-aid on top and searching a shelf for a certain pen. Even though he greatly appreciated her friendly attitude, he was missing his original doctor.

With a pop the cap of a water-resistant marker was off and she gently put the tip to his skin, just below the orange crest he was wearing.
"The effect should kick in shortly since the remnants of the other injection are making you very sensitive. And as stated in your paper your visa goes for 24 hours. I'm sorry the symbol isn't that pretty. I'm not that big of an artist. But it's gonna fade away so don't worry too much about it."
"Alright."
She drew back and left Jongdae to look at the scrawled symbol with interest. He knew what an actual permanent tattoo of the Layer's crest was supposed to look like; he had seen it on Minseok who had recently gotten his permanent visa and whose arms were already adorned by four permanent crests all neatly lined up on his arm. The only thing this tiny symbol had in common with Minseok's tattoo was probably the pretty blue color but Jongdae was fine with it either way. As she had stated herself - it would go away. And maybe one day he'd wear a permanent one, too.
"Great, then we're all done here. Enjoy your visit, it's a stunning place."
"Uhm-wait." Jongdae quickly called out before the Nurse could leave him. She threw him a questioning look.
"What is it? You know the way to the portals, don't you?"
"Well, yes! But... I just."
He squirmed in his seat, unable to form the question torturing him.
"Do I get a hint or anything?" he asked lightly instead, the panicky 'I don't know how to do it' clearly written in his eyes.
She seemed to understand. With a hum and a finger tapping against her clipboard she thought about it.
"It's of course difficult to describe and you've probably read all about it in your school books, so... I think the most accurate description I have ever heard was the dream one. Yes. Have you ever had a lucid dream?" she asked, now directed at him.
Jongdae hesitated.
"Those dreams where you're aware and able to take control?"
"Yes, exactly. It's a little like that. You find the correct structure and make it yours, turn it into your reality. Kind of like taking control for a moment."
Jongdae nodded as if he understood a thing of what she was saying.

The council had two main portals placed right in the entrance area. There was absolutely nothing special about them, just round polished platforms of stone, painted in their signature orange. They simply served the purpose of an official shifting point - a point where it was safe to cross over, controlled on both sides. As far as he knew, you could go anywhere from here, even with their home laying extremely low in comparison to others; every single Layer was forced by law to this point accessible. He'd heard that in some Layers you had to take an elevator and go down for minutes before reaching this point.
The first ten minutes he kept watching those portals, watching how people appeared or disappeared routinely.
Admittedly, there weren't many of them as it was half past eleven on a weekday. People who had to work were already sitting at their workplace while others followed their respective occupation. Yifan was probably giving little kids lessons on subtraction right this moment, while Minseok probably had his button nose buried in some blue print somewhere on the Layer Jongdae was headed to. When he had finally given up on getting some sort of sudden revelation by looking at businessmen appearing and disappearing out of nowhere, he went to the backroom, receiving a nod by the lonely woman behind the counter who gave him a small thumbs up.
There was a third platform. Unlike the other two, you couldn't shift into every Layer from here but that wasn't needed anyway. It was a platform for newbies like him, slightly secluded to give him a bit of privacy and peace. He looked at it in something akin to fear and inhaled deeply.
Alright. That's it.
He was compatible. He was technically able to do this.
Absolutely nothing could go wrong.
No matter how loud and obnoxious his inner cheerleading was, he simply couldn't drown out the image of Yifan.
Yifan who was also compatible, yet had never managed to actually cross over. No matter how many hours he had spent on that exact platform, trying his hardest. Nowadays he had stopped trying and Jongdae couldn't even blame him in any way. Saying that he'd never give up in his situation would be nothing but hypocrisy. Now that he felt the wariness in his stomach by looking at the orange circle, this thought was even more confirmed. How many disappointments would he be able to stand?
Jongdae shook his head to rid himself of the impending cloud of negative feelings.
He never knew before he tried. With two firm steps he stepped into the middle of the cycle.
So far, so good.
He stared ahead, the numb echoes of shoes clacking on wood and stone as people arrived and left right behind the wall he was currently looking at. His breath came out in deep and steady takes, meant to soothe his anxiety. When he felt himself getting woozy instead, he gave up on that strategy. A look to the clock at the wall told him that it was exactly 11:35. The injection should be working by now and he had about four hours at most to figure out how to do this so as not to be late for the auditions at 4 P.M. Unfortunately the spider web-like strings had become far less intense and even as he closed his eyes, stood very still and concentrated a lot he could only make out a few of them.

Then again, this was the whole point. The blue substance flowing through his veins made him sensitive to only one type of strings - the ones belonging to the blue Layer. So these few ones he was currently sensing had to be the ones he needed. For a minute or so he stood there, frozen into place as he tried to get as familiar as possible with them. It was actually easier with only these few ones and soon he had quite a good grasp of them, feeling them individually even during small movements.

But what now? They were clearly there, which meant the other Layer was right there, too. Under his fingertips, brushing against his face, enveloping him completely from every direction. After a good half hour of clueless standing around in an almost-panic state he tried to think of it as a dream, as the nurse had suggested. Luckily enough Jongdae was indeed familiar with lucid dreams. It probably differed from person to person but for him, changing the scenario of a lucid dream required a bit of concentration, yes. But mostly certainty. You needed a specific image in mind and the utter conviction that it's gonna work. He had experienced it - even the slightest doubt would let it all crumble and the dream would escape his grasp.

With this thought in mind, he closed his eyes and imagined the platform below him to be blue. Blue like the symbol on his arm. Blue like the injected substance had been. He imagined the strings to be a part of this world and therefore the only thing that mattered right now. Emptying his mind, there was nothing left but those strings which were no longer light and fleeting, but solid anchors he had to get a hold on. Those were the actual reality.

And when he was actually convinced of this and felt it from head to toe, even imagining the air to be different he opened his eyes and the platform was indeed blue. Jongdae stared at it, tempted to rub his eyes. Unfortunately this would include closing them for a tiny moment and this was obviously not an option. His eyes darted around the place, rapidly taking in the vast variety of new impressions. Gone was the clean simplicity of wood and stone. The room he was currently in had an unusual round form with a sliding door he knew from watching TV. Everything was covered in polished marble, glass and blue metal. The intensity of artificial light was almost dazzling as it reflected of all these bright surfaces.

He was looking up and marveling at the glass roof when a friendly voice resounded, ripping him out of his stupor.

"Welcome to the blue Layer. Can I help you with anything?"

Jongdae knew he was staring at the female service assistant but he couldn't help it - never before had he seen such clothing materials or colors on hair and makeup before. At least not in real life. His eyes wandered down and he couldn't fight off the tiny smile. She wore indeed shoes with pointed heels.

"Are you alright Mister?"

"What? Ah, yes. Yes, I actually could need some help. I have an appointment at SM Entertainment."

That day Jongdae didn't pass the auditions. Dazzled by his surroundings he barely had the conscience to feel disappointment at the suggestion to try it again the following year after taking a few sponsored lessons. Even as he fell into his bed with a huff a few hours later, completely exhausted by the day's events, he did not feel particularly depressed about the way things had played out.
A failure like that was by far not enough to discourage him, after all. Jongdae was a positive person and he couldn't wait to tell Minseok all about his adventures as soon as he saw him.

Only the next day did he hear from Yifan that Minseok hadn't returned home.
They only began to truly worry when three days had passed without a trace of their eldest friend.
Jongdae went to the authorities. He waited.
He was told that Minseok had quit his job. He waited.
Minseok didn't return.
And after six months, Jongdae was able to smile whole-heartedly again.
After twelve months no one saw a trace of sadness in his eyes anymore.
But deep inside, he kept waiting.

"I've heard enough. We'll think about it. Dismiss her."

"His majesty says we are going to think it over. You are free to leave now." Luhan swiftly translated, neither his smooth voice nor blank face betraying any emotion.
He could clearly see the foreign messenger's torn expression at this, but the woman found it better to keep quiet and, with a bow so poor it had every attendant tense at the disrespect she left, she was led out by two of their soldiers.
The heavily ornamented door had barely closed when the emperor ushered out anyone besides his right hand, the head minister and his head translator.
It might have come to a surprise to foreigners that a translator was of such importance. Then again he was the main link between the Yellow kingdom and the rest of the world which, logically speaking, made him extremely important. There were barely a handful of other people able to translate and most of them were his students. None of them could be entrusted with translating political matters.
The emperor slowly got up, sighing barely audibly over what Luhan supposed was a weak knee.
"Let us take this to the tea room, shall we?"

"You may sit."
He relaxed his posture just the tiniest bit as he sat down on a plush cushion, keeping a respectful distance to the other men. Two servants filled up their cups with a grace painfully acquired during years of harsh training under the hawk eyes of Madame Fei. Luhan knew that because he as well had been under her wing once, being a constant recipient of her infamous slaps over the head. His fellow students liked to joke that she hit so much sense inside him that he’d gotten smart. It wasn't that he felt any kind of resentment towards her - seeing as Luhan wasn't of an exceptionally good descent and didn't have the luxury of a private teacher. Madame Fei had never hesitated to remind him of how much his physical appearance was helping him. Luhan used to hate these kind of words. But now that he was the country's head translator and even the emperor himself had been heard to compliment his appearance, he had come to accept it.

"A wonderful cup of tea to calm our nerves after this act of presumptuousness."
With a calculated bow of gratitude, he took the hot porcelain cup, slowly leading it up to his lips.
"I cannot believe their behavior. They get worse with every day." the emperor began with a disapproving frown etched deep into his face, only reinforcing the expression that had been trained for years, just like Luhan's current posture, fingers stiff around the handles of his cup while one hand gracefully held it from below.
"And the messengers are getting younger with each day as well." the minister to his left threw in, obviously delighted to be of his majesty's opinion. As if there was even the slightest possibility of him not agreeing.

"One day they will send us their kids."

Luhan took the liberty to let his eyes flit over to the window, their mindless conversation only half-registered by his brain.

The tea room was magnificent.

Located at one of the highest spots in the palace the oval shape was blessed with a perfect view. With the entrance being located on the north side and all the other walls consisting of windows, each more intricate than the next going from the ground upwards until they almost touched the ceiling, the sun was always able to shine into the room and make the thin, elegant swirls of golden window frames twinkle.

Currently the late afternoon sun was blessing them with bright golden light. Luhan had heard that it suited him best, the golden light - reflecting prettily on his blond hair and making his white skin gleam.

A faint metallic chiming was heard as he subtly rearranged his posture and set the numerous tiny bells on his heavily adorned garment in motion. He would have liked to at least dispose of the headwear but being in the emperor's presence without covering his head was unheard of. His eyes wandered over the long and empty table made of solid wood, over the tapestries and veils covering the ceiling, the overall grandeur of which he had gotten used to but respected nonetheless.

His eyes wandered until they landed on a pair of terrified eyes. Eyes that didn't, couldn't see him.

And as Luhan watched the young girl receiving repetitive slaps across her face until she crumpled into a puddle of dirt on the floor... he was wondering what kind of emotion would play in those desperate young eyes if she was, indeed, able to see him.

He saw her getting kicked and roughly pulled up by her hair. Screaming, trying to fight only to receive a punishment he wouldn't inflict on any human being besides the one currently executing it.

He saw a man holding a weapon, pointing it at him. His eyes read nothing but insanity as he advanced, pointing it right between his eyes and firing it.

Luhan didn't even flinch.

He merely took a last sip of his tea before placing the cup down with a soft clattering sound echoing through the barely occupied room as he tuned in on the conversation going on to his left. At least he tried to.

Luhan hated the tea room.
"You've already had your compatibility test, right?"
"Yes. There have been no complications."
"Alright, then we'll just proceed with the main injection."
Jongdae nodded and followed the given instructions calmly. This time around, he wasn't panicking though the nervous spark remained. After all, it had been a little over twelve months since he had shifted anywhere. He really hoped it was true that one didn’t forget the ways of shifting. To be honest, he had spent many days lying awake, trying to feel the structures he had felt back then. They had definitely become weaker but now that he had been made aware of them once, it didn't seem like they were going to leave any time soon.
His eyes attentively followed the nurse's movements as she took out one of the already prepared trackers. They weren't that big, maybe about half the size of his smallest fingernail and flat like a coin. A curious little metal object with an embossed magenta crest on it. Jongdae had seen those before, both in books and on school trips to the council. But this one was special as it was obviously meant to be planted in Jongdae's arm. This thing was going to be a part of him, so he felt obligated to pay special attention to it.
The sight only reinforced his relief over this being a magenta crest and not a red one. He really had to thank his luck that just a month ago, the red Layer had lowered in rank considerably. It didn't happen often and the whole thing was huge on the news but after years of observation, it seemed like the red Layer had officially become too much of a rough area to be considered easily approachable. It had always been notorious for it's gangs and the frightening crime scenes but now the government had finally decided that it wasn't socially acceptable anymore to send regular citizens like him into a zone this dangerous.
Now the blue Layer was only two spots over his home in the ranking. Jongdae was beyond excited. Just as he had promised he waited until his 20th birthday, had spent hours and hours in his family's bakery, never complaining even once. Now the time had come and he had his eyes firmly set on the blue Layer, like so many aspiring young people. Unlike most of them, Jongdae already had a plan though. It may have not been enough to sponsor him but SM Entertainment had actually liked him enough to offer him a traineeship if he took vocal lessons and got all the necessary visas himself. It wasn't exactly an insult or a burden since Jongdae was confident enough in his intellectual skills, so passing the tests shouldn’t be a problem. He wasn’t aiming for the topmost white Layer, after all.
If he'd one day have his stage debut people would surely like to see him able to get his own visa, anyway.
So he passed the first evaluation easily and was now about to get a permanent visa to the next Layer in the rank, the Magenta one. He wasn't planning on settling there but in order to get to the blue one it was necessary. You couldn't just skip a spot. He would think of it as a tourist experience, going there just to take the evaluations and (hopefully) receive one of these pretty little trackers with a blue tag.
"This is going to hurt a bit."
It was no lie. Getting this thing inside his arm did hurt quite a bit. But nothing he couldn't take. The process left behind a faint scar that was quickly covered by a band-aid.
"and we're done already. You are strongly recommended to let it heal and settle in for about five days before you get your tattoo. Any exceptions are to be discussed with your doctor, alright?"
"Yes, I'll just wait. What are five more days?"
The nurse smiled at him warmly.
"That's the spirit. Have a nice day Mr. Kim."

Jongdae took a ridiculously long detour on his way home. His family lived in a part of the city that was surprisingly well-off, in regards to the proximity to the town's outer wall. There wasn't a lot of traffic passing through, since there was virtually nothing behind this part of the wall, nothing except for some rather slippery grass slopes. And this was exactly where he was heading to. All the way back, he kept fiddling with the brochure the nurse had handed him, his eyes barely needing to look up from it as he knew this part of the town like it was an extension of his own body. Well, not like the newest little metal-one, he corrected inside his head. Though the brochure didn't offer a great deal of news to him on that one.

It showed a close up on the metal-plate, showing a no-name crest and some complicated terms for every part of it which Jongdae forgot about the moment he read the next one. Another page read the risks which he studiously avoided since reading the risks of basically anything was always a depressing thing and he wasn't in the mood for unnecessary worrying. Finally he found a list with simple facts about the progress, all accompanied by the overly cute comic-style snake mascot that found it's way onto basically anything shifting-related for kids and had become a familiar sight to Jongdae.

1. Pass your test
   (Make sure you get your parent's permission if you're under 17)
2. Go to the health care center and get your tracker injected
3. Wait a few days to make sure your body and the tracker are reacting as planned!
4. The tracker will now provide your body with a daily dose of the medicaments so you can go to the Layer whenever you wish.

**FAQ**

When does it expire?
*It depends on each individual but in general the tracker expires after approximately two years.*

Will I still be able to shift when the tracker is expired?
*In 80% of the cases you will, since after a regular dose of two years most people are permanently accommodating to the structure.*

If that's not the case for you, you can get another tracker.

Should I have it removed after two years?
*You are free to do so, though the material is not going to affect your body in any way.*

Do I have to take a new test if I want another one?
*You don't have to.*

If you experience any trouble with your tracker, please consult a doctor immediately.

Humming to himself he turned the brochure when he felt a sudden pain in his head. It vanished as quickly as it had come up, like an intense sting.

The first time he could have easily pretended it had never happened, but when he almost crashed into a lantern when it happened again, he couldn't help having a bad feeling about this, especially with
the warning printed black on white he was currently holding close to his face in an attempt to block out the pain. He was imagining the goofy snake to give him a very pointed look, gesturing at the warnings below with her tail.

No, Jongdae wasn't going crazy already. He was just a little imaginative. So he imagined himself pouting back at the snake, telling her that he'd go... soon.

After all, the thing hadn't even been inside him for an hour, surely he could wait a day for it to settle down before going to whine about some pricks of pain. Said pricks of pain seemed to come in shorter intervals though and they seemed to last longer, causing him to close his eyes at the blinding white pain. He was glad he wasn't headed home right now - he could only imagine the fuss his mother would make at seeing him like this.

He slid out of the gate with nothing but a wave to today's gatekeeper who barely glanced up from his book (which was probably far more exciting than being a guard at the most useless gate they had) and immediately staggered down to the left. It might be a sudden slope in the eye of an architect but if he kept one hand at the massive wall he had no problem walking on the relatively even part of grass. It had the perfect width, really. On warm summer days he used to lie in the grass on his back, watching the sky with Yifan and Minseok.

Jongdae sighed, the thought distracting him enough to almost fall down the slope at another harsh prick of pain.

Minseok.

Nowadays, he wasn't scared anymore to think about him. He wouldn't deny the wonderful time they've had any longer, but in a way, it felt so distant already. As if Minseok had passed away and he had moved on. Which he hadn't. Minseok was obviously still alive.

Jongdae had never even once doubted this.

Kim Minseok was alive and was surely currently laughing somewhere with his hamster cheeks and goofy gum-revealing smile. He'd meet him again one day. Soon he'd be on the blue Layer as well and no matter how big this futuristic city seemed to be, he was determined not to give up until he found him. Period.

Another piercing pain hit him and he instinctively bumped into the wall so as to not tumble down the slope, one hand kneading his forehead in a vain attempt to block out the pain while the other was blindly holding on to the stones, burning at the rough sensation.

At first he thought it was the white hot pain creating these flickering in his vision, but with every heavy sting it lasted longer and the images became clearer. Where lush green grass had been laid out beneath his feet he suddenly saw a pile of dirty stones. The wall he was desperately holding on to was now gone, even though he could clearly feel it.

The sight was disorienting and with every blink of his teary eyes, his whole surroundings seemed to change at random. Familiar forests turned into vast meadows, seas of ash and the impression of being underwater. By now he was all but clawing at the stone, frozen in his tracks. It was all too much to handle and the intense pain pounded through his body like an erratic heartbeat.

One second everything was on fire, the next he saw nothing but complete darkness. Fearing he might have gone blind, Jongdae kept blinking rapidly, swallowing the upcoming panic. When he opened his eyes and was met with a gaping nothingness beneath his feet he yelped in shock and a misplaced foot sent the world spinning as he tumbled down the slope he for sure knew was there. Feeling the slightly moist grass against his skin while seeing nothing but blue sky both above and beyond was the scariest thing that had ever happened to him and Jongdae finally squeezed his eyes shut as he blindly tried to hold on to something, anything at all. But the grass was slippery and only when the world finally stopped twisting and turning he knew by touch that he had reached the ground. In a corner of his mind he was grateful for the lack of bushes and trees in this particular area. For a moment he listened to his racing heartbeat and heavy breathing. Then he finally took the courage to open his eyes and to his luck he was seeing more than just an expanse of sky.

Everything appeared dull and gray, and he seemed to be sitting in some sort of a cellar though the number of walls and corners he could see made him think of a maze. Crude walls and moist-looking
soil had him wondering where the dull light was even coming from with no sign of the sky. The fact that he was still slightly hovering over the ground was more than a little freaky, but Jongdae's attention was fully concentrated on the person nearby. In front of him, just a few meters away, really, sat a figure leaning against one of those dirty walls. A boy, to be exact. He was dirty from head to toe with his clothing torn in several places. His stance emitted exhaustion and he had his head thrown back to gaze at the low ceiling with empty eyes. Eyes that Jongdae knew almost like his own.

"Minseok!" he involuntarily called out, already scrambling to his feet. There was no reaction but he didn't have the slightest doubt about it. The face, the proportions, the posture... everything about him seemed perfectly familiar. This was Kim Minseok, his best friend. "MIN!"

Constantly tripping over his own feet, he stumbled towards the lethargic boy. He looked so sick, his usually strong body seemingly fragile in the pale light. Not hesitating a second, he reached out, and when his fingers went right through him the momentum almost caused him to fall over.

"Minseok...?"

It was obvious that he could neither see nor hear him, but Jongdae couldn't help it, so he kept calling out carefully as his searching fingers hovered over his upper arm.

"Min... What happened...? Where are you?"

The whole sight vanished as quickly as it had come, accompanied by more pain. No matter how much he willed his eyes to stay open, the sensation was just too much and before he knew it, his hand had flown up to his forehead, a dull ringing sound disturbing all of his senses. When he opened his eyes again they fell upon nothing but grass, lying perfectly still.

And yet the image of Minseok's pale fingers digging into the ground so hard that tiny streams of red trickled into the dirt had burnt itself into his mind where it stared back at him. Unrelenting, almost accusing.

He had to find him.

"Really?"

"You don't believe me? Do you think I might've gone crazy...?"

At this, Yifan hurried to lift his hands in a dismissive manner.

"No! No, I do believe you, it's just... it sounds so..." he muttered, clearly at a loss of words, "are you alright now? Is the pain gone?"

Jongdae gave him a mix between a nod and a shrug.

"More or less. Sometimes there's a prick, but overall I'm fine. I wish I wasn't if that makes me see him though."

"Jongdae." Yifan strictly threw in but the brunette only made a noise of mild protest.

"What? It's true!" he stubbornly gave back, leaning back against the counter.

It was a good thing that the bakery was currently deserted or else this conversation wouldn't be possible. It was almost closing time, and he was on salesman duty, meaning that it was completely fine to loiter in the backroom with Yifan - there were no customers anyway and the bell would alert him in case this changed.

"Still, this is a bad sign. Did you go to the authorities? Did you get a check up?"

Jongdae impatiently fidgeted as if Yifan was completely missing the whole point.

"Of course I reported it, but how long do you think it's gonna take until they find him? They won't, this place looked like nothing I've ever seen before! And yes, I did get an appointment at the doctor tomorrow morning but... I don't know. Should I go?"

"Why in the world wouldn't you?" Yifan asked, exasperation lacing his voice.

It was quiet for a moment as Jongdae tried to find the right words.

"I don't know. Just... if they fix me, we might completely lose the trail."
The tall blond shot him a long, imploring look before he broke into a sigh, his features softening. Jongdae knew that Yifan wasn't doubting the truth of his words. It was the genuine worry driving him but judging by his current expression he had come to terms with the fact that Jongdae wouldn't budge. He usually didn't if it involved the safety or overall happiness of his friends.

"But what now, Jongdae? What good does it do that you might be able to see him if you have no idea which Layer you're actually seeing? You said it already, he could be anywhere. And unlike the police, you have no access to any other Layer."

"I... I don't know." he murmured dejectedly, looking around as if a clue to their problems might jump at him from between the bags of flour at any moment.

Yifan was right. Just because he had for some reason seen Minseok didn't mean he had even the faintest idea as to where he was. The number of Layers was innumerable and judging by the scenery it definitely wasn't one of the more populated areas.

"There has to be some way-" he said more to himself than anything as his gaze wandered through the room without actually seeing it.

"Well... the only person able to help you would be a shifter." Yifan thoughtfully said, leaning his upper body on one of the higher counters.

"And I'm pretty sure the chances of finding Minseok on your own are higher than finding a shifter first."

Jongdae visibly perked up at this.

"A shifter. Maybe you're right. You think it's that impossible?"

Now his friend threw him a look that was seriously questioning his sanity.

"Really now? I don't think I've ever seen a shifter in my entire life. You happen to know one? Cause I clearly don't."

Shifters really had become somewhat of a myth nowadays. The whole official records only named a handful of them who had become some kind of a hero to today's society. Unlike regular people shifters were naturally able to feel the structures of the Layers and step from one into another without restraint. That was pretty much all there was known about them though. His history books told him that once there had been one or two shifters taking it upon them to help humanity exploring and colonizing the different Layers, but the last known one had died about eighty years ago. It wasn't like the ability to shift was heritable, so there was no way that shifters had just died out like an animal species. Rather than that, the very low number of them - genetic scientists estimated there to be around five at most- stayed low-key, hidden from the public's eye. Jongdae had always wondered why they would do so; after all, this kind of ability opened up so many possibilities. Maybe they were just selfish, choosing a few profitable jobs over the good deed. And who was he to judge them? Usually he wasn't even actively aware of their existence, like most people. But now he kept wondering whether there'd be any chance to meet one.

"Shouldn't shifters be moving around a lot in populated places? In this case, I'm sure there has to be one at least passing by in this area. Maybe we've even seen one before, without realizing it-"

"And how would you identify them? Stalk down random strangers and wait for them to disappear? And then what?" Yifan patiently but mercilessly asked, not unlike the way he was possibly talking sense into the kids at school.

Jongdae groaned, ruffling his hair in frustration.

"I don't know... Ah, what to do! I saw him so clearly, Yifan. He was suffering and hurt! I just have to get him out of there."

A big hand was placed on his shoulder and he looked up to meet his friend's docile expression.

"I know. I also want to see Minseok again. But there's nothing you can do right now. We can ask around for suspicious-looking strangers or anything."

"You think that's ridiculous." Jongdae half-asked, not angry, but rather defeated.

"I think the probability of succeeding is very low but no, I don't think it's ridiculous. If it's about Minseok, we should try anything, right?"

He shot him a grateful smile, as always glad to have a friend this faithful. Suddenly he felt like he...
heard a very faint ringing. It could have been his imagination but it was time to close the store anyway, and so he nodded to himself and stepped away from his much taller friend.
"Yes. You're right. We'll try and succeed. But first I gotta lock up."
With swift steps he sauntered around the tables and through the open door into the main store. As he threw a look over the deserted but tidy place and hummed in satisfaction, his eyes were drawn to a sticky note placed on the counter. He might have overlooked it with the golden streams of late sunlight reflecting on the polished surfaces if not for the bright green color. With a tilted head he removed it from the wood, being met with weak resistance. The handwriting was a cute scrawl at most and it took him a careful look to even comprehend the words.

rather tall, slim (but not scrawny), quiet
about your age, slight tan, dark brown curls
Setting Sun.

The last two words had been circled multiple times.
Setting Sun.

"Oh my god it's so obviously a trap." Yifan muttered under his breath, silenced by an elbow meeting his ribs. Jongdae shushed him as he took another deep gulp from the beer he had ordered. It wasn't enough to get drunk but the pleasant buzz dulled out the faint pain he was occasionally feeling.
"I get it already, Fanfan. What's the worst that could happen? It could be a prank at most. Now keep watching out for him."
"What kind of a prank would that even be?"
"The one girls play all the time to get your attention?" Jongdae half-whispered back, looking around the crowded pub.
The Setting Sun was a typical go-to place for people who had spent a day with hard physical work or very few teenagers who wanted to feel better than those rowdy kids flooding the square at night. Right now every table as well as the counter were well-occupied, making it nearly impossible to spot a specific person without standing up and suspiciously snooping around.
One unnecessary walk to the counter later, he was sure that the shifter wasn't there.
Maybe he'd still show up. Maybe he'd left already, left the pub or the Layer for all he knew. Just because he had shown up once didn't mean he had to turn back. Common sense told him that a shifter staying low-key would avoid being at the same place for too long.
"Who do you think could have written this note? The... person himself?" Yifan carefully asked, avoiding to name the subject in a place this public. Even with a table in the far corner they didn't have to rub it into everyone's faces, after all.
"I don't know. Maybe he or she would be willing to offer this 'service'? Like, for money or something?" he guessed vaguely, his chin resting in his hands.
The thought of someone listening in on them -shifter or not- was slightly creepy, considering that he had barely heard the bell when the person left. He may tend to be an airhead at times but the ringing of the bell was something he'd wake up to from the deepest slumber; it was a very well-trained routine and once in awhile, people would laugh at him, comparing him to a conditioned dog. Not that he'd dare to agree with them if his mother was in any proximity to hear this and slap him across the head for it.

That evening, the shifter didn't turn up and Yifan and Jongdae spent their waiting time making up hypothetical plans in case they would. He or she may be offering his services but if not, they had to get the person to an isolated place. Neither of them knew the rules about shifting but leading someone to a dead place seemed like the best idea. A so-called dead place was a location where no
other (known) Layer was overlapping. Logically speaking, you wouldn't be able to shift anywhere from a place like this. Once again, Jongdae considered himself lucky to live on the orange Layer. There were few Layers that had no dead places at all. Even if the Layers lying over them were unpopulated, they were still there. The orange Layer, however, was lying so extremely low that they had quite a few known spots where there was truly nowhere to go. There were probably many more, but the known ones sufficed completely. To his delight there was one not too far from the place he had spotted Minseok at.

At half past eleven Yifan finally managed to persuade him to go home, and lucky for him his parents didn't question his late arrival, simply assuming he had went to celebrate the reception of his tracker. Sadly, Jongdae hadn't had enough beer worthy of an actual celebration and spent the next hour turning under his sheets, far too awake to even consider sleeping. He almost didn't want to fall asleep, afraid that the pain -and with it the chance to see Minseok- might disappear completely.

The next morning, Jongdae felt nothing but miserable. In fact, he officially declared it the worst night ever the moment his alarm clock had brutally ripped him out of his hazy dreams. It had felt like it lasted forever with him constantly drifting off due to exhaustion just to be awoken by a sudden pain and disorientation at the sight of his changing surroundings.

To make things worse, his suspicions had proven themselves to be true and his miserable excuse of sleep had cured most of the pain. At least his parents were going easy on him, figuring he was having a hangover.

While all of this was most certainly a downer, it didn’t have an impact on his resolve. He had waited patiently for Minseok to return for a long, long time. Now that he knew for sure that Minseok hadn't just abandoned him, he'd go to hell to drag him back if necessary.

Yifan was sadly occupied with a parent teacher conference at his school so Jongdae went to the bar on his own that night. It wasn't that he was harboring hard feelings against his friend, quite the opposite; seeing Yifan being wanted at such an event even though he was hardly more than a temporary help at this point made him feel genuinely happy for him. Unlike Yifan himself, he had no doubts about him getting a full employment very soon.

After all, he wasn't only competent and patient but he had a very imposing aura that was able to put both parents and students in their place if needed. Not that this was required very often with the female half already at his feet most of the time.

This could hardly be said about Jongdae, who was clearly taking after his short parents and was lacking his friend’s honey blond hair, having nothing to offer but a dull shade of brown. At least he had nothing to complain about his face or body shape - he may not be nearly as broad as YIFan or built as Minseok, but being raised in a bakery, Jongdae was perfectly content not being fat.

*Take what you can get,* that was one of the mottos he lived by.

And this was probably exactly what the people around him currently thought of him, sitting all by himself at a crowded bar, twirling a straw in his glass of fruit juice.

He must be looking like the biggest loser, either getting stood up by his friends or on the lookout for a cheap hook up.

Just as he was debating with himself whether to feel relieved or offended at the lack of attention, he saw him.

The mop of curls was lowered as the guy inconspicuously entered the bar but Jongdae was at the edge of his seat in an instant. Hair in the color of dark chocolate, about his age and taller than him - the features all aligned, even though he couldn't be too sure about the tan in the dim light. The boy fleetingly glanced around the room and Jongdae hurriedly dropped his gaze to his opened notebook on the table.

A sudden shadow blocking the light took the decision of whether or not it was safe to look up again and to Jongdae's utmost surprise the stranger had come up to him.

"Is this seat free?"
His voice was quiet, his stance one of polite nonchalance, though Jongdae could clearly see the attentive spark of wariness behind this facade. Out of instinct his eyes flitted over the place. It really was crowded and the secluded location of his table as well as the two free chairs was obviously what had drawn him here. Acting as nonchalant as possible, Jongdae nodded, idly flipping through the pages of his notebook—skimming recipes he knew by heart already and even scribbling a few annotations that were mostly useless—as the boy sank into a seat. Meanwhile the boy (who he liked to refer to as his target in his head), had waved over a waitress and ordered a beer. Sneaking a few glances in between, Jongdae came to the conclusion that it was fascinating how he had managed not to stand out. Now that he sat across him, he could not only see the mentioned tan, but also take in his overall handsome features. He wasn't exactly his type (not that anyone but Minseok would know about the existence of a type, much less what it looked like) but his features were perfectly balanced with smooth skin, generous lips, and even though he was far from looking like a porcelain doll, he emitted a kind of boyish handsomeness he could see people falling for.

The beer was placed on the table with a soft thud, streams of the liquid already wetting the table. The stranger gingerly reached for it and Jongdae couldn't help noticing how calculated his movements appeared to be.

It was no secret that "smart" and "Jongdae" rarely happened to be in the same sentence. In short, academic success didn't come easy to him. He wasn't smart. What did come easy to him, however, were people—quite literally even, considering this case.

Jongdae had a keen eye for people and this boy was sending a lot of interesting signals. The way he held himself spoke of caution, inconspicuousness and shyness with hunched shoulders and a perpetually lowered gaze. But to Jongdae, it looked like he was restraining himself, purposefully holding back to appear as non-existent as possible. Maybe he was just indulging himself, but in his mind this was reinforcing his image of a shifter.

The boy innocently took another sip, carefully looking around the vicinity and it had Jongdae wondering—Was this just a coincidence? It couldn't be, right?

After all, what are the odds of this shifter walking right up to him?

Which brought him to the question of what to do next. He'd made a lot of plans on how to approach him, and while none of them included this particular scenario, Jongdae figured he should just do his thing—get the boy talking and through some careful poking, find out whether he was intending to help him or not.

A last nervous gulp and he forced his body to relax a bit as he openly turned towards the boy.
"The beer is good, right? Pretty sweet."

Blinking at him in surprise the possible shifter nodded, obviously wary of what sounded like the beginning of a bad pick up line. Shooting him the most gentle smile he had, he added "I like to order this one as well," hoping to disperse his suspicions.
"You should also try the dark beer— it's a local speciality."
"Ah." he softly replied, barely audible over the noise, "Okay."

The boy was nodding but he could clearly see how startled he was to be approached with small talk. The following minutes were spend with Jongdae casually talking a bit about the local cuisine and quirks of people. He hardly got a reply longer than two syllables but he could clearly tell the boy was interested, the passive stance betrayed by a flicker of curiosity in his eyes. While this was indeed very charming, Jongdae had to face reality and after a while he gave up on waiting for a signal and his shoulders lowered visibly as he dropped his voice to a disappointed murmur.
"...you didn't come here to help me, did you?"

It was close to impossible to understand him over the noise but he could see the boy across him tense, shaking his head ever so slightly.

Undeterred, Jongdae searched his eyes and continued.
"Right. Sorry for assuming. Can you help me though? I need someone to help me find my friend..."

The bewildered look turned into one of mild panic as he looked around the room. It took a second
for Jongdae to understand.
"Oh. Don't worry, I'm alone. It's only me." he reassured him though the memory of a green sticky note invaded his mind. He couldn't bring himself to trick this boy and possibly endanger him. That's not what you did if you wanted someone to help you, so he decided to be honest.
"Though there was... I'm not gonna lie, I got a tip on how to find you by someone. Figuring now it wasn't you." he lightly added. The boy looked positively anxious by now, like a scared animal with eyes darting over the place, itching to jump up and flee. Aware of the delicacy he needed Jongdae tried to gently reason with him.
"Look. Maybe we both got tricked. But if you make a scene now it wouldn't benefit you, would it? We can talk somewhere more private, if you want to. Let's go outside? I'm just a regular dude, don't worry about me."
He lifted his hands as if to prove his point, but the boy hesitated. There was obviously no reason to trust him and while he surely wouldn't want to disappear right on the spot, there was hardly any other option for the poor boy. If he thought of Jongdae as an enemy, he couldn't be sure that this wasn't a setup. There could be people waiting for him outside.
"I don't know how to make this easier for you but I can go first. It's up to you. I can't say anything in my defense other than that I wouldn't have approached you so dumbly if I had known the note wasn't from you." he added with a helpless shrug and while still conflicted the boy finally made his decision and leaned towards him, almost whispering, his eyes imploring.
"You go first."

The air was cool and refreshing after spending so much time in that dingy bar. To be completely honest, Jongdae was surprised to find the guy so willingly following him; even though he kept a clear gap between them, walking just out of reach. It was a risky move but Jongdae kept walking, leaving behind the bustling streets and when he felt the boy hesitate as they passed the city's gate he turned to tell him the truth - that he knew a place where no one would be able to get him. It seemed good enough for him.
The noises faded into a dull hum in the background and since they weren't being followed Jongdae soon came to a halt, standing close to the city walls on an even meadow covered in grass - a known dead place. There was simply not a single known layer he could shift to from here. Jongdae had barely managed to turn around as the now slightly more confident voice broke the silence.
"I can't help you."
He should have been prepared for this defiant attitude but his desperation was probably all-too obvious anyway.
"Please? Look, I really don't want to cause you any harm... my friend has vanished a year ago and lately I've seen him somewhere. I don't know where he is but he's suffering." he explained, trying his best to nonverbally communicate the genuine nature of his pleas.
The shifter - and by now it was clear he was one, even though no one dared to address it - kept throwing uneasy glances around him, looking like he was actually sorry for him.
"I just... I can't help you. I hope you can understand-" he said, straightening his posture and, assuming that he'd go away, Jongdae reacted in a fit of panic.
"Please wait-"
He leaped forwards and then many things happened at once. For a second he saw the brown orbs widen in fear and then their bodies met each other as Jongdae all but tackled him down, the lack of resistance on the shifter's side causing them to fall. It felt like he was caught by a wave of dizziness and the world tumbled much more than it should as they weren't met with soft grass but unforgiving stone, landing in an awkward tangle of limbs.
They both groaned in pain and it took a short moment for Jongdae to realize that the air had changed. Instead of cool night air and moonlight, it was stuffy and as he raised his head, the pointed end of a lance was blinking at him in the flickering light.
"Don't move."
The lights began to fade. Minseok groaned. He wouldn't want that.
He needed the lights. He was still aware enough to know how wrong it all was. How pathetic he'd be in a few hours when they were gone completely. If there was anything left in his stomach he'd puke out of pure disgust at himself but he'd save that for later. For the moment the lights would be gone to make room for the pain.
Those beautiful, fake lights. The lazy kaleidoscope, covering everything like a transparent foil. He liked it the most. It was better than seeing people or places. Seeing Jongdae made him especially sad. Because he was reminded of the disappointment he was. Minseok sighed, rubbing a bit of dirt off his itchy face.
He really wanted to see Jongdae. Or Yifan. Anyone.
But he couldn't. No, he couldn't. No.
It became increasingly difficult to breathe but he refused to give in just yet. He had to avoid the haze as long as possible. Had to endure the pain as long as he could.
The last time he had been so good, had lasted for so long.
But now there was barely any space left on the scratched skin of his arms he could dig his chipped nails into.
The final light disappeared like a tired firefly and left Minseok in the dark reality.
He screamed.
"I mean it, one move and I cut you in two." the male voice repeated and Jongdae didn't even question the determination behind it for one second.
"Okay, okay, I got it!" he offered hastily, resisting the urge to lift his hands as a sign of surrender.
"But we're currently in a very uncomfortable position -not to mention awkward- so I'm not sure I could keep still if I tried."
It was a bad habit of his, saying whatever came to mind - though it was true. Fortunately, the guy decided not to chop his head off for this remark.
"Ugh, fine. Then sit up. I dare you to try anything funny," he gave in with exasperation but Jongdae had already decided not to provoke this person any further, so he complied carefully. It may not be easy to shut him up but sharp metal objects had always proven themselves to be very effective on that matter. With slow but sure movements he took great care in covering the shifter as well as possible. Ever since their surprise arrival, he had felt the boy tense beneath him, obviously anxious if not downright frightened. It sparked his natural sense of protection - after all, this whole mess was entirely his fault.

The male before them had lowered the lance a tiny bit so he could closely regard their faces over the sharp edges of metal. Pretty brown eyes traveled down their bodies sharply as if to evaluate their worth. And considering this guy's own appearance Jongdae figured they were probably pretty worthless compared to him, not to sound self-conscious or anything.
Had he ever seen features this fine on a man? Most certainly not in real life. On a magazine maybe. It was surreal. Soft-looking blond hair, white skin, rather tall as far as he could see it from the ground... and clad in the most marvelous attire he had ever seen. Layers and layers of lavishly decorated fabric snugly hugged his body, revealing nothing but a pale throat and shoulders. A broad sort of belt reached from below the breast almost down to his waistline and looked like it was tight enough to make you voluntarily avoid any kind of food. Below that, parts of the garment were wide, wider than even any dress he could imagine with orderly clad legs in odd sandals peeking out from beneath.
There were so many layers, complex patterns with swirls and ornaments, all kept in earthy to golden colors with occasional tiny black hooks and pearls, it was hard to believe anyone would be rich enough to wear all this. The pompous nature of the attire didn't stop there and up to that day Jongdae had assumed bells were something funny, something for entertainers and kids. But this tiny golden bells didn't look out of place with all the elegant jewelry coming along with them. With all this metal even adorning a slim headpiece and the ridiculous amount of fabric he was supposed to make a lot of noise, Jongdae thought. Instead everything lay perfectly still - not a single rustle or one little bell chiming as he flashed them a pretty frightening look considering the angelic features.

Did he want him to talk?
"So, uh. Can we help you with anything?"
"How did you get here?"
"How did we get where? I mean, what's 'here'?"
A piercing glare gave him a clear no-nonsense vibe and Jongdae reconsidered.
"Oookay. Your rules it is, Jongdae thought, quickly backpedaling.
"It was a mistake, sorry. We didn't mean to break in or anything."
He lightly shrugged his shoulders at this, though the motion was followed by a twitch of the lance and then hurriedly stopped. Simultaneously, the shifter behind him had taken in a sharp breath, reminding him of his presence once more.
"It won't happen again, promise."
"How. Did. You. Get here?" the guy repeated, his patience obviously wearing thin. Clearly torn, Jongdae hesitated but the boy behind him suddenly spoke up, his voice a little raspy from not using it.
"It was me. I brought us here. I'm sorry." he uttered and even though he didn't turn around, Jongdae was sure he was fidgeting with something. This finally brought the blond's attention to him even though the lance stayed pointed at Jongdae who didn't exactly feel flattered at being labeled the bigger threat.
"How? Do you know what this place is?"
He dared looking over his shoulder at the shifter who shook his head slightly.
"I'm not sure, is it the Yellow one? I'm barely at this height level, so I don't know this place-"
Jongdae gasped and this seemed to do it for the blond as well who finally pointed his weapon at the shifter.
"So you've been here more than once?! Wait... wait," he stopped himself, hit by the revelation, "you're a shifter?"
His voice had trailed off into a more quiet and probing tone, a complete change of atmosphere. The boy nodded once and the lance was finally lowered.
"I've never met a shifter." he added almost softly, placing the lance on the floor and, with a swift and elegant movement, sat down in front of them, his body turned towards the shifter and ignoring a very startled Jongdae.
He offered his hand and an actual smile, a quick 180 degree turn taken in a couple of seconds. "I'm Luhan, head translator of the Yellow Kingdom."
"I'm Kai..." the shifter carefully replied, responding to the handshake out of pure social pressure.
"Your clothes are getting dirty..." he mumbled, his eyes trailing to the precious garment lying in the dirt. The blond only brushed it off.
"Don't mind them. It's a given thing to be on eye level with those you respect."
"Oh and what am I? A rat?" Jongdae mumbled, receiving a probing look by Luhan as if he was actually considering the possibility.
"Are you a shifter, too?"
"No?"
"Then you're an intruder and pretty lucky I'm not reporting you right this second." he easily retorted and while normally he'd pout at this, the curiosity won.
"Are we really on the Yellow Layer?"
A look of mild exasperation was sent his way.
"You haven't even introduced yourself and throw questions at me already?"
Jongdae resisted rolling his eyes and he could see Jongin looking mildly amused.
"Because pointing weapons at strangers is so much more polite. Fine, I'm Jongdae, so are we? Like, seriously?"
Still pretty unimpressed with him, he tilted his head to one side.
"We are. If you're planning anything stupid, I'll have to kill you."
"Oh yes. Look at me and my army, I'm ready to invade." Jongdae blankly replied and Luhan sighed.
"Again, you're lucky you're talking to me. I'm sure more than half of the people living here would have you executed for that statement alone."
If it had been any other Layer Jongdae would have scoffed. But this was the yellow Layer, one of the oldest known to men. Back in the days when people had only habituated one Layer and an awful war had destroyed it completely, some very smart people had discovered how to shift over to other Layers. Most refugees used it to illegally flee into other dark areas to be saved from the aftereffects of the war. But the first Layers to be officially colonized were the red one, now an infamous and shady place, the blue one that Jongdae yearned to live on, the green one which was very in tune with nature and a bit of a nut job... and the yellow one.
Unlike others, they had immediately formed a tight society and openly refused communication, cutting themselves off the rest of the world completely. It was said to be an old-fashioned place, still
ruled by a tight monarchy that was only possible due to the complete isolation. The official
connection point was still intact and frequently used by various messengers trying to re-integrate
them into the system but even as much as a simple trade offer was incredibly hard to gain; political
intentions had been met with nothing but refusal so far. Though nowadays they noted some progress -
after all, they now accepted messengers instead of blocking the contact point or flat-out killing
whoever dared to set a foot on their land, like people preferred to in the past.
All in all, it could be said that Jongdae was fairly convinced. At least he could now see why people
were still trying so hard to get through to this Layer.
Right now he didn't see a lot, being in this odd underground passage but the looks of this big
structure made of polished stone and lit torches somehow gave the impression that whatever was
upstairs must be pretty impressive, especially for Jongdae whose birth layer had no need for anything
underground and was overall pretty modest and uncreative regarding architecture. Actually, the only
thing underground Jongdae could think of was the sewage system and this definitely neither looked
nor smelled like it.
And even though Jongdae referred to those lamps simply as torches, his own mind was chiding him
for the crude choice of words. Those torches looked each more expensive and important than
probably any artifact his home Layer might have (not that their stony replication of the first bread
ever to be brought over as a symbol of colonization was a big competition. Or any at all. The orange
Layer really didn’t have a lot to offer). They looked ancient, quaint and overall, just foreign.
All of this greatly sparked his curiosity.
While he was taking in his surroundings, Luhan kept talking to Jongin in a gentle voice, his stance
one of polite attentiveness with both arms folded in his lap.
Yes, even everything about Luhan seemed foreign. From the obviously precious robe to his slight yet
exotic accent down to his little movements, like how he tilted his head and the refined way he held
himself.
Jongdae noted all this without even trying as the soft voice echoed quietly through the hallway.
"Are you feeling well? Do you want me to get you clothes? Something to eat?"
Kai only lightly shook his head and Jongdae could imagine he'd prefer this guy to stay here. God
knew who he might bring back with him.
"Are you going to report me?" he carefully asked, looking every bit as timid as a scared rabbit. It
made Jongdae scoot a little closer to him, even though he was probably no different from the blond
in his books.
"I'm sorry to tell you that, but I'd prefer not to get involved into anything political. Or... anything at
all." he said politely but straightforward nonetheless.
Luhan nodded at this, his expression not betraying anything at all.
"I'm not going to report you. As a citizen of this country offering you to join us is one of my duties.
But if you don't want to, I will respect that."
Sighing in relief the shifter relaxed his posture slightly.
"Thank you."
Luhan only dismissed him with a shake firm shake of his head.
"It's nothing. In our culture travelers -or shifters, as you call them- stand above all and are to be
treated well. Though I must also inform you that we'd prefer if you didn't bring foreigners to this land
without permission. The consequences might be harsh for everyone involved." he continued, sparing
Jongdae a side-glance.
"It was an accident, really!" said male repeated, throwing up his hands, "Don't worry, I'm not
intending to break anything. I don't even particularly want to stay here, I've got to find my friend!"
This made the shifter perk up and shoot him a tiny, guilty grin.
"Right. I'm sorry. I'd take you back in an instant, but..."
"Oh god, please don't tell me you can't."
The thought of being stuck on the yellow Layer out of all the places quickly managed to drain the
color from his face.
"No! That's not it. I mean, I'm not used to taking a whole person with me but I'm sure I can repeat it.
It's just that I don't know who exposed me to you. Maybe there's a trap awaiting us."
Right. He'd almost forgotten about that.
"You're on the run?" Luhan inquired, obviously not keen on being left out and full of disapproval for people who'd hunt a shifter.
Kai replied with a bitter laugh.
"I'm always on the run. It's what shifters do to survive."
Jongdae frowned and found his expression mirrored on the pretty face of the translator who shook his head.
"This is so wrong. Still, I gotta return and give my daily report. Don't look at me like that," he chided both of them, "I told you I wasn't going to rat you out. It shouldn't be too long and you appear to be stuck here. I'll bring back some food, alright?"
While he talked he reached for a wide robe carefully hung on a nearby wall and threw it over himself, hiding the last bits of skin and looking even more like a human peacock. Or maybe an exotic princess. Not that Jongdae dared voicing these thoughts as they bid him goodbye and watched the blond saunter away with lots of tinkling and rustling.

He waited until even the last jingle had lost itself in the wide hallway before throwing in the long overdue question.
"So what are we going to do now?"
Kai shot him a helpless look and shrugged.
"The issue is that there's absolutely no other Layer we could go to from here."
"I know, it's supposed to be a dead place," he replied easily, "obviously our people wouldn't be informed about the yellow Layer being here."
After all, they didn't give out any information, especially no geographical ones.
"Yeah. That's why I followed you. Because there was an escape route for me."
"Ah, now that makes sense as well."
"This doesn't seem to bother you a lot...?" the shifter carefully asked and Jongdae, who had been scanning his surroundings, looked back at him with an equally questioning voice.
"Should it? I mean, obviously you don't trust me. I'm a stranger to you. There's nothing I can offer you but my word."
Kai felt visibly uneasy about this, shuffling a little and avoiding eye contact. To soothe his concerns Jongdae laid a hand on his shoulder, ignoring the way he flinched since ultimately Kai made no move to draw away. It was another habit of his, choosing physical comfort over verbal.
"Now, now. Don't gimme that look. It's alright. You shouldn't feel obligated or pressured. I mean, I do want to find my friend. But I'm not gonna force you into anything, so relax a bit."
The skeptical look at the last sentence made him laugh a bit, gesturing along the dark hallways. "I don't think there could be a safer place for you. Though that doesn't go for me so let's hope we're not discovered." he concluded with a playful grin which Kai weakly returned. And even after Jongdae's hand was already safely tucked against his side he felt Kai subtly scooting closer until their shoulders touched at the tiniest movement. Silence fell upon them like dust settling in after a disturbance.
It was a little surprising how calm he felt, even to Jongdae himself. Maybe it was all due to the fact that this place seemed really isolated, making the whole scenario a lot more surreal. Besides that he had Kai at his side - it was always nice not to be alone.
He wondered how long Kai had been alone already...
"What's your friend like?"

The sudden interruption swiftly brought him back to the present only to push his thoughts into the past. Jongdae sighed barely audibly, a faint smile tugging at his lips as he thought about words to describe his best friend.
"Minseok? He's... strong. And kind. Since he's older he always wants to look out for everyone. You
know, he's rather short and has a really cute-looking face, all with big eyes and round cheeks... but don't you think for a second that he gets intimidated easily. The thing about Minseok is that he's pretty chill and mature. Quiet, too. He barely cares about people talking shit about him or trying to threaten him. But if someone dares give us - and I mainly mean myself and Yifan, another friend of mine- any trouble... you should see him, I can't describe it. He gives them this really sharp and unimpressed look. He wouldn't hesitate even a second before jumping to our aid and as I said, he's really strong. Could probably throw me, if he wanted to." At this, Jongdae made a thoughtful face, trying to recall something specific.

"Has actually done so, when we were kids. You see, I've known him since I was ten or something and I was even scrawnier as a kid. Min was slightly chubbier but not any less strong. We were quite the duo as kids, the laughing stock of the neighborhood. Am I rambling already?"

Kai shook his head, the brown curls bouncing along.

"No, please continue."

His attentive and earnest stance made Jongdae feel as if he was telling an engaging tale and not simply describing his friend.

"Okay. So... yeah, that's Minseok. Did I mention he's pretty smart, too? He studied a lot to fulfill his dream of becoming an architect. Has always had an eye for the details. I bet even this simple cellar would be one hell of an inspiration to him. He'd probably do anything to study the architecture on this Layer..."

Blinking eyes reminded him that he had a listener, devotedly soaking up every word he said and he hurried to compose himself.

"Anyway. Of course he did become an architect and in a very short amount of time he had worked himself up to the blue Layer where he always wanted to be. I don't know if you're aware of the Rankings since they don't really matter to you but from our birthplace onward you gotta cross the red and the magenta one before you can go to the blue Layer. Min worked at a really big company there but after work he still liked to return to us. The rent there is super expensive anyway. Well, that is until last year. When he didn't return anymore."

It was impossible to keep the sadness out of his voice as he told the story. It was the first time he was telling this to someone completely non-involved and it made him strangely emotional. At home everyone had heard of Minseok's sudden disappearance. People had learned that talking to Jongdae about him was an unspoken taboo.

"Obviously you'd think that he just lost interest in our poor, plain orange Layer. But I've always refused to believe Min would abandon us without a word. It's really not like him. So yesterday... did I mention that I'm also aiming for the blue Layer? I've been doing so for years but of course I intended to also search for Minseok. I got my first tracker yesterday morning and my body started acting up and everything got pretty messed up." It was probably ridiculous to explain this to a shifter, but he had to try.

He told Kai how he had been able to see glimpses of other Layers. How he saw Minseok and the position he had reached. Once in awhile Kai would nod faintly, still listening intently and when Jongdae had reached the point where they had met in the bar silence enveloped them once more.

For a few long minutes there was nothing but Jongdae's occasional sighs until Kai seemed to come to a conclusion, speaking up.

"I'll do it."

His head flew around to regard the shifter with surprise.

"Really?!"

In a vain attempt to calm his excitement, Kai lifted his hands defensively.

"It might be a really bad idea to ask me. Really. But if you want me to do it... I will. You should think it through carefully."

"Because you can't do it? I'm sorry, am I being ignorant? I don't exactly know how all this shifting-stuff works."

Kai only shook his head, not showing signs of offense though he did look rather miserable.
"That's not it. I'm sure I'll be able to find him. And I can take him somewhere, too. But you should ask yourself whether it's worth associating with a shifter. Even if it's a one time thing... the aftermath can be severe."

"Physiologically?" he asked cluelessly, receiving another dismissive hum.
"I doubt it. It's more about... involvement."
"Oh."

Jongdae thought about it. Of course, it made sense; Kai had stated before that he was on the run. Who knew what kind of people were after him. Indeed not a decision he should make easily, considering that it would also affect Minseok himself. Still, this was his only chance and so Jongdae immediately turned to reach for one of the bronzed hands and squeezed it.
"I'll accept. Thank you. Thank you so much."
Looking more uneasy than anything Kai lowered his gaze.
"Don't thank me. This might ruin you." he half-whispered.

Jongdae didn't ease his grip at this.
"Still. Thank you for trying. Minseok's gonna chide me for this afterwards but... I know he would've done the same. And really, it's you doing the work. I'll never forget your kindness."
"Don't mention it. Should we go right now?" he offered, taking Jongdae by surprise.
"Right now? Is that even possible? And what about that translator dude?"

The shifter looked down the deserted tunnel-like structure in both directions.
"It's a matter of minutes, right? I can just return here on my own afterwards. Maybe."
He swore he heard him mutter about how he probably shouldn't as he got up.
"You said it was around here, didn't you? Can you try to remember where exactly? Maybe we're lucky and it's a place we can reach from here."

It wasn't an easy task. He tried to find the exact point where they had stranded, the direction they were facing. With closed eyes he attempted to recall the surroundings at home and guided them down the hallway, taking a turn to the right at some point.
"I'm really not sure about this, but I think it's the closest we can get with these limited options..." he murmured and slowed down until he faced a wall, one hand lying on the flat surface.

One look over his shoulder told him that the shifter was looking thoughtful, his brows scrunched in concentration.
"There are several Layers here..." he said more to himself than anything. As an additional guide, he lifted his right hand absentely, his fingers slowly caressing invisible strings as if feeling for the structures.
"They're not all accessible, obviously... You said it's a more uninhabited one? I'll search this area alone. If I find a Layer suiting your description, I'll come and get you, alright?"

Watching the professional at work, he readily agreed.
"I'm not used to taking people along, as I've told you before. Let's not try our luck on this..."

The generous hood was lifted to cover his head as well as possible and for a moment he rose out of his professional haze and flashed Jongdae a shy grin.
"See you in a bit."

And just like that he disappeared, leaving back nothing but thin air.
For some reason Jongdae didn't have the slightest doubt that he'd be back. Kai seemed to be a genuine person. Maybe a bit too genuine for his own good. It also reminded him of the fact that he would probably never see him again after this, considering that he was on the run. They had only met about an hour ago, yet Jongdae could already say that it would be a pity. The seconds ticked by and just as he was asking himself how often or how fast a shifter could go between the Layers, a slightly out of breath Kai appeared right to his left, giving him almost a heart attack.

"Oh my god. I'd never get used to this. My heart just stopped there for a second."

Kai seemed amused by this, his shoulders slightly shaking with concealed laughter. He took off the hood and wasted no time in getting to the point, his fingers combing through the unruly hair.
"I think I found the Layer. Grey, labyrinth-like structure? Really high walls?"
A furious nod encouraged him to continue.
"I didn't see anyone there but now that we know it's the correct one we could search for him?"
"Yes, please."
He knew he sounded desperate but Kai didn't call him out on this and rested both hands on Jongdae's shoulders, closing his eyes in the process. Not knowing what to expect, he followed suit. A few seconds trickled by and even with Kai's fingers tightening their hold, nothing happened besides a faint shiver running down his arms.
"Uhm... This is difficult, sorry. I've never tried it before. I'm not sure how to..."
His hands unsurely traveled down his upper arms and Jongdae could actually see his face gaining color.
"This is embarrassing, sorry-"
"It's not, don't say that. Anything I can do to help? Should I tackle you down again?" Jongdae jokingly asked and Kai seemed to genuinely consider this, his eyes now open but reluctant to meet the shorter's, his voice a barely audible mumble as he talked more to himself than anything.
"Was that it? Body contact? Maybe. So, uh. If you don't mind-"
The words were cut off by a huff as Jongdae unceremoniously threw himself at him, hugging him tightly.
"Like this?" he offered, his voice muffled against the shifter's shoulder, acting like the koala he could be when it came to his friends. It was almost comical to him how the poor boy froze beneath him and how long it took for his hands to carefully settle on his upper back. Their hearts were both racing, though Jongdae was certain it was more about overall nervousness.
"Yeah. That's better."
He waited patiently for Kai's heart rate to settle and his muscles to gradually relax.
It happened without warning while he was fully concentrated on the steady breath of the warm body he was holding onto, just like that, in the blink of an eye. One second there were dark hallways, the next there were brighter but far filthier expanses of gray. A short wave of nausea washed over him, as if his body was belatedly reacting to the involuntary change of Layers. Kai all but jumped away from him, still flushed and looking highly uncomfortable but Jongdae didn't give him a chance to dwell on it too much as he quietly thanked him again and began to scan his surroundings.
"What is this place...?" he mumbled in disbelief as he slowly paced down what really did look like part of a big maze, or at the very least an enormous, abandoned structure. The floor was covered in gravel and the gray walls looked like pure cement, reaching so high that the dull gray sky above seemed far away. It was an oppressive sight, to say the least. Even though it was supposed to be very late, the faint patch of gray above their heads was bright enough to dimly illuminate the surroundings. How very odd. Not that the scenery was something Jongdae would usually shed light on. Everything was dirty; trash and waste in every corner. Occasionally he even saw suspiciously red lines adorning the walls and for a second the awful image of Minseok steadying his bloody hand right there made his stomach churn more than anything he was actually seeing. His steps gained in purpose, fueled by the thought and he could hear Kai's footsteps behind him.
He was really lucky to have the shifter at his side - this way there was no worrying about getting lost. It took only a few random turns before the all-too familiar figure of his friend came into sight, huddled on the floor against a relatively clean dead end.
"Minseok!"
Throwing away the cautious behavior, Jongdae broke into a jog, quickly approaching him. Every step revealed more of the pitiful state he was in but it was the way he looked at him that had him pause in front of the boy instead of drawing him into a hug immediately.
"Min? Hey..."
It was Minseok. Alive and breathing. A fleeting scan told him he had several superficial wounds and ripped clothing but that was it. Dirt smeared across his skin, his once rose-colored hair was now more dark roots than anything -not to mention greasy- while his body appeared more fragile than he had ever seen him before but he was alive.
He was even looking at him, straight into his eyes with his own dark orbs.
"Minseok."
Minseok smiled and it was all wrong. The way he looked right through him, the way his smile was small and lazy. The complete absence of any physical reaction.

Jongdae crouched down to eye level and Minseok followed his movements with his eyes, not moving an inch otherwise.

"Hey..." Jongdae repeated unsurely, not yet daring to touch him.

"Why don't you say something? Are you hurt? Talk to me?" he carefully asked and at this, Minseok's smile turned somewhat bitter.

"I would like to talk to you Jongdae..." Minseok mumbled softly, his expression speaking of conflict and fondness alike.

"I'm running low. But you're still here. Nothing less to expect from you."

Minseok wasn't making any sense and to be frank, it scared the hell out of Jongdae.

"I would love to see you..." he breathed out in yearning, closing his wet eyes.

"But I'm here! Right here, hey. Minseok. Don't ignore me now. Let's go home." he urgently pleaded, one hand carefully resting on his shoulder, coaxing him not to lose focus now.

"Min. Please, let's go home. I missed you."

When he opened his eyes again, he was crying. Actually crying with tears running down his dirty cheeks and despair written in his red eyes.

"I miss you, too." he whispered and Jongdae finally threw himself around his neck, forcing the cold body against his as he wedged his hands between Minseok's back and the rough stone.

Minseok never cried. Be it about physical pain or matters of the heart, Kim Minseok did not cry. He tried his hardest to keep his inner self intact at the sight. Now it was his time to be strong for his friend.

"Then let's go home."

Minseok didn't even resist, his body limp against his own.

"Why are you tempting me like this? It's not fair." he hiccuped and for a very brief second Jongdae felt anger flashing up inside him. Something wasn't right about Minseok and whoever had done this should pay for it. But again, this wasn't the time and so he softly withdrew himself, cupping the teary face with both hands and trying his hardest to get his attention.

"Kim Minseok. We are going home now," he slowly but firmly announced, "do you see the boy behind me? He's my friend. And he'll take us home."

He rose to his feet and Minseok all but whimpered at the loss of his touch. Throwing a look over his shoulder he made sure that Kai was indeed still there, an empathetic look of misery on his face.

"Can we go to the orange Layer from here?" he quietly asked, not meaning to startle his disturbed friend any further. A faint nod was enough for him to turn back to Minseok, offering him his hands.

"Up with you. Now." he commanded as gently as possible and after a few seconds Minseok sighed in defeat, actually getting to his feet.

"I'm so fucking gone..." he breathed out and Jongdae decided to ignore the gibberish for now, gesturing Kai over. Only now did Minseok actually realize his presence and it got a sudden sharp and quite violent reaction out of him, quickly ripping himself away from Jongdae and out of reach.

Even though he didn't utter a word he quietly hissed at him. It was animalistic and scary, a thought Kai seemed to share with him as he backed away slightly.

Trying his utmost not to show any concern Jongdae stepped in between, both hands bravely resting on his far-too fragile upper arms.

"He's a friend, Minseok. His name is Kai. He won't hurt you. He's harmless."

The shifter followed his gesture very unwillingly, positioning himself behind a still agitated Minseok while Jongdae kept mumbling soft reassuring nonsense, keeping their eye contact steady.

"You hear me? He didn't hurt me either. He doesn't want to hurt people. Actually he's really frightened and just wants some comfort. You like comforting frightened people, don't you? You'll let him hug you, right? Just a hug, don't be alarmed, those are just his hands on your shoulders, I can see him."

Minseok trembled as if fighting an inner battle, obviously itching to turn around and attack Kai any second but as long as he had his attention fixated on Jongdae instead he remained still.
"It's alright, isn't it? Kai is younger than us and he's really lonely so you'll indulge him, right?"
Jongdae wasn't even sure where those words came but they felt right and they worked.
The trembling fingers of the shifter tentatively wandered down his back to embrace his stomach. By
now Minseok's hands were digging into Jongdae's arm rather painfully but he didn't let up, made up
for the uncomfortable feeling by leaning their foreheads together.
"Such a sad and frightened boy, like that bunny we had as a child. It's okay. Just trust me. And
remember... I'll come for you."
And with this, Minseok and Kai vanished, leaving him to embrace the empty air.

He wanted to feel at ease but it wasn't over yet. He just really hoped Minseok wasn’t trying to hurt
Kai. After all, those words he had said may have come out of the blue, calling out to Minseok's sense
of protection, but a quiet voice in the back of his head told him that this made them no less true.
Jongdae closed his eyes, trying to feel the structures of his home Layer. It had been a long time but
everyone should be able to make it to their birth Layer easily, being well-versed with these structures.
Unfortunately, Jongdae was way too antsy to smoothly step over.
The feeling grew rapidly when faint noises echoed through the maze. Noises that grew louder.
Sucking in a deep breath he tried to recall the place he wanted to go to as vividly as possible and
finally managed to pull it off. His surroundings changed and the ground beneath his feet lowered for
a few centimeters - if it hadn’t been for Kai’s support he would have tripped on the moist grass.
Jongdae gasped, willing the nausea away as he stumbled a few feet away where he assumed the
bundle on the grass to be Minseok, blinking the blurry haze from his eyes.

"Stop right there or we'll shoot!" a muffled voice bellowed across the meadow.
"W-what?"
He did stop, though not before taking a final step to stand half-way before the cowering Minseok
who was silently moaning in pain.
Four people -all clad in black- were pointing weapons at them and unlike the one Luhan had used,
those looked light and deadly though Jongdae could hardly identify them in the dim moonlight.
While one was pointed at each Minseok and Jongdae two aimed at Kai, who had a look of terror on
his face.
"You are coming with us."
For a moment everything seemed to freeze, fear blocking his movement like an invisible barrier.
Then a deep voice cut in, breaking the tension.
"Authorities! Hands up!"
One of the four people whipped around just to get hit by something with a dull thud and sink to the
ground. It caused the other three to also turn their backs on them, even if only for a second and
without thinking, Jongdae jumped to his left to shove Kai over to Minseok.
"Go!"
He had no time to make sure they had left since one of the guys had noticed their activities and
Jongdae lunged to the side, out of his possible shooting range- That is, if he was holding a gun.
Jongdae didn’t want to find out. Grunts and thumping noises came from the bundle of three shadows
wrestling with each other. Jongdae skidded over the slippery grass, bringing the undefined mass of
shadows in between him and the last guy. Maybe he would at least hesitate before possibly shooting
his partners.
If only he had a weapon-
One of the dark people was thrown against his partner, causing them both to lose their balance and
tumble to the ground. Before he knew it the newcomer had rushed over to Jongdae, roughly pushing
him behind his back. Far too befuddled to show any resistance he complied, hiding behind the
stranger's back.
"Jongdae. You gotta leave."
He knew his name? How?
"Who are you?"
Looking past his current protector he saw that the attackers had regained their footing and now three people were slowly closing in, weapons lifted. The stranger pushed Jongdae back behind him as they took slow steps away from them to avoid being circled around. Something about him seemed vaguely familiar but it was too dark to make anything out. Whoever he was though, he was protecting him.
"Behind you. Get away from here." the guy mumbled, his deep voice urgent and strained, and Jongdae imagined feeling it rumbling through him as his hands clawed into the fabric of his hoodie (when had he reached for his clothes?). Without letting go he turned around just in time to see Kai who reached out and violently pulled him away. For a second he saw nothing but a tall shadow being approached by all four of them. Then everything vanished in favor of the dim, yellow underground hallways.

People had liked to call Kyungsoo insane. Sure, they had used more medically correct terms, most of the time. Sick. Unpredictable. Dangerous. Those were the words that used to softly echo through the hallways while more complicated terms firmly stuck to the paper. But that was years ago. Nowadays, they didn't seem to care much about him anymore. By now he was nearly forgotten, his life frozen in time, spent trapped in white walls. The endless routine of white felt like a sedative all on its own but inside Kyungsoo burned a colorful fire that no amount of white would ever be able to extinguish. It may be a monstrous, undefined and even gross fire but deep down Kyungsoo preferred it over the eternity of blank, lifeless white. Preferred it over having nothing at all.

Today as well, a wicked little smile danced across his generous lips as he kept himself entertained by things people barely bothered to ask about anymore. It wasn't the first time that he had managed to smuggle something sharp inside his room to slice open his blanket, and it would probably not be the last.
Yes, people still liked to call him insane, once in awhile. But Kyungsoo didn't mind. *Because they were absolutely right.*

Chapter End Notes

If you wanna know what went down with the poor boy left to fight the pursuers, refer to my Microcosm I: 
*Microcosm I*

*About the Microcosms:* 
All of them are snippets of no more than 500 words. I highly recommend reading those as well, if you wanna get the full experience~
♡
Chapter 4

Steadying his hand on a wall, Jongdae gasped for air. The shock was slowly settling in. He could feel it in the way his legs were wobbling. Still, there was no time to process what had happened and his head whipped up to look at Kai. "You need to get that guy too! They'll kill him!" he anxiously exclaimed, "I think I might know him and he saved us, so please-"
"I'm trying, okay?!!" Kai snapped back, one hand pressed against his side as if suffering from a stitch, his breathing labored.
He gulped audibly, and closed his eyes. Only then did Jongdae have a chance to notice the light sheen of sweat on his forehead. The shifter was exhausted.
"I'm sorry." he hurriedly threw in, one comforting hand on his shoulder but Kai shrugged it off, taking a step back.
"It's okay. I'm trying." he repeated and before he could say another word a strangled scream echoed through the hallway, followed by both familiar and unfamiliar words.
"Get off me you freak! Get-off- Oh my god-!"
Jongdae looked up to see Minseok and Luhan tangled in a mess of limbs a good distance away from them and set off stumbling in their direction.
In between yapping for air he kept calling out to Minseok to no avail.
The lump of fighting bodies came closer and he could clearly see them rolling around as Minseok tried to get his hands on Luhan to inflict as much harm as possible, hysteria clearly taking over him.
Without hesitation he tackled his friend to the ground and the huffing blond scrambled away from them, reaching for the lance that was lying somewhere forgotten.
Minseok wasn't even able to formulate any words at this point - all he did was groan and hiss, wailing in agony as he tried to pry Jongdae's hands away.
But next to the weak and unstable boy, Jongdae clearly had the upper hand and with quick and precise movements, he pushed him to the ground, both of the bloody hands firmly pinned down his lower back.
"Let go-" Minseok grunted, not ceasing to struggle against his hold. He could tell that the grip was bruising by now but there was no other option. Especially with the lance being pointed in his direction by shaky hands.
"Dae, let go, let me go- I need it, he has it, I need it, please-" Minseok rambled brokenly, the side of his face pressed into the cool ground below.
"This guy is crazy!" Luhan exclaimed with wide eyes, clearly shaken up, poorly concealed disturbance written on his face.
"Please put that thing away, I've got him now-" Jongdae reassured him though his voice was cut off by a groan of pain as Minseok twisted in his hold, "can you get anything to calm him down or knock him out?"
Hesitating for only a second, a muffled scream of pain from Minseok ripped him out of his reverie and Luhan scrambled away, leaving the weapon behind. Jongdae could only hope that the blond wouldn't hand them in now - he had every reason to do so, after all.
"Minseok. Min. Calm down. You're hurting yourself-" he tried to tell the struggling boy beneath him but it was no good. He wasn't even sure whether Minseok was hearing him. He just kept wailing in pain, a never ending string of pleads on his trembling lips.
"Dae please- it hurts, hurts so much- I need it, help me-"
"What do you need?" Jongdae inquired but Minseok only whimpered, tears welling up.
With the way Minseok's body was twisting and convulsing, his pale skin drenched in sweat, it took every ounce of will for Jongdae not to panic. Even worse than the physical symptoms, however,
were those endless pleads. Choked and broken whispers of 'please', each piercing his heart. Begging him to make it stop, telling him that he was his friend and should help him. Screams of pain that ended up muffled as Jongdae forced the fabric of his discarded jacket into his mouth, afraid he might bite his tongue. It felt like he was torturing him, but what else was he supposed to do?

A few feet away Kai appeared out of nothing, a tall guy at his side. The shifter quickly leaned against the closest wall and sank to the ground in exhaustion. The stranger crouched down next to him, attempting to touch his arm but Kai swatted at his hand, even scooting away a few inches.

"You need help?" he asked, worry clearly visible in his wide brown orbs.

Where had he seen them before?

"I... I don't know. I think not." he uttered, fully concentrated on keeping Minseok down.

It was evident that his friend was getting tired but he kept thrashing and screaming anyway, as if forced by an invisible power. The guy crouched down next to them, supporting Jongdae by holding Minseok's legs still which Jongdae begrudgingly allowed. A quick scan later, the stranger nodded in approval.

"You already gave him something to bite into. That's good. Do you know what triggered him?"

Big eyes flit up to meet his, their proximity rather close.

Jongdae shook his head.

"Who are you?" he asked instead, desperate to finally remember where he had seen him before.

"Chanyeol. I'm Chanyeol."

The name didn't ring a bell but before he could dig deeper he saw Luhan approaching in the distance and Chanyeol jumped to his feet, attempting to stand in between them but Jongdae nudged his leg.

"It's alright. He's a friend."

Lucky for him this statement proved itself to be temporarily true and Luhan rushed to their side, carelessly throwing himself to the dirty ground and reaching into the bag he had slung around his shoulder. With slightly trembling fingers, he took out a foreign-looking object Jongdae had never seen before.

"Hold him down, this goes into the neck." he curtly advised and Jongdae had no choice but to trust him, exposing the spot with the help of Chanyeol.

Luhan seemed to know what he was doing. With swift and decisive movements, he removed the cap and placed the end of the cylindrical object on the dirty skin, pushing down on the other end. There was no indication that Minseok had been hurt in any way but about a minute later the resistance got even weaker, his will leaving him.

"It's an anesthetic." the blond explained, stashing the object away to take out a big bottle of water instead.

Jongdae had finally ceased the grip on his friend's hands in favor of soothingly petting his hair. A mere two minutes later, Minseok had fallen asleep, his body finally resting. Jongdae exhaled in relief and climbed off him.

"He'll be out for at least three hours. Make sure he drinks a lot of water afterwards. What on earth just happened? Who is he? And who are you?" Luhan kept interrogating but Jongdae had blocked out everything but the first sentence and was currently scrambling over to Kai with the bottle of water in one hand.

The shifter spared him a fleeting glance but made no move to tell him off as he knelt down close to him. Encouraged by this, he offered him the bottle and reached out to check his temperature.

"Okay..." he mumbled, letting the back of his hand trail from his forehead to his cheek, just to make sure, "I think you'll be alright."

Kai's skin was still a little clammy but at least he wasn't burning up or anything.

"Are you in pain? Do you need anything?"

The shifter only shook his head slowly, finally accepting the bottle after Jongdae had opened it and all but forced it into his hands.

"Just tired. I'll be fine." he murmured and Jongdae felt the last bit of tension drain from his body.

"That's good. You were awesome. We owe you our life. Really. Thank you."
"It's nothing..." he trailed off, taking a deep gulp. Jongdae shook his head vigorously. "Don't say that. I personally do value my life so I'm grateful. In this case you should say 'you're welcome'."

For a second, Kai looked at him with confusion written over his glazed eyes before he finally gave in, weakly whispering "You're welcome." before closing his eyes. "Look. I have a lot of questions right now and I think I have every right to get some answers."

Luhan piped up a little louder, obviously unhappy about being ignored and Jongdae turned to him. "Yes. Of course. Shoot."

Luhan blinked. "I'm sorry. I meant: ask away. Ask your questions. It's a figure of speech." Jongdae clarified, exhaustion nipping at his own thoughts now that the immediate danger was gone. The blond nodded, understanding lighting up his features. "I will. But we shouldn't stay here. This place isn't that abandoned and you've made quite some noise already. Let's move somewhere else."

Jongdae naturally moved over to carry Minseok but with the way Kai was refusing help from Chanyeol and Luhan being busy scoping out whether the coast was clear, he left this task to Chanyeol. Which didn't mean that he was leaving this stranger out of his sight while he took it upon himself to steady the shifter.

"Okay, first question: Who are these two?"

Jongdae sighed, reaching for one of the snacks Luhan had brought with his free hand. He wasn't even sure whether they tasted good or not, but any food was welcome at this point. They were still in those odd catacombs, though considerably farther down, where Luhan had led them to an abandoned room. It seemed to be a long forgotten storage room with bulks of heavy curtains stacked everywhere, filling more than half of the room. A few of them had been spread out on the cold stone floor or were used to cushion their backs. Currently, Jongdae was leaning against a wall, the head of his unconscious friend rested in his lap while a dozing Kai sat to his right, his head nestled into the crook of his neck. Luhan was sitting in front of them, cross-legged and expectant while this Chanyeol guy was also sitting nearby, a polite distance from both Luhan and him. Jongdae rubbed his eyes. "The one who tried to attack you is Minseok, my best friend. Kai saved him for me. I'm sorry for what he did to you and I know he is sorry, too." he offered, still petting the hair of his peacefully sleeping friend. Luhan didn't seem completely convinced. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know..." he admitted with a sad look before directing his gaze at Chanyeol, "I also don't know you, I think? Though you do seem familiar."

Now that there was some time to breathe, he could finally take in his appearance. Chanyeol was tall, very tall. More on the lanky side with a youthful face and a misleadingly deep voice going along with it. His curly hair was far more unruly than Kai's and appeared to be a rich shade of brown in the dim light of the flickering torches. To Jongdae, the most striking feature were his eyes though. Big and full of life, the fire's light dancing in them. The familiarity was undeniable. "Ah, we've met before... Back at the square, where you were making that funny face?" Chanyeol asked hopefully and the realization finally dawned upon him. "I remember..." Jongdae mumbled, squinting his eyes a bit. Something was still off. Even back then he had seemed familiar. "I'm also a regular at your bakery?" he added helpfully and ah, now it all made sense. "So that's it!" he exclaimed as loud as he dared without disturbing the two resting males. "Yeah... I was the one writing that note, too."
"You? You know Kai?" Jongdae wondered out loud when Kai suddenly spoke up, revealing that he was still very much awake.

"I don't know him." he mumbled with his eyes still closed, "What do you want from me?"

He sounded biting but tired and Jongdae couldn't help noticing how vulnerable he was in this position. Chanyeol, however, quickly denied his suspicions with rapid hand gestures.

"I don't want anything from you! Promise! I just overheard their conversation and wanted to help..."

With his slumped shoulders he gave the impression of a kid awaiting a scolding. It looked ridiculous on someone as tall as him. But also endearing, in an odd way.

"I just saw you once in awhile, appearing out of nowhere close to our shop. I'm sorry..."

The shifter lifted his head a bit to shoot him an imploring look but in the end he gave up, sighing.

"Whatever. I don't even care. M'tired."

"Just take a rest, then." Jongdae intervened, "You'll be fine."

Kai murmured something unintelligible into his neck before taking the suggestion. Luhan didn't seem too happy about Chanyeol and kept throwing him suspicious side-glances.

"Hah. Sounds fishy," he openly declared, disregarding the way Chanyeol flinched and turned to Jongdae, "so now you're stuck with him, aren't you?"

"Stuck? What do you mean?"

"What are you planning to do now?" the blond elaborated in patient contempt, obviously taking him for a moron.

"That guy over there told me you just fled from a bunch of assassins. You think you can just go back home now?"

"Right... you're right. Of course. We don't even know whom they were after. They could have been after Kai, but just as well after Minseok. After all, Minseok wouldn't just get into this situation out of his own free will."

Luhan nodded gravely.

"Exactly. And you've associated with a shifter and this friend of yours already. Even this guy-"

"I have a name you know?" Chanyeol threw in with a pout and went ignored.

"...has been seen with you. If you go home now..."

"...they'll be on our heels." Jongdae concluded.

"Even if we don't return... where would we go? How can we be sure that our families would be safe? Without Kai, we're basically helpless." Jongdae muttered.

That was indeed a problem he had only dimly registered. Only now that he thought about it, did the full consequences hit him.

"Now you're getting it. The police are already investigating the scene, too. You'll be declared missing."

Chanyeol was fidgeting at this but the first question coming to Jongdae's mind was not about the why.

"How do you know that?"

Luhan looked over his shoulder, clearly fixated on nothing but a blank wall.

"White uniforms with orange straps around the upper arms. That's your police, no?"

"I hope you're realizing that this is slightly freaky. Are you actually seeing them?" Jongdae prodded incredulously.

"I can see all sorts of things." Luhan vaguely replied.

"What do you mean?" Jongdae muttered utterly confused but Chanyeol seemingly understood, gaping at him.

"You're a... seer." he breathed out.

The translator licked his lips nervously, avoiding their eyes.

"That's true."

Jongdae had never heard of this expression before, but judging by the sound of it...

"You're seeing different Layers? How's that possible?"

"It's a genetic quirk," Chanyeol intervened with poorly concealed eagerness, "it's probably not as rare as the ability to shift but there are many shades ranging from those who only see, like, one
certain Layer at all times to people being able to manually switch and see many."
"How do you even know all that...?" Luhan inquired grumpily.
"Why are you being so hesitant about this?" Jongdae threw in, "if shifters are basically holy in your culture, wouldn't seers be respected as well? I don't see the problem?"
The blond sighed.
"You can't understand this. Being a seer is a double-edged sword. There have been countless disasters throughout history where people trusted a seer unconditionally, only to pay for their mistakes. It's not that easy. However certain you may be, no one is without fail. Seeing things and knowing how to distinguish and relate them are two entirely different things."
Jongdae nodded. It did make sense. If a seer told you the coast was clear but he had merely looked into the wrong place... he could see how this would result in a lot of damage.
"I already am in a respectable position. Being a possible weapon in a war was never what I wanted. There's a reason I have bared this truth to you, though."
Luhan sat up straight, his whole posture taking on a more formal feeling.
"You are obviously not safe anymore, but I might be able to help you. I have an offer for you."
Both Jongdae and Chanyeol perked up at this while the soft breathing of Kai suggested that the shifter had fallen asleep, after all.
"If you meet my conditions, I'll talk to the higher ups and they will offer you shelter. All four of you. My position grants me a high influence, so this shouldn't be a problem. I don't think there would be any better place for you to hide from the world."
"What are those conditions?" Chanyeol carefully asked.
This time Luhan paid an equal amount of attention to both of them.
"There is a place I keep seeing. I do not know what Layer it is on, but it looks like a village... of traffickers. People abducting children of all ages, both male and female only to raise them with violence and condition them with drugs. I've seen people break under their treatment. They cry and scream and suffer... until they're fully conditioned and accept the abuse. Embrace it." Luhan's voice slightly cracked at the end of this and while Jongdae had a look of disbelief on his face, the blond shared Chanyeol's expression of disgust.
"What they do... is unforgivable. For the sake of those victims and also in the name of this kingdom, this has to be stopped."
"What... do you want us to do?" Jongdae mumbled, his hands tightening in the fabric of Minseok's shirt in an unconscious search for comfort.
"I want to find out which Layer this is. There is no need for you to stop it - the mere knowledge of where exactly this place is will be enough proof for me to alert my men. I know I've seen some of our children as well. This will be the incentive they need." "If this is so important to you, why haven't you exposed your skills a long time ago already?" Chanyeol asked and while it was pretty tactless, Jongdae had to agree to a certain point. Luhan could have flat-out told them he was seeing things like that.
"And then what?" he gave back in annoyance, "Have an army of our undercover soldiers search the whole world blindly? Who knows on which forgotten Layer this takes place. They'd soon give up and declare me crazy. Let's see how much of a change I'll do then." "So you're sending us cause we're disposable." Chanyeol concluded with an unhappy face. "Partly, yes. And flexible. It's just an offer though. Also because you have a shifter on your side." They both looked from each other back to Luhan, hesitating.
"I'm very much aware that this is a tough decision. Discuss it when you're all awake. I'll keep covering for you for the whole of tomorrow, to give you time to think."

Jongdae barely had any sense of time left but he'd guess a few hours had passed. Unable to catch some sleep, he was trying not to feel claustrophobic in this windowless room as he watched the shadows flickering across the wall.
He wasn't entirely sure whether the close proximity of people to both of his sides was making this task any easier. To his left, in between him and the wall lay Minseok, still sleeping soundly and
occasionally twitching, huddled under the same heavy curtain as him. To his right, Kai was spread out and even though there had been a respectable distance when they had gone to sleep, by now he could feel his legs brush against him at the slightest movement, as if he had gradually rolled over. In an odd, tilted way.

Chanyeol had spread out his blankets in another corner. It made Jongdae feel like they were casting him out and he wasn’t sure how to feel about that. It wasn’t like him to exclude people but he wasn’t sure what to think about that guy yet. Even though he technically knew him way longer than he knew Kai, the feeling was completely different. Kai was really... simple. Whatever he did felt genuine and trusting from how he honestly spoke up about his issues to the way he clung onto Jongdae, searching for comfort. With Chanyeol, he wasn’t so sure. Something was slightly off. As if he was holding back on something. The whole thing about him being a regular who had coincidentally overheard their conversation was pretty fishy indeed, as Luhan had put it.

Then again, he had protected him, there was no denying that.

A faint rustling to his left ripped him out of these thoughts. It was Minseok, slowly returning from the deep, artificial sleep.

He turned around to face him and found drowsy eyes blinking back at him. The sight was foreign, yet at the same time so familiar he wanted to cry.

"Hey." he whispered quietly. The single-lidded eyes blinked once. Twice.

"Hey." Minseok finally replied.

For a while, none said another word and Jongdae watched the wonder dancing in Minseok’s glazed eyes, his lips slightly parted. Finally he reached out with his bruised and slightly bloody hand. Slowly, tentatively until it was resting atop Jongdae's matted hair.

"Dae. It's you." he breathed out, still dazed but the clearest Jongdae had seen him so far. Nimble fingers messily petted his hair before falling to his shoulder in a clumsy fashion.

"It's really you, isn't it?"

Jongdae smiled widely and whispered back.

"Welcome back, Minseok."

The spell was broken and he was drawn into a hug that would have crushed him if Minseok wasn't so weakened. He reciprocated it gladly, mashing his cheek against Minseok's dirtied one without a care in the world. Deep, ragged breaths were wracking the other's weak body but he wasn't crying. Because this was Minseok and Minseok didn't cry.

"What happened, Min?" he asked finally and his friend drew back to get a good look at him, as if savoring every second of doing so.

"I'm not sure. I can't remember anymore." he uttered, his face scrunched up as if even trying to do so gave him a headache.

"I can only remember working at the office... then there's a huge gap. It's all black."

He could feel the pale fingers twitching from where were rested on his shoulder.

Minseok closed his eyes, trying his best to recall anything at all.

"Someone took me away. Someone... they put me there and gave me this-"

Realization wiped out the pain and replaced it with guilt.

"I'm so sorry, Dae." he whispered, retracting his hand in a jerky movement, disgusted at himself.

"I'm- I-"

Minseok opened his mouth just to close it again, searching for the right words. Searching for the courage to say them.

Not perturbed even in the slightest, Jongdae placed his own hand on Minseok's shaking shoulder.

"Take your time." he simply said, waiting patiently as the trembles slowly ebbed down.

"I- I haven't been myself back there. Because... I was high. And, and then I was running low. And I always get this way when it's gone, I always get this... awful. I'm s-sorry."

Even in the dim lighting he could tell that his friend was scarlet by now, ashamed at himself.

"Don't apologize." Jongdae whispered back and wasn't even sure what to add to this. He didn't mean to make him even more uncomfortable but they had to know.

"It's a... drug?"
It wasn't like him. The Minseok he had grown up with was a little bit of a health freak, unwilling to do so much as to try smoking a cigarette when they were in their teens. Still, he nodded, his eyes fixated on him in an earnest plea.

"When I was put there I was completely high on whatever it is. I don't know what it is, really. And I had nothing but a few spare syringes with exactly this fucked up stuff. When I came back to myself, I couldn't shift anywhere anymore. I tried to be stronger, I tried to be better than that, please believe me Dae. I tried so hard-" he croaked, his voice breaking, "but every low was worse than the one before and soon I ran out and began to wander around this fucked up place. I came across... others. And I took their resources. I- I can't remember whether I hurt them. I don't even know whether I'm a murderer-"

"You're not." Jongdae breathed out shakily, both to Minseok and himself. But Minseok was barely listening as he kept blurting out the truth.

"And sometimes I found food or more syringes because they were playing a game, Jongdae, they were playing a sick game with me-"

He softly hushed him and in response Minseok's eyes darted around the room, stilling on Chanyeol.

"Who is he? We're not home, are we?"

"No, we're not. We're someplace safer than that. Just trust me, I'll explain it all tomorrow. You should catch some rest."

Jongdae gently replied, rearranging their replacement of a blanket but instead of relaxing, Minseok only tensed up.

"I can't sleep. What if I lose control again? It's gonna happen again."

He lowered his head below the curtain to hide himself from the dim light. And maybe from Jongdae's eyes, too. His faint voice was whispering against his collarbones.

"I can feel it coming already. My fingers are trembling."

Jongdae kept reassuring him that it was fine, that he had more of those anesthetics Luhan had used earlier, that he should sleep now.

Completely unaware of the way a very much awake Chanyeol was propped up on one elbow, watching them with curiosity in his eyes.

True to Minseok's words, the night was rough and Jongdae ended up giving him another shot to put him to sleep. It was only a temporary solution but they all had to get some rest and Luhan had promised them he'd come up with something better the next day. Even with all the stuff going on, exhaustion managed to pull Jongdae into a light sleep full of dark and bleary snippets of odd dreams. At some point they were awoken by Luhan who told them it was early morning already - not that they would be able to tell. He left them with more food and a bunch of pills for Minseok.

"Those are analgesics mixed with a very light sedative. They'll dull his ability to feel pain and calm his nerves. Don't let him take too many. About two a day is completely fine. I hope that's gonna help."

"Thank you. I'll give him one when he wakes up." Jongdae replied, stashing away the pills.

"Alright. I'll come for you later again, I still have a job to do..."

"Which reminds me, don't people get suspicious if you keep lurking around here?" Chanyeol piped up and Luhan tilted his head, sending him an unimpressed look.

"I don't 'lurk' around. I'm merely enjoying the emptiness of this area."

"Ah, because there's nothing but the orange Layer out there in the hallway, right?" Jongdae asked and maybe it was the complete lack of mock in his voice that got him a nod, accompanied by a small smile from Luhan.

"You have quite a beautiful home."

"Hah, you think so?" Jongdae gave back with a raised eyebrow, "It barely compares to your cellars though."

Chanyeol didn't seem willing to give in that quickly though.

"But yesterday we made plenty of noise-"

He didn't mention that it was mostly Minseok making all the noise.

"so surely someone must have heard us, right?"
Maybe Chanyeol was just rightfully worried and that was probably the reason Luhan finally gave in, after trying to ignore him.
"Only the lowest servants are living on the first floor and they won't tell on me. I've grown up with them. Besides," he added reluctantly, "with all the echoing altering the sounds they are completely convinced by now I'm indulging myself in... very vivid illicit affairs. And the scratches on my neck really didn't help."
Chanyeol snorted and with slightly pink cheeks Luhan whisked away, saying no more about that.

When Minseok finally woke up, Jongdae coddled him until he rolled his eyes at his overly caring nature. The air between him and the other two was rather awkward and especially Kai seemed frightened Minseok might go crazy any second. Chanyeol just appeared to be flighty, torn between approaching them and staying away, not sure whether he was actually welcome. This, too, made him feel sorry for him but he was a little too busy filling Minseok in on everything he had missed. He had been hesitating but in the end, it was Minseok himself speaking up about what had happened to him in front of the other two. Unlike the night before he was being oddly clinical about it, as if completely detached.
"And for that reason, we can't go back anymore." Jongdae concluded, looking at both boys sitting across him.
"You said you don't remember what brought you into this situation." Kai shyly murmured, not daring to look him in the eye.
"...then they'll definitely be after you." Chanyeol finished from where he was leaning against a wall, a few meters away from them.
"There's something in your head that they most certainly don't want to resurface."
Oddly enough, Minseok didn't seem too frightened by this idea. Maybe it was the pills kicking in but he showed no other reaction but a moody hum, gulping down the water Luhan had smuggled down.
"I wonder whether those guys were the ones chasing after Min... or after Kai." Jongdae mused. The shifter let out a short, bitter laugh at this.
"Everybody is after me."
Jongdae decided not to comment on this - he couldn't think of any comforting words that were true, anyway.
Instead he patiently told them about the offer Luhan had made, filling Kai's eyes with disbelief instead.
"Shelter for me? I don't know... it... it doesn't seem possible?"
"It could be though. We gotta decide whether it's worth a try." Jongdae neutrally said.
At this, Jongdae gestured Chanyeol over, inviting him to sit with them. With a giddy smile and poorly concealed eagerness he scrambled over, silently sinking to the floor on his right.
"I mean, it's not like we have any better ideas, right?" Minseok mused.
"Exactly, that's what I'm thinking as well." Jongdae agreed, "We can't stay here and I guess keeping in motion is the top priority for us. So we might as well search for this place Luhan's seeing.
"I'm in on this." Chanyeol agreed easily, seeming oddly unaffected by the fact that his whole life had been turned upside down in the blink of an eye.
"Yeah, me too," Minseok added, sounding determined, "to be honest I wouldn't want to go home right now, anyway. So that's more than fine by me."
Jongdae nodded, and their attention turned to Kai, who was still hesitating.
"I don't know... Do you really want me to join you? I told you I'm dangerous. See where it already got you-
"The way I see it, it mainly got us out alive," Minseok harshly cut him off, "you've just told me they're after whatever has gotten lost in my fucked up brain so I don't think you're the only reason for the downfall of this group."
It startled Jongdae, to say the least. Minseok used to be far more gentle than this, not that his words were a lie. Not that he'd think of either of them being their 'downfall'. The words seemed to hit home however, and Kai bit his lip one last time, finally coming to a
"Jongin."
"What?" Jongdae asked quizzically.
The shifter looked up to meet their eyes.
"That's my name. Jongin. My real name. It's probably just me being stupid again but... anything's better than being alone, right? I'm in."

A few hours later -Minseok guessed it to be around the early evening- did Luhan return.
Even though he brushed it off as having expected their answer, he seemed genuinely relieved that they'd do this.
"Great. I suspect you already have a plan?"
Jongdae nodded.
"Sort of."
"That doesn't sound convincing. What's 'sort of' a plan? I'd rather get insight on what could possible kill me." he stated matter-of-factly while rummaging through his bag.
"Kill you? Why?" Chanyeol asked in mild confusion.
"Because I'm coming with you? Obviously?"
"You are?!” they replied in unison and Luhan put down his bag in favor of crossing his arms to give them an exasperated look.
"Of course I'll go with you. How else are you going to know whether you've found it? Don't tell me you can't use a seer."
"That's not it, I mean. Wow, I didn't expect this. Though now we definitely need to get our hands on some clothes," Jongdae blankly added, giving Luhan's pompous clothing a once-over, "you're standing out more than any of us and we basically look like we've escaped a war zone."
"Is there anything wrong with my attire? I was planning to leave the coat behind, you know?"
To demonstrate, he slid off said coat. Not that anything he wore below that was even remotely closer to being discreet. According to Jongdae this image might have ultimately been ruined by the golden embroideries. Or the bells. Or the flower patterns-
"So what is the plan? Care to tell me now?"
"Oh, first we're gonna go to the orange Layer-" Chanyeol began, his voice dutifully reciting what they had agreed upon before.
"U-huh."
"-and then we're gonna sneak into the council and steal a bunch of chemicals!" he concluded with a bright smile.
Luhan almost fell over.
"We are going to do what?"

Pumping beats, flashing lights, and sweat. Those were the main indicators of a good club.
Wasted youths lying in the corner uncared for, half-naked women sprawled over the counter and ominous people who are a bit too generous in treating others - those were the main indicators of a dirty club.

"Plleease Mister. Can I get another one? I can't find your friend anymore-" Baekhyun prattled with a heavy slur almost swallowing half of the words. He stumbled a little over nothing, his desperate hands clawing into the jacket of an edgy-looking man. He didn't look all that impressed and pried the pale hands away.
"Easy there. How many did you have already?"
It took Baekhyun two seconds to react. With a slightly opened mouth he thought very hard about that before breaking into a smile.
"Just one!"
With a raised eyebrow, the blue-haired male roughly pulled Baekhyun's left arm forward and twisted it until the inside of his upper arm became visible where two short, neat lines were lined up, just a hand-width from his armpit.
"Liar. You've had two."
Baekhyun faked surprise, complete with wide eyes and hands trying to cover his blushing cheeks.
"Reeeally? I just forgot, so sorry-"
"Quit the bullshit."
The boy winced, his posture going lax as his lie was exposed.
"I'm sorry... But please gimme another one, pretty, pretty please."
He changed his strategy and shot the guy what he deemed an alluring look out of his blown pupils, leaning a bit closer into his personal space and not so accidentally brushing against his groin.
"I can pay for it." he said as low as he possible could to be heard over the beat. The guy didn't even blink though his pupils widened a fraction as well as he eyed him up and down.
A lot of trashed people turned very ugly very quickly. But this one seemed just awake enough and was really not all that bad-looking. His hair was so freshly dyed that the vibrant magenta was visible over the flashing lights and he was all white skin and slim figure with some loose, gold coloured glitter clinging to his hair and skin. Admittedly, the heavily smudged kohl liner and the black net shirt made him look like a very desperate prostitute. But a pretty fuckable one nonetheless.
It was barely around noon but what did it even matter in this club?

"I only take cash. Fifty and no less." he sharply said and Baekhyun broke into a wide grin.
"That's fiine!" he slurred, reaching for his back pocket to grab his last notes. He gave him ten extra dollars and the guy counted them orderly to give him a look over said notes.
"There's ten dollars missing."
"Oh. Oh no... I only have five dollars left though..." Baekhyun mumbled, searching his other pockets in vain. When he couldn't find a single coin, he was just that close to crying. Seeing this, the man sighed, the sound drowned out by the ongoing party in the next room.
"Fine, then gimme the five. I'll make a discount, just this once."
"Really?? Yaaaay, luckyyyy~" Baekhyun laughed, eagerly offering him the last note. The guy took it and leaned in closer to talk into his ear, his breath tickling him.
"You could do me a little favor later if you wanna make up for it."
Baekhyun shot him a grin that may have been salacious if he'd been sober and nodded.
He let the guy draw a third line on his arm, and arched into the touch of his fingers lingering on his lower back before getting shooed away.
"Go to the guy with the green hair at the counter. You remember? Green. Hair."
With a happy nod he hopped towards his destination, trying really hard not to tumble any more while squeezing through the masses of bodies sloppily moving against each other. The air was stuffy and full of smoke. He had almost reached said guy -who was receiving the approval of his blue-haired boss in the form of a hand gesture over the crowd- when the UV light was turned on. The erratic flickering of white light made Baekhyun feel even more lightheaded, the world around him slowing down and at the same time gliding out of his control. As if the heartbeat of the world was skipping a few beats, again and again. He got shoved by a careless overweight person and all but crashed into the green-haired guy.
"Watch it!"
"I'm- I'm sorry." he uttered as he tried with difficulty to detach himself from the guy who shoved him off not too nicely.
"You sure you're getting another one, shorty?"
Baekhyun nodded hastily.
"A yellow one, please."
The man complied and reached into his breast pocket, taking a small yellow pill out of his box and brought it to Baekhyun's lips, forcing it inside his mouth. He closed his eyes and even hummed, easily letting it happen and repeatedly thanking him after he half-sauntered, half-tripped back to the dance floor.
As soon as the mass of bodies had swallowed him up, he spat out the pill. There were no actual uppers inside but who knew what else would be. He barely took any detour and as swiftly as he could he made it to the girl's bathroom. He wasn't feeling too bad about it considering that the noises already filling the room didn't sound all female. Two giggling girls were standing in front of the mirror, blatantly ignoring the grunts and moans from one of the obviously very occupied booths. Baekhyun lounged in front of the mirror, washing his hands and creating an even bigger mess of his kohl liner with his wet fingers.
"You're a boy! This is the girl's bathroom, you're wroooong!" one girl suddenly called out, both breaking into further giggles. Baekhyun wanted to roll his eyes but instead he looked at them with his mouth forming and indignant 'o'.
"How can you say that!" he whined back, feigning hurt.
"My nipples are super pretty though!"
At this, he lifted the net shirt over his head and the girls couldn't keep in their hysterical laughter. 
"Look, loook. They're pretty, like a girl's! I can be a girl today! Let's have a girl's night~" he sing-songed and the totally trashed girls agreed easily, still laughing at him.
"Let's go and dance a bit you cute little girl-" one of them proposed with an exaggerated wink and Baekhyun almost sighed in relief.
"You go first, I'll be there in a sec." he replied, seemingly eager as he wiped the net shirt over his face to dry it.
Get lost already, he screamed in his head.
The heavy door had barely closed behind them when he threw the shirt into the sink, his hands flying down to untie the fluffy black sweater from his waist, pulling it over his head in one swift motion. It was only a matter of time before the guy at the counter would realize that the bags with the actual drugs were missing from his back pocket.
Only a matter of time before someone sober turned up they had to give some real stuff to.

Baekhyun rashly combed the hairspray out with his fingers and turned on his heels, not missing a beat as he walked towards the wall of the white tiles to his left. In one fluid motion he threw the now soggy net shirt over his head and into the booth of the moaning couple who complained loudly. The curses dissipated in mid-step just like the stuffy, dirty surroundings and the moment his feet met the ground he was met by a rush of clean, fresh air, the pumping bass replaced by the faint chatter of people. He didn't even blink, reaching for the duffle bag he had placed at the side of the back road and slinging it over his shoulder. With a casual movement he threw the bags of colorful pills inside and took out a heavy book about medication. Being casual was the key and the reason why no one batted an eyelash at the boy who crossed out of a side street and into the main road, half his attention on the book in his hands. Beams of sunlight reflected off his white attire and skin, the dusty brown hair flipping softly with every step. A serene image of a picture-perfect student.
While his eyes seemed to flit back and forth between the lines, Baekhyun huffed lowly and resisted the urge to shake his head.

*Paying $15 dollars to give a blowjob. Hah. That would be low, even for his standards.*
"I don't know, I feel like a criminal."
"You do not look like a criminal, Luhan," Jongdae patiently repeated for what must have been the fifth time at least,
"and that's not how you tie shoelaces. Let me help you."
Chanyeol's snicker was cut off by a deathly look from the blond and Minseok only sighed as he tossed a simple hoodie over to Kai who caught it with a surprised huff.
"At least you're not looking like a little princess anymore. All those bells were enough to give a whole concert."
"I think they're perfectly reasonable. If you're of a certain status, you shouldn't have to sneak around in silence like a mouse," he gave back with a small pout he himself would never admit to.
"Pay attention. I won't always be around to tie your shoes, your majesty." Jongdae jokingly threw in and one pair of successfully tied sneakers later he turned to checked on Kai, whose hair was a mess after forcing on the hoodie that was slightly too tight. It was a rather old piece of Minseok's wardrobe, but it was all they had for now. With Luhan's ability to see, they had managed to locate Minseok's home and stealthily went in to take some of his clothes and return before anyone could notice them. Chanyeol might have looked rather unscathed but the rest of them were ranging from slightly bloodied and dirtied like Jongdae to the mess that was Minseok and the inappropriately lavish Luhan.
Jongdae wondered what Minseok might have been thinking, standing in his dusty old room. Another part of him envied him just a tiny bit for getting a glimpse at the sky. Only 24 hours had passed and yet he already felt depressed by the lack of sunlight.

Once they were all set Luhan told them it was way after midnight, maybe around three in the morning which was a perfect moment to head out. Carrying as little as possible, they made their way down the hallways with Luhan leading the odd party. On and on they went, until polished bricks turned to rough and dirty ones, the torches at the wall long gone. It felt more like crawling down a tunnel or cave than anything else. Still, no one complained. Once in a while Jongdae looked back to see if they had lost anyone on the way. Minseok had taken one of his pills a few hours ago and while they ought to make his head a little fuzzy, he had silently admitted to feeling better than ever. Behind him were Chanyeol and Jongin. The shifter seemed adorably eager not to be last but still too wary of Minseok to push forwards. Chanyeol had decided to keep him company, though Jongin didn't seem too excited about that prospect.
"We're almost there. Don't make too much noise. We're gonna climb up a few stories later and there are gonna be people above us." Luhan murmured back, carefully lighting the way with the torch he had brought along.
Jongdae wasn't too nervous.
Their plan was simple and the biggest chunk of work had already been done by Luhan and him. At some point during the day the translator snuck away from his job to scope out the surroundings with Jongdae, so all of this wasn't entirely new to him anymore. It had been an awkward back-and-forth of Luhan describing what he saw and Jongdae trying to figure out where to go next but after a long and tedious search, they ultimately found the place where the orange council building was. The official shifting point as well as the whole entrance area was heavily guarded, obviously. But the orange Layer didn't have to fight a lot of crime and was rather poor in general so the extremely expensive cameras only kept to those areas, as well as the outside of the building. Yifan had worked for the council once and so he knew that they only hired security guards around important festivities, slacking off on most other days.
Jongdae would hardly blame them for their carelessness. After all, what were the odds of a shifter deciding to sweep right into the building?
Well, he thought while his hands reached for the rusty metal of an old ladder fixated in the stone, *today the odds were against them*.

Now that they knew where to go, all that was left was to shift over and get a hold of the substances. The reason was simple. Jongin might be able to take a person with him but being completely dependent on him was nothing short of stupid, especially considering how exhausting the process appeared to be. If they wanted to be able to move quickly, they needed to figure out the system and inject the substances by themselves. Especially Minseok could use those, being unable to shift anywhere at all. There was not even a home he could return to, rendering him completely helpless. Luhan had accused him of thievery and while that was very much true, Jongdae couldn't find it in himself to care. He wasn't actively harming anyone and they wouldn't take *everything*. It wasn't like they had any other choice.

After another flight of almost ancient-looking crude stairs they finally halted in a very unimpressive area with a ceiling so low Chanyeol had to walk with his head ducked to avoid scraping it. Indeed he could hear faint sounds of thumping from above. He wondered where exactly they were. And why the cellar closer to the surface looked this forgotten and unused. Maybe they weren't under the palace anymore.

Huddling down in a small circle they wordlessly communicated, Luhan gesturing to Jongin and Minseok to leave first and check whether the coast was clear. They could have sent Jongin to do the task alone but Jongdae had insisted on getting him company. Just because Jongin had the capabilities, didn't mean he should risk his neck for them all the time. He watched them leave, Minseok looking deceivingly calm. He couldn't help worrying about him, though he was certain that Minseok would harm neither of them. When Jongin returned to get Luhan, the other two also got ready to step over. Jongdae extinguished the torch and the last thing he saw before doing so was an encouraging grin from Chanyeol.

It really got easier. It was only the third time shifting to the orange Layer, but the structures already felt so familiar that it didn't take Jongdae long to make it.

When he opened his eyes he stood in a brightly lit room, similar to the one he had received his injections in. Everything was dead silent and deserted.

Jongdae blinked rapidly and stretched his limbs a little to adjust himself.

"There we are. Welcome to my humble home. Sorry for the mess, I didn't expect any guests." he mumbled more to himself than anything and Luhan hushed him. Not that there was any living soul nearby to catch them. Jongdae rolled his eyes but Chanyeol and Jongin seemed fairly amused.

While Luhan was already rummaging through the shelves in search of something useful, Jongin was trailing after Chanyeol through the open door, exploring the other rooms.

They had talked about that. Since Jongin and Luhan were their most valuable members they shouldn't stay too close to one another - after all, it would only draw more suspicions and losing both of them would cause tremendous damage to everyone (even though Jongdae had fiercely argued that they wouldn't leave behind *anybody*). Jongdae himself had promised to stay by Luhan's side but... where was Minseok?

Unable to suppress the worry, he explained in silent gestures that he'd leave and Luhan dismissed him, undeniably engrossed in what must have been completely new territory to him. He stepped into the hallway. To his left, Chanyeol and Jongin went through the other medical rooms in a systematic order. To his right, the hallway led to the entrance area and a movement made him flinch before he picked up on the alarming turquoise color of Minseok's hoodie. His heart still skipped a few beats and as quiet as possible he tip-toed down the hallway, careful to avoid the side where he suspected the cameras to be aimed at. They didn't know whether someone was watching them in real-time, after all.

Minseok was currently crouching on all fours, slowly moving behind the deserted counter.

Jongdae came to a halt shortly before entering the hall, not daring to take another step. Inside his head, thoughts were running wild, shouting out to Minseok and asking what on earth he was doing.
With clenched fists he kept shifting his weight nervously while Minseok opened some cupboards below the counter with a concentrated but calm expression.

He had just opened his mouth to whisper a question when a noise from where he came from made both their heads fly up.

Only then did Minseok notice him and Jongdae gestured that he'd go and check. As much as he felt uneasy about his friend dancing under the nose of those cameras, hasty movements were not the way to go.

With swift steps he went back towards Chanyeol, who stood in a doorframe, shooting him an alarmed look. He nodded towards another room and through the keyhole he spotted light behind it. Shit. There was someone in there. They shared a look before turning to look for anything suitable to act as a weapon when Jongin handed them an odd-looking statue that was probably supposed to be decorative. Jongdae took it and the shifter obediently retreated into the office while the two went into position to open the door. Before they were ready, though, said door swung open and revealed a surprised-looking medic. Chanyeol rushed forwards to knock him out cold but the doctor was quick to react, jumping back in the room and throwing a nearby shelf into the doorway with a loud crash. It wasn't high but it sent Chanyeol tumbling, causing both of them to fall to the ground where they wrestled with bare hands to gain the upper hand. Jongdae was standing beside them helplessly. Just as he put down the now useless weapon a faint click sounded behind him and a cold voice followed suit.

"Don't move. Chanyeol. Let him go."

Jongdae knew this voice by heart and whirled around immediately. Chanyeol, on the other hand, continued to fight him until a quick look over his shoulder made him freeze. The medic saw his chance but the moment he had Chanyeol tackled down he only made himself an easy target for the gun pointed at him.

"That's right. One more wrong move and it'll be your last. Put your hands up."

Chanyeol seized the opportunity to scramble away from the doctor who slowly lifted his hands, entranced by the sight. Minseok slowly advanced under the incredulous look of Jongdae, Chanyeol, and even Jongin who was peeking out of the room he was hiding in.

A gun. Minseok had a gun. Was that what he'd been looking for before?

"We were planning to find it all out by ourselves but this comes in handy." he said, his voice clear and determined, no mercy in his eyes.

"You are going to get us the shifting substances and explain to us how to use them. I don't think I need to repeat my warning about acting out of order." By now he was standing close to the doctor, just out of reach, the gun still pointed at his head.

The man swallowed, smart enough not to ask any stupid questions.

"Are there more people here?" Jongdae piped up carefully, his eyes still darting in between Minseok and the shocked medic who hummed dismissively.

"No. Just me. I'm going to get what you need. Don't harm me, please."

"If you comply, we won't." Jongdae firmly assured him when his friend didn't speak up. The doctor nodded faintly and slowly got up to retreat into the room he came from, Minseok following closely behind him, interrogating him in a sharp voice. There was no trace of Jongin and Luhan but Jongdae wasn't worried - they had specifically told them to hide in an undefined emergency situation.

"Who are you and why are you still here?"

"Zhang Yixing. I'm a medic. I'm doing overtime."

The man sounded completely calm and only the very occasional stutter betrayed his fear. He was probably in shock. Jongdae would be, too. The way Minseok talked and nudged the gun against the back of his head... it was scary. He almost twitched more than the medic when it happened, holding in his breath.

Jongdae wanted to feel safe. He wanted to blindly trust Minseok and if they were speaking about the boy he had grown up with there would be no questioning that. But this wasn't the Minseok he knew - he was too cold, too unpredictable, and even now he could see his fingers slightly trembling.
A bad sign. Maybe he’d spiral into another seizure soon and who knew what would happen then. He really wanted to be certain that Minseok would never harm any of them. And even though he tried his best to convince himself of this, the safety of this uninvolved stranger was something else entirely. They entered the surprisingly big room that looked like a laboratory, a quietly humming desktop shedding light on multiple documents, supporting the medic's words.

The man shakily gestured over to a cupboard.
"They're in there. The colorful substances in the lowest department and the transparent one above it." Minseok nodded over without breaking eye contact and Chanyeol crossed the room to search it.
"What do you want to know?" the medic asked quietly, nervousness clearly written over his soft features.

"How they are used. We want an easy instruction on how to use these. Can you do that?" Minseok rhetorically asked and offered the man to take a seat to which he complied in relief. Jongdae noticed his legs shaking and felt incredibly bad. If shifters were holy in Luhan's culture, for Jongdae and most Layers that would be medics. There were many doctors, sure, but a medic was someone specialized in shifting. Only very few people had the capabilities and endurance to become a medic and after obtaining this rank, most of them spent their time at research facilities.

The number of traveling medics was very low. They should be treated with respect and gratitude, not threatened.

"I- Yes. I think so. I'll get a few pieces of paper now," he announced quietly, shooting a timid look over at Jongdae, "Can you give the gun to one of your friends?"

Minseok laughed a short, humorless laugh.
"And why would I do that?"

The doctor looked back at him but his eyes kept flitting over to Jongdae, silently calling out to him.
"Because you're about to have a seizure."

Jongdae tensed at that and Chanyeol halted in his movements, regarding Minseok in a new light. He couldn't help but fear his friend might see red but all Minseok did was flash him a dangerous lopsided grin, his pupils slightly dilated.

"Then maybe that'll be an extra incentive for you to hurry the fuck up."

The medic bit his lip and reached with shaky fingers for a pen, placing the tip on the white backside of some random document.

He drew small, black circle on top of it and a row of three white ones below.

"This is Fenethylline," he explained, writing both the words 'black' and 'Fenethylline' below the first circle.

"It's sort of an amphetamine, meaning that it manipulates your body to be more alert. To put it simply."

There it was again, the tiny stutter that clawed at his guilty conscience.

"It can have a ton of negative side effects so regular injection should be avoided. It is considered a drug."

Jongdae leaned in closer to get a better view while Chanyeol kept bustling around the room, taking turns in stuffing various objects into his duffel bag and checking up on Jongin and Luhan, probably assuring them that they had the situation under their control.

"The other three," he went on, wetting his lips, "are filtered versions of this drug. Their names match the colors. Rojotylline for the red one. Azultylline for the blue one and Verdetylline for the green one."

Jongdae tried to memorize those since the medic's writing was more of a scrawl, not necessarily filling the cliche of a doctor's handwriting and more likely reflecting his panic.

"Those barely have side effects and are safe to consume. You can mix them."

He drew out a laminated paper depicting what looked like two very colorful hexagons attached together at one side. They consisted of many small, colorful cubes and from afar it looked like one center of the hexagon was a black hole, polluting all the colors around it while the other center was white, doing the same.

The tip of the pen wandered over the sheet, pointing at a few already highlighted cubes.
"This is a mix chart. You'll need it. It's a two-dimensional view of a globe. Imagine the white dot to be on top and the black one as the bottom."
"Go on." Minseok instructed and a fleeting glance revealed the slight sheen of sweat on his friend's face. Jongdae subtly reached for a pill and to his relief, Minseok took it without a hitch, his eyes still fixated on the paper.
"The corners of this graphic are very pure colors."
He pointed to three of the six corners, always skipping one in between.
"There's red, blue and green. If you look closely, you can see the color code."
Jongdae inched closer for them and indeed, there was a combination of numbers and letters in each of them.
"The order is always red, green, blue. Every color has two symbols stating the amount of substance you need. You see that the red Layer has the code FF-00-00. 'F' stands for... I'll write it down."
He added a small list that read '0, 3, 6, 9, C, F'.
"What's that?" Jongdae asked with a tilted head.
"The concentration. It goes in steps of three. Zero means none at all. You need to have the perfect balance to get to the right Layer. So. FF-00-00. As I've said, the order's red, green, blue. There's only red and no green or blue. That's how you get to the red Layer, with red substance only. The magenta one says FF-00-FF. That means you need to mix red and blue at the ratio of 1:1 to get there."
Jongdae nodded even though the medic couldn't see it. The man was really good at explaining, and he vaguely wondered whether he had students himself.
"Unlike regular inoculations, 3ml are enough for one shot. 1ml of each red, green and blue. It's common to dilute the substances, though. Right now we're on the orange Layer. The code says FF-99-00. That means a ratio of 16:9:0. A little complicated to calculate."
The gun was nudged into his chestnut-colored hair and he flinched.
Jongdae wished he would stop doing that but didn't dare to say anything. He also hoped the pill's effects would kick in soon.
"So. So medics usually dilute them to avoid mistakes. Take a pipette for these substances. Most of them display this measuring system, taking one milliliter in total. You fill it with red up to the F, which means up to the top. 1 milliliter of red. Then you fill it again with green. But you only go up to the nine, and fill the rest with fluid chloroform."
He drew a last circle on the paper, writing below 'transparent' and 'Chloroform'.
"You can't dilute any of the three in water. It must be Chloroform. The last one says zero, so fill the pipette designated for blue with Chloroform only."
"So if I want to go to the green Layer, 00-FF-00, I'll take two ml of Chloroform and one of green."
Minseok repeated and maybe it was due to how well Jongdae knew him but he sensed the minuscule tremble in his voice.
"Yes. Though it's not that advisable to take this much Chloroform as it has very light toxic characteristics. You'll only die at around 45 grams but it should still be avoided to."
"What about the dark Layers?" Minseok cut him off and the doctor quickly tapped the black cycle.
"If you stretch the substances with pure Fenethylline instead, you'll get there. Again, that's not advisable since."
"Jongdae, did you get that?"
He nodded quickly and stepped around the table so as not to obscure Minseok's aim. His legs were slightly shaky even though they had no right to be. From where he stood now, he could see the strained, fearful look of the doctor. He couldn't keep the guilt off his face.
"Yes. So... If I want to go to the dark red one, the post war zone... it says 33-00-00. I fill the pipette up to the 3 with red and then fill the rest with the black liquid, the drug. Then I'll add two more ml of this drug. Right?"
The medic nodded, a silent plea swimming in his eyes. Jongdae felt awful and could only hope that Minseok wouldn't do anything stupid.
"Just stick to the color codes and mind the ratio."
"That's it?" Minseok questioned with one brow lifted in doubt. "Seems easy. That's the big secret? Anyone can do that."

"Anyone might be able to get it right," the medic calmly said as if reciting something he'd said a dozen times before, "but only very few know what to do when something goes wrong. That's the art of being a medic."

Jongdae was slightly impressed even though Minseok wasn't. He risked a quick glance over to Chanyeol, who uneasily hovered in the doorframe.

"Chanyeol? Did you listen? Do we have everything?" Minseok questioned without turning around to see the tall guy. He wondered how he did that.

"Yes and yes. We got it."

"Good. Let's leave. Luhan can do it alone, I guess. You're first, then Dae, then me."

Chanyeol nodded and swiftly disappeared into the hallway.

"Dae. Take the notes and the chart." Minseok ordered almost softly and he complied. Somehow, the way he used his nickname was calming him down tremendously. As if it was the last indication of him actually still being there with them.

"Do you know what to do if you're fighting withdrawal symptoms, too?" Jongdae bursted out without thinking, getting a warning look by his friend.

"Jongdae."

"What kind of withdrawal symptoms?" the medic asked carefully though his eyes were already analyzing Minseok's state from head to toe.

"I-I don't know. Uhm. The ones caused by drugs? The ones that make you feel very good and energetic, and prone to hallucinations? They mess up the whole Layer-sensibility, too."

The doctor nodded while Minseok went stiff, the free hand clenched into a fist at his side.

"It's a vague description but a general answer would be - violent seizures as the aftermath of uplifting drugs, yes? In general you can go for anything dimming the process like alcohol, baldrian, morphium, basically any analgesic or sedative. But they are mostly highly addictive as well, so don't overdo it. It sounds trivial but a lot of water, exercise, and healthy food will help in getting it out of your system." he said in a rush.

"Jongdae. Over here, please?"

It was Jongin, standing in the doorway. He really didn't want to leave the two alone and the medic seemed to share this thought with him. In a gentle motion he placed his hand on Minseok's upper arm.

"Come quickly," he said quietly, his voice dropping to a whisper, "don't hurt him, okay Min?"

Minseok only grunted and very unwillingly he let go of him to join a positively frightened Jongin who led him a few steps down the hall where he deemed it possible to shift over to the yellow Layer.

Not even half an hour later they found themselves settled back in the storage room. To Jongdae, the dusty, dark room almost felt like a home already and with a sigh he sank in the nest of curtains that was his makeshift bed. Jongin was half-napping already while Chanyeol unpacked the stuff the shifter had brought.

Jongdae hadn't dared to ask Minseok whether he had hurt the medic or not, but on their way back Jongin had subtly denied it. The immense amount of relief at this made his steps lighter. He'd have never forgiven himself if the kind medic had gotten hurt in any way. After all, Minseok was not to be held responsible.

"Do you still have that gun?" Luhan suddenly asked into the silence, a brave and imploring look resting on Minseok, the unspoken question to hand it over lying heavily in the air. It seemed as if the collected amount of courage wasn't needed as Minseok silently pulled it out and offered it to the blond nonchalantly.

Luhan took it in a way that suggested he'd never held a weapon like this before and looked at the others questioningly.

"I have to go upstairs later on so I shouldn't have it. Jongdae shouldn't, either..."

*Because I'm his best friend and you don't fully trust me yet,* Jongdae silently added in his head.
And you fear for precious Jongin to get hurt. That only leaves one person.
Sharing this train of thoughts Luhan pushed it into Chanyeol's hands, who seemed fine with it. He instantly crouched down and turned the object to investigate it, his otherwise clumsy hands swiftly flying over the mechanisms.
"What are you doing?" Jongdae asked curiously though the sight was vaguely unsettling. The sight of a gun always was.
"Just checking whether it's fully functional. It's locked though, don't worry. Our store mostly sells children's toys, but once in awhile the local officials like to get their stuff serviced as well. I guess you could say we've made a name for ourselves as craftsmen. I'm not even done with my traineeship yet but those guns are really simple. In the end it all comes down to mechanics." he calmly explained, picking apart the weapon and placing each part orderly on the ground.
"You look so routinely though. You sure you haven't been in the army or anything?" Luhan inquired half-jokingly and Chanyeol laughed soundlessly, as if it was a joke only he got.
"Hah. Me, in the army? No. Not quite. I mean... kind of, maybe."
"How can you be 'kind of' in the army?" Luhan asked with genuine confusion and Jongdae couldn't deny his own curiosity either, but he also sensed the boy's uneasiness and decided to save him for now. After all, no matter how direly they could need the information, they have barely known him for longer than a day and spilling all his personal secrets could surely wait.
So he reached for the doctor's note and the chart and began to retell what he had heard to the others. Luhan and Jongin were listening attentively while Minseok wrote it down so they wouldn't mess it up. All the while he could feel Chanyeol's eyes on him even though they would quickly flit down to his hands as if polishing the parts with his sleeves acquired his utmost attention as soon as Jongdae caught him staring.
"Alright. So we have the resources to travel safely. We vaguely know the location. What are we going to do now?" Luhan inquired, pulling a little at the foreign clothing that was more loose than he was used to.
"We could go there and scour the Layers until we find the right one," Minseok suggested, throwing a look at Jongin, "That wouldn't be too difficult for you, would it? You found me, too."
Jongdae noticed it, the soft tone at the last sentence, but he wasn't sure anyone else did. At least the shifter seemed to gradually get used to the ticking bomb that was Minseok.
"I can do that. I can sort of feel whether the ground level matches with my current position. A little lower is still alright. If we can get that close..."
"But even if we manage to find a spot like that, we can't just let Jongin appear in the midst of that place," Jongdae threw in thoughtfully, "it would endanger both Jongin and the mission. We gotta find out the color code of this Layer. And I bet it's not a common one..."
Everyone went quiet for a few seconds, staring at the chart as if any tiny cube would just come out and reveal itself to be suspicious.
"I have an idea." the deep timbre of Chanyeol's voice suddenly piped up and they all turned to look at him. He was just putting the last element of the gun back in place with a metallic snapping sound and lay the now considerably more shiny weapon on the ground before him.
"Let's go to the cyan Layer."
"Isn't that place highly populated?" Luhan gave back with a frown, checking the chart for the position and code of this Layer.
Indeed it was highlighted by a black frame, belonging to the few very well-known Layers.
"Yeah. More people equals less attention?" Chanyeol replied with a light shrug, "Besides, they've got the biggest library in the world and I know for a fact that they have all the books and maps regarding topological stuff. If we wanna find out how to get close to this point Luhan keeps seeing, we might get some information there?"
Jongdae nodded. That made sense. The cyan Layer was most famous for their academics, both in the fields of shifting research and the raw accumulation of knowledge. He's heard that they're not that into the technical developments though, preferring a rather modest life style. Which was probably still much more refined than the poor one he had grown up with.
"Are we gonna get into this library?" Jongin shyly spoke up for once, "I've seen it from afar before and it looks pretty important..."
Chanyeol dismissed his worry with an easy smile.
"We'll make it. I've been there before. Besides, I know someone who might help us."
Jongdae decided to put faith in that self-confident smile of his. It was worth a try and they were already regarded as criminals anyway. It could hardly get any worse.
"Alright then, let's just go there. Any complaints? Better ideas?" Minseok curtly inquired, rubbing his temples as if fighting a headache. He was met with nothing but silent headshaking and a playful salute from Chanyeol.
"Great. Let's leave in the morning. I'll catch some sleep until then..."

The others followed his example while Luhan re-dressed and went back to his quarters for a few last preparations. Jongdae couldn't deny the respect he had for the translator. Even though he had made it clear that he'd never shifted anywhere before, his professional attitude didn't falter one bit, despite the complications they'd been facing. Not to forget that he was new to this. New to most things, actually. Having seen the occasional bits and pieces didn't mean a thing when it came to actual action. Heck, he couldn't even tie shoe laces but the moment he had been carried over to the orange layer he was moving around like second nature. He took it all in stride, fueled by nothing but fierce determination, refusing to show his nervousness and that was something Jongdae wasn't sure he'd be capable of. Those were his thoughts he tried to occupy himself with, huddled below a few curtains. But sleep refused to come and he could feel his thoughts getting pulled back to-

Minseok groaned very silently in his sleep and tugged the blankets tighter. He was shivering. Without thinking, Jongdae silently got up to retrieve another one to throw it over him as gently as possible but the moment he was lying down again, big eyes blinked up at him. He wasn't sure whether he looked sleepy or delirious. His forehead was covered in cold sweat.
"I'm cold." he mumbled quietly, "But it's hot, too."
Jongdae reached for a random piece of cloth he could reach and wiped the sweat away. Minseok let him. He was in every way different than before. When the others were around he was moody and aggressive; both traits that had never before applied to Minseok.
Now he was just tired and vulnerable, shivering from head to toe.
"Are you thirsty?" he quietly asked but his friend only shook his head.
He straightened the blanket with calm fingers under Minseok's steady gaze until a whisper made him stop in his tracks.
"You really thought I'd do it, didn't you?"
A few heartbeats of silence followed. Jongdae averted his gaze and drew his hand back.
"...I'm sorry." he simply whispered because there was nothing else to say. He had been a disappointment.
But Minseok shook his head again.
"Don't be."
His smile was weak but other than hurt, there was something else reflected in his eyes.
"Keep looking at me like that." he breathed, closed his eyes and settled down, the last words barely audible on his trembling lips.
"So I can always trust you."
Trust you to stop me, were the words unsaid. Jongdae heard them clearly anyway. And as he lay down, listening to his breathing gradually evening out and the trembles subsiding, he wondered whether he'd ever be alright again. He didn't want to accept that the Minseok he had known might be gone forever.
Stretching himself thoroughly in the only angle possible -which was from top to bottom as both of his sides were encased- his eyes met the ones of Chanyeol who blinked and quickly averted his gaze but Jongdae had already seen him. He rolled over on his stomach and propped himself up on his elbow.
"Sorry. Did we wake you up?" he whispered across the room and received a shake of his head in
"No. I'm just not that tired right now." he replied and with a side glance to both Minseok and Jongin who were firmly asleep, Jongdae decided that he wasn't that sleepy either. He was neither sick nor exhausted from shifting and had spent a good amount of the day sleeping. "Me too." Jongdae faintly whispered with a shrug. Chanyeol appeared to be genuinely worried, all attention perfectly focused on him as he even sat up with his back against the wall and the curtain pooling around him like a kid determined to take the blanket with him. 
"Are you nervous?"
Jongdae thought about that. 
"Maybe."
A faint rustling sounded to his left and they both stayed quiet, waiting for Minseok to settle. Jongdae ultimately took his blanket and crossed the room, careful not to step on anything and create more noise. He stopped right before Chanyeol who blinked up at him in slight wonder. "Can I?" he whispered, gesturing to the spot on the ground and Chanyeol nodded eagerly, making some space for him next to his makeshift bed. Jongdae made himself comfortable. This way their whispered conversation wouldn't wake Minseok (he wasn't even worrying about Jongin. That boy's sleep was deep). 
"I'm just curious. About the cyan Layer. I mean... I've only been to the blue one and that was one time. Other than that I've been nowhere else. Excluding all the craze of these last days," Jongdae whispered, belatedly remembering the fact that Chanyeol didn't actually know him. Or maybe he did? It wasn't too strange that Jongdae wouldn't recognize a regular customer at their bakery. After all, he was first and foremost in the back. He rarely stood at the counter and mostly during delivery times where regular customers were working. Not to mention that he had even known him by his name. As far as he knew his mother had stopped bragging about her cute little son when he stopped being cute and little. 
"It's a nice place." he assured him and even though it was barely above a whisper Jongdae could hear the depth of his voice clearly. Almost as deep as Yifan's, though a lot less rough. 
"Very clean. Warm weather. Everyone wears pretty floaty garments, all white and cream and the likes. The people there are mild-mannered and calm." 
Jongdae nodded. This vaguely confirmed what he'd heard of though it was obviously different to hear if from someone who had experienced it. 
"Have you been there a lot?"
Chanyeol looked around, his brows knitting in thought before he shook his head. "Nah. Only a few times. When I was a kid I really wanted to study medical science there. But look where I am now. Things took a few different turns, as they always do." 
"Medical science. You must be a smart little cookie," he replied teasingly, effectively flustering the boy who rubbed his neck distractedly, denying it. Getting to know Chanyeol was nice but then again Jongdae always harbored an interest in the stories of other people. 
"Do you regret missing the opportunity?"
This time Chanyeol didn't have to think it through and smiled. "No, it's alright. That's life. It sounds cliche, but I'd rather not exchange all my experiences for other ones. They make me who I am, after all." "I guess you're right..." Jongdae mumbled and pondered whether Minseok would ever say the same thing. He doubted it. In the end, everyone was different and the things that had happened to Minseok probably shouldn't be compared to anyone else's experiences. No, that wasn't exactly right, Jongdae chided himself. Chanyeol, too, didn't deserve to be compared. Trying to weigh up amounts of tragedy against each other was both pointless and showed a lack of respect. 
"You're from the orange Layer, too?" he asked to fill the silence and Chanyeol easily presented him his right arm where an orange crest was barely visible in the dim light. Just like Jongdae, it lay over his pulse and no other marks or blemishes decorated his skin.
"I see. So you've been to the cyan Layer as a visitor."

Probably to check out or apply to this university but there was no reason to rub it in.

"Have you visited any other Layer before?" he asked instead and something unreadable flickered over his expression. He sensed that he'd hit a sensitive topic by the way his body language became a tad more fitful, the calm confidence instantly exchanged for more frequent blinking, averted eyes and strained shoulders. It happened in a mere second and before he could take it back Chanyeol nodded, more to himself than anything.

"Yeah," he breathed out and when their eyes met he wore a lopsided smile as if he had successfully convinced himself, "Yeah, I've been to some places before. Holidays. Kind of."

They ended up talking about a lot of different places Jongdae had seen in TV or witnessed in person -like the blue Layer- though he was mindful of the other's hesitance and restrained himself from asking too many questions. They went back and forth between comparing the advanced blue Layer with their home, listing advantages and disadvantages of their laid-back and quite unspectacular birth Layer, sharing a few odd stories and quiet laughs and by the time Luhan returned to wake the others Jongdae felt as if Chanyeol wasn't that much of a stranger anymore.

The paper bag rustled slightly as deft fingers forced the little wooden stick deep inside, reaching for the last piece of fried chicken. Without mercy nor care the piece was picked up and generously swiped through the leftovers of sticky sauce. He wasn't even paying attention as the bite of meat unceremoniously disappeared into his mouth, his eyes fixated on the dimly lit street. The only light reaching the narrow alley came from an adjoining street nearby and it merely reached up to the first floor, leaving the darkly dressed assassin on the window sill of the second floor in complete darkness. Pressed against the dirty glass of the high window, he became one with the shadows and invisible to people walking by below. There was no one around so he crumpled the paper in his hands, throwing it through a hole in the broken window he was leaning against. The wooden stick was pulled from his lips and followed, having fulfilled its purpose of keeping the sticky sauce off his gloved fingers.

Tao wasn't afraid of germs.

It wasn't like he was unwilling to get his hands dirty, but greasy fingers could complicated the process of getting his hands actually dirty.

One could argue that it was stupid to eat unhealthy street food during a job, but it was something he often did and it had yet to cause a slip up.

Tao wasn't even particularly hungry or gluttonous. Sure, food could taste nice, but it was nothing compared to his actual treat. Still, Tao had to eat a lot. It was something his owner had explained to him more than once and that was a rare occurrence. Usually Tao picked up on stuff fast. But the treat that kept him running, sharpened his senses and made his aim calm and precise also made his body burn a lot of energy. Energy he had to provide it with. The problem was that at the same time it switched off his body's natural alarms, so to say. It didn't bug Tao by constantly crying out for whatever thing it needed and so Tao had to bridge this minor flaw of his by eating more than others, whether he was hungry or not.

Absently licking the sauce off his lips, his gaze stayed fixated on the street, waiting for the target to appear.

There wasn't much going on inside his head and he wasn't mourning over that fact. His occupation required utmost concentration, leaving no room for idle thoughts.

That way, he wasn't the least bit surprised when three people appeared in the alley, two of them clearly drunk as they stumbled slightly, a third person acting as a bodyguard for his target. He
patiently waited for them to take a few steps, waited until the sober one's gaze had skimmered the street, failing to notice Tao, whose black garments and hair made him one with the shadows. Only when they started walking again did he jump off, buffering the impact with a swift roll and using the momentum to get back up to his feet in one fluid movement. The sober one - the bodyguard - had barely managed to turn around before Tao's fingers brutally slammed into a pressure point located behind his ear, knocking him out cold. The disadvantage of having to keep your ears free. The two drunk guys didn't make much of a challenge but Tao didn't waste any time and they sank to the floor, unconscious, only seconds after. He rolled the taller of the two onto his back and with catlike grace he swung his long legs over him, holding him down by one shoulder. The other reached for the slim knife stored in his belt and without hesitation he dug it into the politician's chest, as deep as it could go, until the handle met the man's jacket. The weakly convulsing body was no match for Tao's strength and the groans were muffled by a piece of fabric. Tao's movements were precise and efficient, though others might argue. Most of his kin preferred poison nowadays as it was much cleaner and left behind little evidence, but Tao liked to be really, really sure and therefore went for the confrontational approach. He wanted to actually see the life leaving them, or, even better, feel it underneath his fingertips. Ever since a certain slip up in the past where he had failed and endured harsh consequences, he had switched to this method. He hadn't failed again after that. The twitches stopped and Tao didn't need a watch to tell him that barely a minute had passed since he'd entered the alley. Most people held on to their life for longer, but most people also didn't have the misfortune of experiencing the deathly aim of Tao going for the heart. He wrapped some cloth around the base of the knife to avoid blood splatters as it was pulled out (though there would be slight traces of blood left on the metal in case his owner wanted them) and he quickly stepped away before the growing puddle would reach his feet. Unwilling to struggle with the bulky bodyguard for longer than necessary he simply twisted his neck before the guy could come back to his senses. The sound was nasty but his keen ears had told him that there was no one walking by close enough to hear it. It wasn't exactly mercy that made him spare the third one who only received a slight sedative before Tao jumped on a container and made his way up, climbing along the window sills that had sheltered him earlier. A rare spur of actual thinking had told him that they might want the other politician alive and while his owner would only downright laugh at the client for being unspecific, Tao knew he'd get punished later on anyway. Just thinking far enough to stay in the good books - that was the reason Tao was one of the most accomplished ones. He didn't need to look down and check the situation for him to know that there were no fingerprints, no blood, maybe a stray hair. But research would only get them so far and Tao wasn't in any of their databases. Deciding against burning the street in order to spare the third guy, he swung his weight onto a sill on the third floor and vanished just before the first passerby noticed the bodies.
In the end it was Jongdae who mixed the cyan substance under the watchful eyes of everyone else ("Sure. No pressure at all. Thanks guys."). The mixing process was simple and they only needed three portions anyway since Chanyeol claimed his last visit wasn't lying too far in the past and he'd make it. They were skeptical but he proved it by scoping out the Layer with Jongin until they found a spot where it was safe to cross over. Luhan had brought more of those oddly shaped syringes which made the process fairly easy. This time around, though, more sneaking around on higher ground was necessary, meaning that they had to be extra careful. Without Luhan's guidance and sharp knowledge about everyone's habits they would have never made it to the washing room safely. As predicted, Minseok seemed drawn to the tiniest details of the “run-down” and “really not that nice” servicing rooms, as Luhan had put it.

And while Jongdae, too, would have loved to spend some more time marveling at the oddities hanging from the clothes lines below the high ceiling, there was hardly time for that. With a fresh shot of cyan flowing through his veins, Jongdae now already felt a variety of structures -mainly orange and magenta with vague sprinkles of something undefined- and for the first time he had to actually distinguish between them and find the correct ones. Luhan was urging them on since Jongin and Chanyeol might get worried on the other side and people were already banging at the door he had locked behind them, but Jongdae stubbornly waited until Minseok had made it before actually trying. It wasn't too hard, grasping for the one unfamiliar structure, but upon seeing the nervousness in Luhan's eyes he decided to yet again hold himself back and shoot him an encouraging smile. After all, this was the first time for Luhan to actually go somewhere of his own accord (some place that wasn't his home) and leaving him alone would surely cause the poor guy to panic even more. That was the reason why Jongdae was the last one to step over and be greeted by a rush of deliciously fresh air and an almost familiar soundscape of a bustling city.

"You made it, that's good." Chanyeol's deep voice easily carried over the chatter of people and Jongdae opened his eyes only to squint against the sunlight.
It was probably an odd thing to say but to Jongdae the change in atmosphere was noticeable. Everything his senses picked up was sorted into the category 'foreign' - the scent lingering in the air, the sounds of people, or the simple gray bricks the street was made of. None of these things were actually new but definitely of a different kind than the ones he was used to.
A quick check confirmed that they were indeed complete. Minseok was steadying himself against a wall, looking slightly pale but shooting him a weak grin nonetheless. Chanyeol was turned towards him while Jongin and Luhan already scoped out the direction they assumed the city to be in, clearly eager to get going.
And they probably should do just that; currently they were standing in a back alley and though not shabby in nature they surely looked nothing but suspicious standing around in such a place.
"Do you know your way around here?" Jongdae asked Chanyeol, who shrugged in reply.
"A little. City center is this way but we might search for a hotel first."

It took a while of what was more or less just purposeful walking before they managed to find a hotel that met their standards. Those included factors like a favorable location that's not too close to the heart of the city, a fair price, and the approval of Jongin which was by far the most difficult condition of them all (not counting Luhan's demand for a window facing the East which was swiftly ignored). It was already way past noon when they finally settled themselves in on the third floor of the
'Hyazinthe', a small but cozy hotel on the outskirts of town. Jongdae failed miserably at pronouncing the foreign-sounding name but the rooms were rather cheap and Jongin approved of it, stating that there were enough escape routes in case of an emergency. Which felt like a far-fetched scenario at the moment. To be honest, Jongdae felt more like a tourist going on vacation than a wanted man, freely sitting on the floor of their room and enjoying the view.

The others were busy settling in while Minseok enjoyed the longest shower of his life, keeping them all waiting. Not that Jongdae minded. He trailed his fingers down the dark green iron bars protecting guests from falling while scoping out the sea of roofs, modern buildings, and skyscrapers in the far distance. They were beautiful with all the different tiles and forms, bathing in bright sunlight. Whenever a light breeze picked up he got a waft of the sweetly scented flowers neatly rowed on the windowsill. For the first time since that tracker injection he felt truly relaxed. Peaceful, even.

"You're still okay rooming with me?"

He could say that the voice was interrupting his moment of peace. Except it wasn't.

Chanyeol's voice was rather pleasant to the ear. Jongdae nodded vaguely, his eyes still glued to the scenery outside.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you're worrying for your friend? For Minseok, I mean."

He considered this.

"Well. Can't deny that but I trust him. He knows his limits best."

He could hear Chanyeol bustling around until he settled on the floor next to him.

"Still, what a surprise."

Again, Jongdae couldn't deny it. They had booked two rooms, one for two people and the other for three. When Jongdae had lightly asked Jongin who he wanted to room with, no one had expected him to name Minseok. Yet that was exactly what he had done, shyly but resolutely. Even the requested person himself seemed a bit taken aback, though not nearly as much as Luhan. who had insisted on sharing the room with them, obviously still wary of Minseok's condition. Jongdae couldn't help being curious about the shifter's sudden change of heart but that discussion could wait for another time.

"You sure are into this Layer, aren't you?"

Sensing the underlying amusement, Jongdae actually went out of his way to turn towards Chanyeol, just to send him a quick, defensive pout.

"So? It's not everyday that you get to visit a new place," he said, his attention already halfway back to the scenery outside, "I'd like to memorize it well in case I end up in jail soon and get stuck with white walls."

Picking up on his joking tone, Chanyeol laughed.

"You won't end up in jail. You should run away before that happens."

"So what if I don't run fast enough?"

"I'll cover for you, then."

It was an effortless and equally light reply that had an unexpectedly strong effect on Jongdae, who grew silent at that.

"Alright. So what's the big plan Mr. Secretive?" Luhan inquired with crossed arms. Jongdae blinked against the sunlight, honestly still a little too interested in his surroundings. The sun had passed its zenith already and they had all gathered in a vast square where a moderate amount of people were milling around. Businessmen and tourists starkly stood out from the crowd of students dressed in blindingly bright shades of white. It was just as Chanyeol had said and now that he stood in the scorching sun he could perfectly understand why they'd all prefer such flowing, light fabrics. Yes, Jongdae understood it better than anyone in their group, considering that he was the only one left in a dark green hoodie and black jeans. Really hot and kinda sticky black jeans that were merrily inviting the sun to bake him thoroughly.

"I think I'm smelling some chicken. Oh wait, that's me burning to a crisp." Jongdae blankly said, a little too tired for proper sarcasm as he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.
"Can we please get to the part explaining why I'm the only one not allowed to change?"
Minseok handed him a bottle of water with an expression of pity.
They all looked at Chanyeol. Ever since they had departed from the hotel he had been acting
mysteriously, just telling them to wait and follow his instructions.
He seemed completely immune to the heat, even going as far as wearing a scarf-like thing covering
half of his face.
Jongdae could still see him smiling widely below that.
"Alright, alright. We need to find the library and my friend. We'll split up for that."
"Okay...?" Luhan impatiently said, urging him to continue, "what does your friend look like? What's
his name and occupation?"
"Oh, we won't find him with that information. But don't worry," Chanyeol reassured them and with
a side step he stood next to Jongdae, throwing an arm over his shoulder, "Jongdae here will find him
for us."
"Me? What should I do?" he asked cluelessly and boy, body heat was the last thing he wanted right
now. Chanyeol shot him a questioning look.
"Are you good at acting?"
Jongdae blinked.
"That depends. Am I supposed to act out a man who's re-thinking his life choices? Seriously now, I
have no idea. Never had to."
Chanyeol nodded and finally detached himself to rummage through his bag.
"It's alright, you're the perfect person for the job." he stated with a confidence Jongdae envied.
Before he knew it, the bag was pushed into his hands along with a neatly folded map.
"Alright, let's split up. Leave the library to us and we'll meet up in front of the Brucite gate."
"The what? And wait, what am I going to do?" Jongdae asked while Chanyeol had already half-
turned on his heels, honestly ready to leave him behind just like that.
Now he looked at him encouragingly.
"You just go and meet us in front of the gate. Trust me."
Jongdae didn't even look back as he waved and only Minseok shot him an empathetic look
while distancing himself with the others.
"That's what the map's there for. See you later!"

It really was hot. Why had he given him the bag as well? Now the strap was basically sticking to one
of his shoulders. By now Jongdae had long given up on his image and the bag was uncooly thrown
over his head, making him look even less fashionable than he already was but at least left him with
his hands free so he could hold the map. Did Chanyeol actually think he'd stash the map away for
even one second? Currently Jongdae was halfway lost which was an improvement.
It had taken him almost an hour to find the so-called Brucite gate. Jongdae wasn't too stupid to
handle a tourist-friendly map but he lacked any orientation whatsoever, having never before been on
this Layer. He didn't even know how to write Brucite, much less what exactly he was looking for. It
took a lot of awkward wandering around, asking people and reading the signs on streets and
buildings until a distinctively green gate slowly came into sight.
All the while he was completely clueless as to what all this was about. Would Chanyeol's friend be at
this gate? Why couldn't they go there together? Why was he still dressed in this hoodie made of
really thick jersey? Putting all this aside, the gate was quite a sight. Made of cyan-colored stone
('Brucite', as the helpful sign attached to it told him) it was chiseled beautifully with various
ornaments and vast expanses of polished stone.
It was pretty, yes.
But what now?
A few minutes later the others joined him, carrying a few shopping bags and cups of iced drinks
which he eyed in envy. Chanyeol still wore this unfazed smile and greeted him as if Jongdae hadn't
just wandered around aimlessly for an hour while they were busy doing something definitely more exciting.
"Hey, you found it. Awesome." he said and no matter how hard he tried, there was no sarcasm to be found in his voice.
"So what's this all about?"
"I'd love to tell you, but nah. Not yet. Next stop is the glass dome. We'll see you there?"

*Nah, not yet. Jongdae dearly wished he could laugh about this.
But when he had made his way to what felt like the other end of the town -all on his own, once again- and Chanyeol only told him to go to some famous tower, Jongdae had protested more indignantly. Unfortunately he was still brushed off easily and by the time he found the tower even his internal whining had subsided in order to save energy. When he complained to the others about being this close to evaporating due to the lack of water, Chanyeol had had the nerve to tell him that he'd put a bit of money in the bag so he could buy himself some food. At this, Jongdae felt like pushing his dehydration even more by actually crying.

And so he kept on walking on his aching feet, sweating far more than he'd had in the past year. From one sight-seeing point to the next, always meeting the others for a few minutes before being ushered away to some other location. Whenever he felt like he had slowly gotten the hang of this city's rough outlines, Chanyeol would send him to a more difficult place. Jongdae was a kind-hearted and patient person, he really was. One could even call him a push-over. But slowly he began to wonder whether Chanyeol was actively trying to die by Jongdae's hands. Because if he was, it was working. Slowly, but surely.
"Alright, museum of abstract art, I'm amazed. Now I wanna know what in the world is going-"
"Next stop is the Cyan main hospital!"

"Aren't you being quite cruel?" Luhan asked after they had watched a dejected-looking Jongdae scuffle away to search for the Florence Street, number 21.
They were currently seated in a coffee shop with a newspaper spread out on the table. While Minseok kept reading it thoroughly, Chanyeol only roughly scanned it for certain articles, humming.
"Maybe. But it's our best shot."
"If Jongdae gets hurt in any way, I'll end you."
Minseok's body language was casual as he didn't even bother to lift his head, continuously catching up with stuff he had missed. His tone, though, definitely wasn't.
"He won't get hurt. Promise." Chanyeol gave back with an earnest side glance before going back to reading.
"Can't we switch places or anything?" Luhan went on, unwilling to let this injustice go on any longer.
"Nah. If anyone's gonna find him, it's Jongdae. Even if I tried to find him myself, his chances are higher. There's no doubt."
"And why is that?" Jongin asked, curiosity outdoing his sleepiness for once.
Chanyeol ripped out an article about some quickly spreading type of flu before he looked around the table.
"Well, you are most certainly too shy. Minseok is too brusque and Luhan... wouldn't go along with this." he ended, shrugging.
Luhan faintly nodded to himself, acknowledging this fact.
"Just try to trust me. I got a feeling that IF my friend is around, Jongdae will find him."
"And if he's not?" Jongin piped up. Chanyeol sighed.
"Well, then we gotta try again tomorrow, I guess."
At this they all shared a slightly guilty look, hoping that they wouldn't have to put Jongdae through more of this.

"Florence street? Sorry boy, I'm not good with street names."
Jongdae groaned quietly before bidding the old lady good bye.
Dawn couldn't be too far away and his feet hurt so much that he had completely run out of colorful metaphors hours ago.
There better be a good reason for all of this.
For a moment he stopped in his tracks to assess his current location. He was standing on a rather small plaza with a pretty fountain offering a few students room to sit and study. In short, it looked basically like any other side street in this maze-like city. If not for the circumstances he might have been ready to admit how beautiful it all was. As things were, however, he just wanted to find this damn street and cling onto Minseok, refusing to take any further step not leading to the hotel.
At least it wasn't that scorching hot anymore, the sun still prominent but rather low on the cloudless sky. Jongdae inhaled deeply and nodded to himself. Alright, time to resume his search. Since the map barely included any street names he had given up on it for the time being. He shot a hesitant look over to the well, trying to assess who might know this particular street by name. There were two adults looking like they were on a business trip, a group of girls chatting while holding cups of ice cream and a single student flipping the pages of a heavy-looking book. He contemplated them closely and just as he decided to approach the group of girls, the boy looked up from his work, catching him staring. With a smile, he called out to him.
"Hey. You need any help? Are you lost?"
Well, maybe he could help him, Jongdae thought, really beyond caring about the fact that he had probably bugged every single civilian in this town at least once by now. So he stepped closer, getting a better look at the boy. He seemed to be around his age and had open-minded, friendly features. Sticking to the unwritten rule of white attire, he had equally milky skin to match it and Jongdae guessed that it was only possible to stay that pale on this Layer if you were a diligent student, spending your time indoors with your nose buried in books. His dusty brown hair only added to the overall natural look and the thickly-framed black pair of glasses basically screamed 'student'.
"Actually, yes. Sorry for staring. I'm looking for Florence street?"
The boy's nose twitched a bit as he thought about it and Jongdae was ready to face yet another disappointment when his features lit up.
"Ah. I know that one. It's kinda far away though. You really got off track, didn't you?"
"Yeah. You could say I had the most intense sightseeing tour of my life." Jongdae deadpanned and the boy laughed.
With swift movements he took off his glasses and closed the book, though not before leaving a bookmark.
"I'll guide you for a bit. It's rather complicated to describe the way." he easily suggested as he got to his feet, stretching out his limbs.
Jongdae was so glad, he couldn't thank him enough. What would he have done if the people here weren't that friendly? Still be looking for that historical whatever-it-was building, probably. The boy lead him down a few side streets, clearly well-versed in this area. Once in awhile he even pointed out a few buildings, to 'complete his sightseeing tour', as he had claimed.
"You see that ice cream parlor over there?"
Jongdae didn't and the boy laughed, threw an arm over his shoulder and pulled him along, pointing upwards.
"There, up there. Their ice cream is really good and from their terrace you can see most of the city. You might go for it, if you're not afraid of heights."
An ice cream parlor on what appeared to be a slim tower, at least fifteen meters high? Jongdae decided to pester the others about it later until he got his well-deserved cup of ice cream.
"Alright, from here on it's simple. You just follow this street for five more minutes and you'll be standing on Florence Florence street. Easy as pie." the boy concluded and Jongdae thanked him again. "You're my savior, really. I would have never found this on my own."
With a cheeky wink the boy bid him farewell, wishing him a nice stay on the cyan Layer.
Jongdae walked down the street as instructed, still in awe of the friendliness of the people and the overall atmosphere. He never thought a lot about academics, always certain that he wanted to become a singer. But in a way, the life of a student seemed nice, and smart people were kind of attractive. For some reason Chanyeol popped up in his mind. He could picture him bustling around this city, helping strangers and wearing nerdy glasses-
"Wait!"
He almost walked right into a street lamp as the boy from before suddenly jumped into his vision, out of a tiny side street. Huffing lowly, he steadied his weight on his knees before shoving a colorful note into Jongdae's unassuming face. It was bright green, stuck to a very familiar wallet and bearing equally familiar handwriting.

Hello Baekhyun!
c:

"Are you with Chanyeol?" he asked him.
"Did you just steal my wallet?" asked Jongdae blankly.

With a towel resting over his shoulders, Jongdae padded into the bigger of the two rooms they had rented, feeling wonderfully clean and refreshed.
Everyone had already gathered there, including this Baekhyun guy who was casually sitting on the carpet around the low table, weight supported by the heels of his hands as he chatted with Chanyeol who was across from him. The latter shot Jongdae a careful smile when he entered and his shoulders slumped a little when he got a rather pointed look in response. Jongdae hadn't yet forgotten that he'd been chosen to run around the whole city because he presumably looked like some moronic tourist who was an easy target for pick-pocketers. His feet, which still felt like they were two times bigger and ached with every step, served as a pretty good reminder. With six people lounging around it got cramped, but Minseok had saved him some space on his bed and a very generous amount of food they had bought during the day. Jongdae wasn't entirely sure whether a few snacks would manage to mollify him. Was he really that cheap?
One bite of the still deliciously hot pasta with creamy bacon sauce made the decision for him - damn yes, he was that cheap.
"So, what did I miss?" he mumbled in between bites and Minseok snatched a strip of bacon off his plate, a small gesture that made him ridiculously happy as it reminded him of old times.
"Nothing much. They were basically just chatting, introducing us all and whatnot. Thought it might be fair to wait for you. Though our seer might combust if we don't get to the point anytime soon." he quipped with a slight grin and the blond whipped around from his position on the carpet.
"I heard that. And you're absolutely right. Besides, Jongin might fall asleep if we don't hurry up." Indeed Jongin was already half-sprawled out on his bed, suggesting that he had slumped to the side at some point. It was kind of cute how exhausted he was considering he hadn't shifted anywhere. Jongdae guessed that it was the whole 'being around people' part that he wasn't used to. The little
thief cleared his throat, seeking attention.
"Sooo, now that we're complete," he began, a look of playful mocking in his eyes as he lazily spread his upper body on the table, "I'd like to repeat that breaking into a library is probably the LAMEST thing I've ever done."

*Because pick-pocketing poor youngsters like me is an actual achievement,* Jongdae thought.

If he hadn't had a mouth full of noodles he might have said it out loud. Priorities.

Chanyeol snorted, obviously unaffected by the open display of confidence bordering on arrogance.
"Oh, come on Baek. Doesn't it sound like fun? Besides, I bet I could think of something more lame you've done in the past."

Baekhyun dismissed him with a laugh.
"You're confusing lame with pathetic, I think. But yeah, sure. Like old times, eh?"

"I knew there was something wrong with you but a criminal? Really?" Luhan inquired with crossed arms, looking every bit unimpressed. Chanyeol had the decency to feel ashamed, his eyes meeting Jongdae's before he lowered his head. Was he searching his eyes for judgment? Would he judge him? A difficult question.

Sensing the change in atmosphere, Baekhyun made a dismissive wave with his hand, pulling the general attention back to him. He was good at that in a way Jongdae had no words to describe.
"Nah," he began and Jongdae noticed that even their speaking patterns were similar, "Channie here isn't a criminal. He's too cute for that."

The nonsense statement managed to throw the poor non native speaker off guard.
"Too 'cute'? Don't you mean 'good'?"

Baekhyun had the nerve to coo at the blond, something even Jongdae wasn't sure he'd dare do just yet.
"Aww, no. You know 'cute'? Like fluffy, little baby animals?" he asked in an exaggeratedly childish way just to mock Luhan a bit more, "they are so cute because they're puuure... And naive and simple-minded. Yes. I mean cute. Like you."

Luhan's usually pale face was scarlet by now, though it hardly had anything to do with feeling flattered.

He looked angry enough to jump over the table and strangle Baekhyun's pretty neck. "You are an insolent-

"Okay, back on track guys." Minseok swiftly intervened, having had enough of this banter. And since it was Minseok, people followed without question. The magic of the mature and experienced ones... though it probably helped that everyone but Jongdae was at least mildly scared of him.
"We are going to get into this building to research. Correct?"

Baekhyun nodded easily, his bottom lip caught between his teeth.
"Yep."

Chanyeol shook his head in denial just as Luhan indignantly went for a "Yes!"

"We're not, Baek. How much time do you need?" he insisted, brushing Luhan's complaints off.

The brunette tapped his pretty, manicured fingers against the wooden table in thought.
"Mh... A day at least. If I'm really good and you know I am."

"Modesty is not exactly your forte, is it?" Jongdae quipped and Baekhyun regarded him for the first time ever since he'd entered the room, throwing him another cheeky wink.

"It's a fact. After all, this is about business. Modesty should be reserved for dates, sweetie."

Luhan looked about *this* close to throwing another tantrum and even Chanyeol smacked him across the head and yes, Jongdae should probably feel the same. But for some reason he couldn't find it in himself to hold a grudge against this petty criminal. He had every right to dislike him but Baekhyun was so effortless in the way he communicated and held himself. This was probably what one calls 'devilishly charming' but judging from the way he and Chanyeol behaved they had to be very close, considering the span of time they'd spent apart, and Chanyeol didn't seem like the type who'd make bad friend choices, so Jongdae decided to trust him for now and found himself joking along with them before he knew it.
"Are you still mad at me...?"

Jongdae's sheets rustled as he twisted out of his usual blanket cocoon in order to hear Chanyeol's voice more clearly. The other had stalled and waited for this moment, where they were both buried under the blankets with the lights off to finally voice out what was so obviously torturing him.

Jongdae sighed.

"For using me as a decoy to get robbed without telling me?" he asked into the silence. He could hear Chanyeol fidgeting, the rustle of the blanket playing along to the slight stutter in his voice.

"I'm really sorry about that. But you were the only one suited for the job," he began, obviously desperate to explain himself, "Baek wouldn't dare pulling this on Minseok. He'd have broken his fingers for sure. Jongin would have never asked for help. And Luhan is so... unworldly. Imagine the chaos that would ensue if you exposed him to this Layer like that."

Alright, the last one was admittedly funny and Jongdae grinned at the image of Luhan going crazy and ignoring every single social rule.

Still, he kept quiet and Chanyeol went on.

"And you're just... open-minded and sociable. You're not afraid to ask for help and you're friendly to strangers and-"

"Alright, alright, stop it..." Jongdae finally murmured with amusement tinting his voice, "I'm not mad."

"You're not?"

"Jeez, I was just planning to play around a bit. Act a little huffy tomorrow, shoot you a few accusing looks and use the pity to coax everyone into having some ice cream; but you make it so difficult, acting like a kicked puppy!"

"We can eat ice cream tomorrow," Chanyeol immediately replied, and Jongdae sighed in kind-hearted exasperation.

"Really, I like ice cream. A lot," he added hurriedly.

"You don't have to be on eggshells all the time. It's just me."

Chanyeol was quiet for once and Jongdae used the opportunity to voice a few random thoughts.

"Besides, you're one to talk about being friendly to strangers. You basically chatted me up right at the square, for no other reason than me making a silly face."

"Well-"

"Why even go that far just to help me?" Jongdae cut him off, the atmosphere turning more somber. Chanyeol hesitated the longest yet but Jongdae wouldn't let him off easily this time.

"You do it, too. Help others. There doesn't have to be a reason," the other finally replied defensively and right then, Jongdae would have liked to see his face to properly assess his reaction.

"True but... I'm basically a stranger to you. And look where it got you. I mean... I sound like a dick right now but what I'm trying to tell you is-"

Jongdae inhaled deeply to get something off his chest he hadn't realized was weighing him down the way it did.

"-I want to apologize. You just wanted to help me and now your whole life is a mess. It's not fair to you."

"No!" Chanyeol cut in, surprisingly firm and with an audible rustle as he turned to his side, towards Jongdae. He looked back, and even though their beds were only a few arm-lengths apart, he could barely make out anything but his general silhouette in the darkness.

"Don't apologize. I don't mind, really. I'm just... the type to go with the flow," he ended somewhat lamely in an attempt at lightheartedness that went well-noticed by Jongdae.

"Don't lie," he gruffly mumbled in a rare spur of unfriendliness, "don't act like it's no big deal 'cause it is. Who knows what fucked up stuff is gonna happen next."

He sounded like a jerk again. Why did Chanyeol seemingly bring out the worst in him by being nothing but friendly?

Still, the statement wasn't purely malicious. No matter how peaceful things seemed, nothing changed the fact that they were wanted criminals now. Jongdae's mind drifted off to the various possible scenarios, including them getting attacked when they least expected it. Chanyeol probably had the
same thought, since his tone was more mellow the next time he spoke up.
"Alright. It was a lie. I'm sorry..." he softly said into the silence.
"But still, you shouldn't apologize, I meant that. It's quite the opposite. I should thank you."
"Thank me? What for?" Jongdae mumbled in genuine confusion.
There was no reply to that and after a while he finally let exhaustion pull him to sleep.

That night, his dreams were less frazzled and he found himself lying in a bed of soft grass, looking up at the clearest sky he'd ever seen.
It was pitch black and sprinkled with stars like powdered sugar. Some of them stood out distinctively, twinkling and coaxing his mind into drawing lines and searching for patterns while others were spread out like clouds of dust. Chanyeol was there as well, lying in the grass with him, fast asleep. Just as Jongdae was about to study his features more closely, the cool sensation of something settling on his cheek pulled his gaze back to the sky where a thousand stars were falling. Quietly, they trickled from the sky to softly land on him, the glowing particles melting away like snowflakes.

Chapter End Notes

If you wanna have a peek into the room of Jongin, Minseok and Luhan, feel free to check out my Microcosm II:
Microcosm II
♡

P.S.: I changed the upload time to one that's accommodating to my time zone. You can expect them all to come around this time from now on c:
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chanyeol stayed true to his word and took them all out for ice cream the next day. Well, everyone but Jongin, who was assisting Baekhyun with his preparation, who had to reassure them about a hundred times that the shifter wouldn't be endangered. Luhan was still a little moody about letting his precious Jongin leave with 'the criminal', as he lovingly called him, but they'd come to ignore his nagging by now.

Taking him to new places always helped and so they enjoyed a moment of blissful silence when they sat down at the ice cream parlor Baekhyun had recommended Jongdae the day before. They'd initially wanted to sit on the terrace outside but Luhan turned out to be afraid of heights and the flimsy fence surrounding the terrace wasn't enough to put him at ease. They chose a cozy booth inside instead and Jongdae squished himself into the corner so he could enjoy the view out of the high window, which Luhan studiously avoided.

"I've never been here before." Minseok remarked, already flipping through the menu. It was his way of saying that he liked the place and while he did seem a little tired, Jongdae found him to be much more relaxed than usual. Though it would obviously take another few weeks of him fighting the withdrawal symptoms before he'd be truly relaxed.

"It's still an insider's tip." Chanyeol casually said, his body language telling Jongdae that he was very familiar with this place. "There was a time when Baekhyun showed me around on this Layer and pointed this place out."

"Did he steal your money as well afterwards?" Minseok asked the thing that had been on Jongdae's tongue as well, making him grin at Chanyeol's flustered expression. He'd decided not to tease the gullible boy anymore, but Minseok wasn't his best friend for nothing.

"Actually not, no. Back then, we were friends already. So... what do you guys want?"

A difficult question indeed. There was ice cream where Jongdae came from. But it was expensive and the flavors were limited to vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. Here they had one entire page of the menu listing the different flavors, followed by various creations mixing them all and Jongdae honestly wanted to try everything.

Minseok was obviously used to this, choosing something called a quattro chocolate -whatever that may be-and passed the menu over to Jongdae. Chanyeol didn't even need to look at it and so it was up to the equally overwhelmed Jongdae and Luhan to decide.

"This doesn't look like ice cream." Luhan grumbled skeptically, flipping the pages in search for something he described as crushed ice with syrup.

In the end he settled on a tropical creation full of fruits while Jongdae took a recommendation from Chanyeol.

While they waited, Minseok read the daily newspaper, skimming over an article about the recent death of an important politician of the lower council.

Jongdae wasn't that interested in reading depressing articles and chose to simply enjoy the view, getting more insider tips from Chanyeol that he would probably never have the opportunity to use. It's in moments like these when Jongdae noticed how quiet Luhan was upon being confronted with new places. He could be such a pain, full of questions or sassy remarks but in unfamiliar places he would keep his mouth shut, taking his surroundings in with patient precision. One could almost forget that he was a seer with how normal he behaved on a daily basis but in moments like this Jongdae wondered what he was actually seeing. He took a look around the still fairly deserted place and his eyes fell on Chanyeol, who was silently observing him. Oh. Jongdae had been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't even noticed that Chanyeol stopped talking. He felt slightly flustered, not due
to the fact that his inattentiveness had been discovered, but because of the intensity that Chanyeol's brown orbs were fixating him with. As if he was trying to figure something out.

"Ah. Sorry, I was just-" Jongdae began vaguely, looking around the room once more to make sure that they had some privacy. With a slightly lowered voice he addressed Luhan, disregarding the way Chanyeol blinked, shaking off the tension as if he had been the one to get caught. "I was wondering what Luhan might be... thinking about." Jongdae carefully emphasized, not daring to openly speak up about his seeing abilities.

The blond turned his attention to him, his posture completely neutral though his expression did betray surprise. "Me? Why would you- oh," he cut himself off, "that's what you mean. It's alright. Nothing too serious."

His gaze roamed over their surroundings and now that he paid close attention, Jongdae could see them getting a little glassy. "A lot of trees, a forest. A desert, far below us. A few unfamiliar things."

Even Minseok was paying attention now but Luhan was effectively interrupted by the arrival of their ice cream - which turned out to be heavenly. Jongdae could honestly not recall having had any treat this great that wasn't baked. Sure, it was cavity-inducingly sweet with sticky caramel sauce, lots of cookie crumbs and chocolate sprinkles, but Jongdae had always had a sweet tooth and relished every spoonful. "Oh my god, you're totally forgiven." he involuntarily moaned and while Chanyeol grinned happily, the other two didn't question it, too occupied by their own food. "This is so good!" Luhan added with genuine surprise, poking various pieces of fruit with his spoon, "what is this called?"

Minseok tilted his head with a bemused expression. "You don't know what honey melons are? You've been missing out at home."

It was the most playful he had heard him in a long time and Jongdae smiled, even though Luhan appeared to be miffed about the response. "No need to be this condescending."

Minseok wasn't the only one taken aback by this statement. "It wasn't meant to be condescending?" he gave back carefully, shooting them a confused glance. "Then there's no need to tilt your head like that." Luhan replied almost defensively. Jongdae knew for a fact that it was a strong habit of Minseok whenever he felt confused or playful so it came to no surprise that this remark only made him tilt his head even more. "Why?"

"It's rude, alright?" Luhan almost snapped, "it means that the person across you doesn't deserve enough respect for you to keep your posture straight."

Minseok only muttered a small "Oh" and even Chanyeol seemed taken aback, claiming that he'd never heard of this before. "Well, it's a basic rule every little kid learns before they turn five." Luhan stubbornly added and Jongdae raised an eyebrow at him, suddenly recalling something. "Ah, I see. So that's why you kept doing that to me when we first met, huh?" he blankly asked. Luhan neither agreed nor denied and settled back on meticulously freeing the fruits of ice cream so he could examine them. "And now you're ignoring me!" Jongdae claimed incredulously, dramatically pointing his spoon at him, "I don't believe you! What did I ever do to you?!"

It was playful though and before Luhan could misread the atmosphere, Chanyeol jumped in to ask him about other body language related stuff. "But you do shrug, don't you?" he asked with far more excitement than is considered reasonable. "What is shrug?"

Chanyeol showed him and urged Luhan to try it, followed by the sporadic 'thumbs up' which Luhan only knew as forming a ring with one’s thumb and forefinger. On and on they went and it must have been the first time Luhan actually acknowledged Chanyeol without being hostile, his natural will to
learn quelling Luhan’s initial suspicions. Especially the high five gesture appeared to really do it for Luhan and he insisted on trying it with everyone at the table. It wasn't only Chanyeol, though. The air between Luhan and Minseok was different, too. He even saw his friend nonchalantly shift his plate over to the blond, who had eyed it with curiosity for awhile, and then proceeded to try a few spoonfuls, equally wordless. Maybe they had shared a nice talk last night, rooming together and all. Jongdae watched all these little interactions play out while enjoying his scoop of cookie-flavored ice cream and felt nothing but peace. Instead of looking outside the window, he kept his gaze on their table, wishing Jongin was there with them. One week had passed since his tracker injection had set all the crazy happenings off and he was just grateful that the people he was surrounded by were such a warm bunch.

They spent the rest of the day shopping for a few necessities and in the late afternoon Jongin rejoined them. As Baekhyun promised, he was completely unblemished, though Luhan begged to differ after he presented Chanyeol with a Pager he had stolen, claiming that Baekhyun was a horrible influence. No one -including Jongin himself- bothered to shatter his image of the shifter by telling him that this was most certainly not the first time he'd stolen anything; though Jongdae was able to read on Jongin's face that a Pager was by far the most expensive object he'd ever taken. It made sense - there was hardly anything more valuable than this tiny, wristwatch-like device that enabled people to communicate regardless of the Layer they were on. They were still quite new and while the messages one could send were limited to 50 symbols, the mere opportunity to communicate was priceless, especially for them. Jongin told him that Baekhyun had the second one and Chanyeol confirmed this quickly after, his features lighting up in glee.

Unfortunately the first text message from Baekhyun announced a delay. Neither of them knew the details of what the short brunette was actually up to but Chanyeol just shrugged (a gesture now sharply noticed by an intrigued Luhan) and claimed that they would find out eventually. The prospect of waiting yet another day made Jongdae slightly antsy and he spent the evening and the following day mostly inside the hotel room. No matter how tempting the outside world was, he felt like he shouldn't flaunt himself in public more than necessary. Minseok seemed equally uneasy though he claimed that it was due to his withdrawal symptoms which made him increasingly nervous. He still ventured out with Luhan to get his hair done - after all, his half black, half rose-colored hair was hardly subtle and Luhan was the only one able to prance around without a care, aside from Chanyeol. The latter preferred to stay behind with them, waiting for Baekhyun.

It took until the early evening, but when Baekhyun finally let himself in (because he obviously didn't believe in knocking), all five of them perked up at once.

"Hey guys, sup Chan?" he asked easily though Jongdae was sure he appeared less energetic than before. He sank to the floor cross-legged and the others gathered around the table, waiting for him to settle down.

"Are you alright? Did everything go smoothly?" Chanyeol inquired with worry but Baekhyun only made a gesture of flipping his hair, shooting him a pointed look.

"What do you think? Still doubting my skills, Yeol? I'm wounded."

"Those are a lot of piercings." Jongdae casually remarked, his eyes drawn to the various silver objects adorning his ears which Baekhyun had revealed unintentionally. He froze in his tracks, his fingers flying up to his ear and with a muttered curse he slid them off quickly.

"Completely forgot about those. Damn."

He was obviously more exhausted than he'd let on, but it wasn't Jongdae's place to point that out and they patiently waited for him to take out all the silver accessories, placing them on the table with a faint clatter. Jongin eyed them with interest and seeing this, Baekhyun gifted him with a simple stud, a tiny, black rivet, that was met with a gleeful grin.

"Do you wear those in your free-time?" Minseok asked with a mildly impressed look and Baekhyun only shook his head -not unlike a wet dog- when he was finally free of metal.

"Not really. Too lazy. Maybe one pair, to a party. It's been a long time, though. Yeol, we should really go out again. I miss partying with you. Just have a few drinks, chat up a few chicks, having
It was amazing how quickly Chanyeol managed to turn red and Jongdae eyed him in amusement, completely unable to picture him flirting. He made a garbled noise, concealing it by coughing and Baekhyun sent a quizzical look his way.
"Yeah. Having fun. We should do that. Not now, though..." he trailed off hesitantly, "when it's all over. Let's go then."
Baekhyun's look turned soft at this and for some reason Jongdae got the feeling that he wasn't only talking about their current situation.
"Over, huh?" Baekhyun mumbled almost gently, deciding to leave it at that and violently turning the atmosphere around before even Luhan could interfere with a nosy question. Without warning he all but slammed a heavy stack of books on the table, causing all of them to flinch.
"There you go!" he exclaimed, openly proud about his achievement.
"Books? From the library?" Luhan asked in confusion but was brushed off with a hand gesture.
"No, you jokester. How would I know what exactly you're searching for, you gotta do that on your own."
Luhan didn't say another word but the way he had his head tilted, looking unimpressed, said it all. Blissfully unaware of the death glare sent his way, Baekhyun continued.
"Those are your props. They actually belong to someone, just like the notes so if you're not complete dicks you should leave them at the library when you leave. Might save some student. And here, my friends," he continued, obviously building up tension for the grand finale as he placed a bunch of cards on the table, "are your tickets."
While a few eager hands inspected them, Baekhyun went on with his explanation.
"Those are fake student ID's. Since only the upper semesters of certain fields have access to the department you wanna get into, there are two for medical science and one for geography. Only three since they're exchange student ID's and those are rare, so a higher number would be suspicious. Lucky for us, they don't use photos, otherwise I would have probably needed another day. Passport photos are pretty damn tricky."
"Alright. So with these, we have free access?" Chanyeol asked, twirling one of them around his long fingers, "we just walk in and act like we're students?"
"That's the ideal case, yes. Obviously you'll need to fix your appearance a bit first."
"So... who's gonna go?" Jongdae asked.
Luhan volunteered easily while Jongin looked hesitant and Chanyeol shot a questioning look at Baekhyun instead.
"What do you think?" he asked, "I mean, I have a vague idea but you're the expert so your opinion is worth a lot. Who would you choose?"
Baekhyun rested his chin in one hand, the other tapping the table as he scrutinized them. It made Jongdae nervous, the way he felt when they picked teams back in gym class.
Baekhyun inhaled deeply.
"I would go for... you, you and you." he announced, placing a card in front of Chanyeol, Minseok and Jongdae.
"I'd buy the student thing from you three the most." he stated in determination, "leaving out myself, obviously."
"You're being biased!" Luhan complained indignantly and Baekhyun barely batted an eyelash.
"Towards myself? I should hope so. Nah, on a serious note. Did you ever take a look at yourself? You behave like you've never been among people before. I'd definitely find you suspicious, to say the least."
Luhan huffed a clearly audible "Rude" under his breath which went ignored.
"And Jongin... there's nothing particularly against him though he's kinda flighty but the other three are a tad more convincing. Chanyeol here basically screams geek while you," he said, pointing at Minseok, "give off the mature and smart vibe and you..."
He hesitated at the sight of Jongdae, snapping his fingers as he searched for a certain term.
Looking mighty unimpressed, Jongdae finished the sentence himself.
"...I just look completely ordinary and unremarkable?"
"Yes! That's it!" Baekhyun exclaimed, changing directions before anyone could hit him with a hard object,
"I mean NO. You're... inconspicuous, that's the word I'm searching for. To be honest I think you'd be great in my field of expertise."
"You can't take him away from us," Chanyeol pouted, tugging Jongdae towards himself, "besides, Jongdae has morals."
Baekhyun stuck his tongue out and while Jongdae nonchalantly wormed out of the taller one's grasp, the touch didn't go unnoticed by him. It wasn't exactly an intimate touch he would usually avoid but for some reason it made him feel odd.
The evening passed by peacefully as Baekhyun spontaneously pierced Jongin's left ear with a needle he'd heated over a candle and Luhan fussed over how unsanitary this was, getting zero support by Chanyeol and Minseok who went through their props. Jongdae wasn't exactly tuning in on the discussion either, too distracted by the way his eyes would accidentally meet Chanyeol's every so often.

During his extensive sightseeing tour Jongdae had already gotten a good look at the famous library. It would be hard not to notice, actually. Located at the heart of the city, it was part of the biggest building complex he had ever seen. Their measly City Hall barely measured up to one of the branches. Now that he had Minseok and Chanyeol with him, they explained that parts of the massive complex of stone and glass belonged to the university, while others were various administration offices and such. Jongdae learned that the university was actually spread out through the whole city. Chanyeol also mentioned that the research center was only a few minutes away so people could reach everything on foot. While loosely connected to the university, the library was easily distinguishable. Next to all the houses made of bricks and even wood the stone and glass stood out so starkly that it could just as well have been from another Layer altogether. Aside from the sheer amount of glass blinking in the sunlight it was the alien, undulated surface that fascinated him the most. Maybe it was an old-fashioned way of thinking but to simple-minded Jongdae, curvy buildings meant futurism and development.

They were already close enough to walk in the building's shadow and its imposing nature didn't help the slightest to ease his worries. He unconsciously fiddled with the strap of his book bag, getting an immediate nudge from his best friend that may have looked playful to outsiders but was actually a reminder not to behave suspiciously. Easy for him to say - with his freshly dyed auburn hair being all fluffy and the oversized robe hiding his toned body, Minseok was back to looking like an innocent, 15-year old boy. Only his confident stance and the calculating look in his eyes betrayed the youthful appearance but Jongdae knew for a fact that his friend was able to switch between an owl-eyed teenager calling out to be smothered and protected to a mature, fierce man in 0.2 seconds. It was just a Minseok-thing and while his cute appearance was once something he was rather unhappy about, being friends with Jongdae made him come to not only gradually accept it, but even use it to his advantage. In this case, he gave off the gullible and innocent aura of a clueless foreigner, even though he was clearly the least inexperienced of the three. From what they'd said so far, he guessed that Minseok had been here at least as often as Chanyeol and the latter hardly had to put up an innocent front. Or any at all. When Baekhyun had claimed that Chanyeol was a good actor, Jongdae had had his fair share of doubts. But now that he trailed along, his steps purposefully short in order to accommodate the others, his depiction of a student was flawless. Baekhyun had made a few excellent wardrobe choices, giving Chanyeol an almost awkwardly oversized fluffy sweater and the obligatory robe which was equally large and made half of his face disappear in a scarf-like collar, and instead of coming off as suspicious, Chanyeol wore it with the enthusiasm of someone truly misguided regarding this Layer's fashion. Another thing Jongdae couldn't help but notice was the way Baekhyun's nerdy glasses actually suited him. He knew it would give him a student vibe, but he wasn't prepared for the actual thing. Glasses always changed people so much despite being such a
small accessory. Of course it wasn't only the wardrobe. Whereas Jongdae was constantly fearing he might look suspicious to the point that he questioned his way of walking, there was not an ounce of uncertainty or nervousness in the way Chanyeol held himself. He didn't look overly confident, no, but rather like a slightly dopey but genuine student. Maybe he was this good because he wasn't forcing himself, Jongdae mused. Maybe he'd always wanted to be exactly that.

Next to them he felt utterly out of place.

Sure, he was at least wearing the correct garments, but otherwise he felt so... normal. Just nothing like Chen, the medical science student working himself through the sixth semester at the university's branch on the blue Layer. The blue Layer, out of all places, Jongdae thought with a groan. He was supposed to be cool and well-versed with technology and all.

His worries turned out to be temporarily unjustified as they got into the library without a hitch. Minseok had been there before, leading them through the entrance area smoothly and they padded after him, taking an alarming amount of stairs. While Chanyeol had the nerve to approach some librarian and cheerfully ask for the way to their compartment, Jongdae caught a glimpse of blonde hair and found Luhan, Jongin and Baekhyun occupying a table nearby. He tried not to stare and when his eyes met Jongin's, he quickly broke eye contact. No one had to know that they were associated in any way. They were seated in a public area and while Baekhyun appeared nonchalant as he flipped through some heavy book Jongdae knew that he was every bit as valuable as the others. Maybe there had been more to Baekhyun's set up, he thought, as he took a flight of stairs to the topmost floor, trailing after Minseok and Chanyeol. After all, these three made for the best back up one could hope for. Luhan unconsciously appeared thoughtful as his gaze roamed the area, no doubt searching for possible escape routes in between actually reading something. Jongin had half-buried himself over a book, giving the impression of snoozing while he was well-alert and obviously the best when it came to sensing prosecutors while Baekhyun was able to take in the whole atmosphere.

It didn't do much to ease his panic as the transit point came closer, separating the compartments with doors that let everyone out but required a scan of the ID to get in. This was it. Their so-called backup plan had more similarities with an escape plan and any second chance might require close to an impossible amount of effort. Chanyeol went first, blocking his sight of the scanning device but a resounding beep and green light followed, allowing him to pass through. Minseok was smaller and he saw him place the student ID face first on a simple black square and quickly enough, a tiny screen on eye-level spelled 'Kim, Xiu Min - geo 6' and his friend passed. Alright, it didn't look that hard. Jongdae imitated him, placing his ID card in the designated spot and... nothing happened. He tried it again, with trembling fingers. Chanyeol shot him a worried look.

"Try hovering it above the scanner instead." he suggested, temporarily straying from their initial plan to leave behind anyone who wouldn't make it. Jongdae complied, rubbing the card over his sleeve before following his advise. Finally, the screen lit up, showing 'Lee, Chen - med 6' and with badly concealed relief he crossed over to Chanyeol, who kept chattering about a supposed pet ferret he had as a child, bumping their shoulders together once in awhile. There was barely any room left for answers, offering Jongdae time to calm his rapidly beating heart. Alright. It had worked. Now they had to stay calm and bury their noses in the books they needed. There was no more reason to panic; the only thing they had to do now was stay under the radar. Minseok had already made his way to a rather secluded table in the back, possessively placing his bag on it as he went through a nearby shelf.

The material they needed was easy to find and soon two heavy books including maps and topological information were placed on their table. Jongdae flipped through the flimsy pages containing complicated maps and swirls of colored ink, peppered with tiny numbers and names. To be completely honest, he had no idea how to interpret them. Minseok jumped in, giving him a brief explanation. There were maps showing various Layers in correlation to each other. Mostly just two at once, for clarity, highlighting the areas they overlapped in height and listing the height differences in others.

They only had Luhan's description to go by, so their actual task was to find a Layer lying roughly in that area, which wasn't too easy since sometimes even one meter would make a vast difference.
Adding to that was the fact that very few Layers had been mapped out completely. ‘You don't have to get it,’ Minseok had said in a hushed voice, ‘just trace those coming close to the coordinates.’ Copying too many maps would be suspicious as well, so Jongdae flipped through them carefully first, looking up the most promising ones. They had their notes spread-out and Minseok had even brought a book or two on medicine. It was a tedious task, to say the least, and being accurate was difficult with the nervous tingling in his stomach. Chanyeol seemed unaffected and the sight of him looking like an actual student calmed his nerves-

"Excuse me?"

He flinched and the pen dropped to his book noisily at the sudden female voice. One look told him that two girls had approached their table, one greeting them with an easy smile while the other was staying half a step behind her, a shy grin on her face.

"Uhm. Yeah?" Jongdae muttered unintelligently while Minseok merely glanced up from his book.

The girl gave her shy friend a look, and said girl bit her lips, pulling out a notebook.

"Hey. I saw that you're med students, and I'm kinda stuck with this and was wondering whether you could maybe help me?" she said in one breath, and Jongdae was about to feel actually flustered when she took a few steps past him to stop in front of Chanyeol and regard him with a timid, albeit hopeful look. Oh. Well. In this case he didn't mind a blow to his ego if it passed the problem on. Both Jongdae and Chanyeol immediately looked towards the opened, medical book resting next to the map Chanyeol had been studying. Traitorous, misleading object. Chanyeol looked positively startled, muttering an equally timid ‘Maybe?’ in reply. The girl smiled, spreading out her notes and leaning unnecessarily close as she tapped her finger on a problem.

“So I gotta estimate the half-life of substance A with these properties in a system B under those conditions..."

Jongdae could basically see the panic in the way his eyes grew larger.

"...and I only ever get this far but the result just won't come out right. Do you have any idea?"

"Uhm." Chanyeol uttered, opening his mouth just to close it again.

“It's probably silly, but I'm only minoring in med and I'm not that good, so...” the girl trailed off insecurely while her friend just stood by to watch them with interest. Well, damn, Jongdae thought. What to do? Saying that they only minored in the subject as well? What if the other girl would follow with a geography question next? Chanyeol seemed equally torn.

“That's. It's,” he muttered, grasping at straws, “I'm sorry, I just-"

“Canlie here sucks at calculating, never mind him.” Minseok suddenly interfered, placing the book on the table as he calmly got up to take a look at the problem. Humming lightly he took the offered pen from the girl, purposefully brushing their fingers in the process.

“You know the basic routine of estimating the half life?” he softly asked, his fingers already moving over the paper.

"Y-yes. It's written on the first page-"

"-but you're struggling with the conditions, I see. Considering this condition, you gotta realize that the decay happens non-exponentially. If you fill in the reaction constant here..."

A few neat numbers were added and both Chanyeol and Jongdae were now paying their utmost attention, the maps temporarily forgotten.

“And do the math, you should get... there. That's the expected result?”

The girl eagerly nodded, her attention now fully drawn from Chanyeol to Minseok, who shot her a flirty smile.

"Next time you don't need to make up a problem. Intelligence is as desirable as confidence.” he added and damn, that was smooth. It didn't fail to turn the girls into a blushing mess, being flustered by his mature charm and with a quick 'thanks' they scrambled away, leaving Chanyeol to stare dumbfoundedly at the nonchalant Minseok who sank back in his chair and opened the book to continue reading where he had left off.

Jongdae tried really hard to hold himself back but ultimately snorted at the baffled look on Chanyeol’s face.

“He totally stole that chick from you.”
Chanyeol blinked and the expression turned to a confused frown, as if he hadn’t even registered this fact yet.
"Wait, you did. That's not nice, actually. Do you often do that to your friends?"
Minseok didn't even bat an eyelash, his eyes already skimming the page.
"I just saved your ass."
"That's true," Chanyeol admitted instantly, "but still."
With a light chuckle, Jongdae leaned closer to him, lowering his voice.
"Min is actually an architect, you know. Oh, and a goddamn flirt on top of that. You gotta put in more effort than that."
"I didn't want that girl!" Chanyeol protested indignantly, the edge of Minseok's lips twitched into the faintest smirk which went noticed by both of them. Obviously hurt in his pride, Chanyeol went on, his desperate attempts to make it right only ruining it further.
"It's true! I didn't even try to do anything since-"
The rest of his sentence was drowned out by a violent, deafening sound reverberating through the whole library and suddenly, the world was shaking. There was no time to think as glass shattered, shelves around them came crashing down and chandeliers met the floor. Jongdae tumbled to the floor, just conscious enough to narrowly avoid falling with his chair. People screamed, a blaring siren went off and he was so overwhelmed by the noise of everything that he couldn't form a clear thought. Books continued to crash down around them and his world grew dark as Chanyeol instinctively shielded him. Minseok had slipped under the table, looking alarmed, his lips moving to form curses Jongdae couldn't hear. Whatever had happened, it passed and left behind nothing but chaos and the faint smell of smoke. The ground had barely stopped shaking when people started to flee the room like panicked rats.
"We gotta get out of here!" Chanyeol shouted right into his ear.
As if on cue, the speakers instructed everyone to calmly move to a nearby emergency exit, a completely useless attempt at controlling the surge of panic. He reached for Minseok's arm who resisted, busy with hastily ripping something out of the book they were reading.
"Min! We have to leave!" he repeated and while Chanyeol pulled him to his feet, Minseok followed, scrambling back from his position under the table. With a careless sweeping motion he threw the foreign notes around the room where they landed in a pile of books, clearing the evidence. Jongdae quickly stuffed their work into his bag and they hurried to join the stream of people headed for wherever the exit was. Jongdae firmly held on to both Chanyeol and Minseok so they wouldn't get lost, wondering what was even going on as they were mercilessly pushed forwards. The feeling of being smothered also brought the illusion of the air getting heavy and used but Jongdae concentrated on Chanyeol and Minseok’s hands to keep himself from spiraling into panic. What had happened? It sounded like an explosion, a fairly close one at that. He really hoped the others were safe but with his height it was impossible to see them over the crowd.
There was just Minseok's strong grip on his left hand and Chanyeol's big one in his right for a long time until there was finally no roof above them anymore. Instead of fresh air they were hit by a cloud of smoke so poisonous it drove tears to his eyes. Nevertheless, the crowd began to disperse in various directions and Chanyeol took the lead, pulling them over to a rather small side street where only few people were squeezing through. Wasting no time, he pressed Jongdae against a brick wall to avoid other people and check him for injuries, before looking over at Minseok.
"Everything alright? Are we good to go?"
Minseok nodded, looking completely composed, though slightly short of breath. Large crowds had always made him wary and his current condition wasn't exactly stable yet. He subtly popped a pill into his mouth and Jongdae would be the last one to blame him for that.
"Where are the others?" Minseok asked, purposefully calm, while Jongdae let his gaze slide down Chanyeol, noting that he appeared to be unscathed as well.
"In a better place." a dramatic voice crooned and Jongdae's head flew to his other side.
"We're literally three meters away. I don't see how this place is any better than the one over there." Luhan complained loudly, his arms crossed.
"Well, for starters, it has me." Baekhyun quipped back. Jongdae sighed in relief. There they stood, bickering merrily as ever while Jongin sent them a shy wave.

"Oh my god, I'm so glad you made it." Jongdae muttered, hurrying over to them with the other two in tow. He leaned towards Jongin, lowering his voice.

"Did you take them away?"

Jongin nodded briefly and that moment he decided to watch out for the shifter. Who knew through how many Layers he guided Baekhyun and Luhan - they wouldn't want him to collapse from exhaustion.

"What the fuck just happened, anyway?" Minseok asked, one hand pressed against his forehead, his expression one of pain. It would take a while for the pill's effects to kick in.

"No idea. Somehow a nearby building blew up. Which reminds me," Baekhyun stated, craning his neck around the street to get a view on the smoking building, "that we should probably get outta here. I'm neither keen on being seen at a crime scene or on being burnt alive."

"He's right, the fire will spread." Chanyeol said, ushering them down the street.

"We should stay on the move, get away from here."

The next few minutes were spent in silence as they followed Baekhyun down a few narrow alleys until they crossed into the street market. Even with the library lying about ten minutes away, the commotion was clear and the narrow spaces between various food stalls were twice as crowded, the overall noise reminding Jongdae of a distraught swarm of bees. Perfect to blend in, actually. To be honest, Jongdae felt pretty distraught himself. Just a few minutes prior he had been sitting in a cozy library, joking around and now they were hurrying to get away to an unknown location. All of a sudden, Baekhyun halted, as if hit by a sudden thought. To his surprise, Jongin pushed him ahead and leaned in to tell him something Jongdae couldn't make out. Their journey continued and Baekhyun subtly fell back until he was walking next to Chanyeol. Now being considerably closer, Jongdae heard him clearly.

"Channie, we have a fan. Jongin noticed him, too - don't turn around," he sharply added, more to the others as it seemed, before continuing, "tall guy. Blonde. Tan. Looks like trouble." "Shit." Chanyeol spoke out loud what Jongdae was thinking. His mind went completely blank and the urge to turn around felt like a thousand needles pricking his neck.

Someone was following them. Who was he after? Minseok? Jongin?

They continued to squeeze themselves ahead and all of a sudden, Chanyeol threw an arm around Jongdae’s shoulder, drawing him in close. He didn't have time to protest when Chanyeol raised his voice just enough to be heard by the others.

"Guys. You go with Baekhyun, we'll meet behind the big building over there, with the metallic roof. You see it?"

"Wait, why are we separating?" Luhan protested, a tinge of fear in his voice but Chanyeol only shook his head.

"Trust me. Act natural, but hurry. Can I count on you, Baek?"

The question came out of nowhere and the petite thief flashed him a grin that spoke of grim determination.

"You bet your ass you can. I'll take care of it. Take the busy route."

Chanyeol nodded and Baekhyun made a show of waving him goodbye, ushering everyone but Jongdae into another alley. He could see the conflict on Minseok's face and put up a reassuring front, waving his friend goodbye even though he felt anything but comfortable splitting up like that. After all...

"What are you thinking?" he asked harshly and Chanyeol only tightened the grip around his shoulder though Jongdae was smart enough not to cause a scene.

"You sent Minseok and Jongin away! They won't be safe, we should stay with them-"

"They'll be safe." Chanyeol said firmly and in a subtle act of checking out some food he threw a glance down the street. Was it his imagination or did he grab him so hard to repress a tremble?

"He's not after them. He's after me."
Jongdae froze in his movements before getting pulled along.
"After you? Why?"
Fear crept up his spine, leaving an icy cold trail. Seeing Chanyeol thrown off like that infected him,
unsettled him.
"I don't think this is a good opportunity to explain." he gave back, rather strained.
"You're right. We have to get away. Do we run?" Jongdae suggested offhandedly as if it was no big
deal. It was a thing he did when panicking - distancing himself from danger by treating it lightly and
joking about it.
"No," Chanyeol firmly interjected, "no, we are going to stay as low-key as possible. Just follow my
lead. Baekhyun will take care of it. Attracting attention is bad. Baekhyun will get rid of him."
He was repeating himself, another subtle symbol of how shaken he actually was and without
thinking, Jongdae put an arm around his waist.
I'm here. I'm not going anywhere, the touch said. The motion was met with a violent twitch before
the taller one accepted it, loosening his grip on Jongdae a tiny bit.
They indeed followed a busy route, squeezing themselves through the rest of the market before
taking a turn to the main shopping road. Jongdae vaguely hoped that the guy might lose them in the
crowd but it was highly unlikely if he was anything other than a regular civilian. The image of their
four people chasing them on his home Layer flashed up in his head. Was their current pursuer
looking anything like them? He was about to sneak a look but Chanyeol hastily dug the fingers of his
free hand into his cheek, preventing him from doing so.
"Don't, Jongdae, please. I mean it. You'll make yourself a target if he sees your face."
"H-how do we know then? Whether Baekhyun stopped him or not?" he gave back, defending his
stupid curiosity.
Chanyeol looked ahead, chewing on his lower lip.
"We don't. We just trust him. We'll take this long detour through all the busy streets and rejoin with
Minseok, Luhan and Jongin to get the hell out of here."
Jongdae nodded. Good thing they'd taken all their stuff along, in case they needed to make a quick
escape.
"It's alright. I know Baekhyun. He'll make it."
"How? Is he gonna turn him in?" Jongdae asked apprehensively. He barely knew Baekhyun but that
didn't stop him from worrying. The brunette looked so petite, it was difficult to imagine him facing a
tall, possibly trained enemy.
"He has his ways." Chanyeol replied vaguely, pulling him along. It seemed like an eternity and the
shopping street was coming to an end.
"Alright. We'll turn into this alley," he quietly instructed and the moment they left behind the stream
of people his hand flew to Jongdae's arm, "and now we run!"
Taken by surprise, he tried to keep up with his much longer legs while his mind helpfully reminded
him that his fitness level was close to zero. Buildings flew by and he could do nothing but blindly
trust Chanyeol, who lead them various narrow streets in what felt like a zig-zag movement towards
the towering building in the distance. Another corner was taken and suddenly they were met with a
black fence, separating the adjoining park of the building from the rest of the city.
"Damn." Chanyeol muttered, looking around for an opening when a familiar voice called out to
them.
"Over here!"
It was Jongin, gesturing them over to a place where a small door was open and they scrambled
inside.
"We're over here. Minseok said it's a good spot." he curtly explained, returning to a wildly growing
set of bushes. Jongdae was panting when he reached the place where Minseok was crouching while
Luhan knelt on the floor, fiddling with the substances.
"You alright?" Jongdae inquired and Minseok nodded, his eyes scanning the area.
"Something is happening in this building. People are panicking all over the place."
"It's the main hospital. Research laboratory." Chanyeol wheezed out, holding his side.
"Whatever. I don't like this turn of events. Not one bit. We're going to the Magenta Layer as a quick getaway before planning further steps." Minseok instructed firmly and if there was any time, he would have voiced out how much he loved his friend for staying calm and taking over in situations like that.

"Can we cross over?" Chanyeol simply asked and Minseok nodded.

"We checked it. Luhan saw it, I've been there, I know it's-"
He cut himself off at a sudden rustling of leaves, followed by someone stumbling out from behind nearby bushes and trees. Minseok jumped to his feet and Jongdae took a defensive stance on his own, the movements causing the stranger to freeze in his tracks. It was a young man, obviously a patient with his white hospital gown covered in specks of fresh dirt. Dark orbs peeked from below tousled black hair as he watched them with a strange mix of intensity and detachment. Jongdae held his breath. The man's eyes wandered until they fixated themselves on Jongin, who physically flinched at that. The patient took a slow step towards him, his bare feet crushing dry leaves and branches without a care.

"If you make another move, I'll hurt you." Minseok announced firmly. The stranger's gaze remained fixated on Jongin who got increasingly nervous. For a long second nothing happened but the moment Minseok inched closer towards Jongin, the guy all but jumped like a cat attacking. He had both hands wrapped around Jongin's throat before anyone could even begin to register what was going on.

"NO!" Luhan called and stumbled after them but Jongin was tackled to the ground with a startled noise and then they both vanished, leaving both him and Minseok to collapse in the now empty spot.

"Fuck! Fuck, they're gone!" Minseok cursed loudly, his fist slamming into the ground, "where did they go?!

"We can't know-" Jongdae uttered, staring at the spot Jongin had been in.

"He's right, we can't. We gotta leave, quickly." Chanyeol suddenly spoke up, pulling Luhan to his feet.

"But Jongin!" the translator protested while Jongdae gathered the supplies they had spread out.

"We can't follow a shifter," Chanyeol said in a calm and insisting voice, keeping eye contact with the distraught blond, "but a shifter can follow us. He'll find us. Now let's go before even more trouble shows up."

Jongdae had to agree, thinking back to their unknown pursuer. He wanted to flee this place.

"He's right." Minseok added and took a deep inhale to calm himself, turning first towards Luhan, then Chanyeol.

"The substance is starting to kick in, how about you? Chanyeol, do you need it? We prepared a shot before you arrived."

Luhan muttered a shaky 'yes' while Chanyeol shook his head.

"I'm good."

"You, Jongdae?"

Jongdae shook his head as well, showing his lower arm where a faint scar was showing.

"Magenta, right? I got the tracker."

"Then let's go." Minseok curtly said, closing his eyes. He was the first to leave, followed by Luhan.

"You go first." Chanyeol instructed, still looking around as if he expected anyone else to jump them at any second.

"Y-yes. Sure." Jongdae muttered, closing his eyes and trying to suppress the inner turmoil to find the structures. Beside the orange structures, the magenta ones were the only ones he had permanent access to, so it should be easy. Without thinking too much, he grasped the faint and unfamiliar strings. The world was shifting and suddenly the floor broke away and he was falling. With a broken yelp he crashed into something, desperately trying to hold on to anything and only barely avoided hitting his head as he landed on the hard floor. For a second he lay there, panting, wide eyes taking in his surroundings. He was sitting in the narrow corner of a white room, his view obscured by booths. White, dirty tiles spread across the floor and up the walls, the air stale and faint bass pumping in the background.
"Min?" Jongdae asked shakily, nothing but his own echo answering him. "Chanyeol? Luhan?"
Silence.
This wasn't the magenta Layer and Jongdae was alone.

The sun was reflecting off of Tao's freshly dyed honey blonde hair while he made his way through the crowd with the repressed grace of a fox, his eyes fixated on the prey in the distance. Admittedly, his mission was already over but the second he had spotted the group of young people, a tall guy in particular, the wheels in his head had turned. The moment realization made it to the surface of his muddy memory, he knew he couldn't let him get away. Currently he was walking close together with a shorter guy, a few meters ahead, just a little more-

Suddenly, a kid crashed into him with a dull 'oomph' and Tao tumbled to the ground, unwilling to give away his actual strength. He quickly rose back to his feet, his eyes glued to the back of the tall guy's head.
"Sorry man, I didn't see you there-" the kid voiced out in an apologetic manner and Tao dismissed it with a nod of his head, ready to move on. But the boy stood in his path, forcing Tao's eyes to flit down and acknowledge the fact that this wasn't a kid but a young adult with pretty features.
"Are you alright? Aww man, I really never watch where I'm going-"
"I'm fine." Tao curtly replied and attempted to step around him but the infuriating boy continued to be in the way, even having the audacity to grasp his upper arm, eyes sparkling with worry.
"Really, I should make it up to you! Can't have everyone suffer from my clumsiness~"
Tao craned his neck and saw his target disappear in the crowd of people, a surge of panic filling him. "Let go of me." he requested firmly, trying to shake his arm free while the boy kept blocking his...

oh. He was blocking his path. The realization came in the split-second the tip of a knife was poking against his side, hidden from people walking by.
"Rude. And here I was, offering compensation." The boy murmured, his eyes harboring an entirely different spark when they met. Tao made a frustrated noise upon seeing that he'd lost his target completely. It turned to a snarl as he regarded the cocky brunette, all pretense forgotten.
"You don't know what you're getting yourself into." he quietly said, receiving a challenging smirk. "Do you?"
The smirk was twitching when the blade of Tao's knife tore through the guy's robe.

Baekhyun suppressed a groan of pain, his stance not faltering a tiny bit. Instead he increased the pressure of his own knife until he felt the disgusting prick of perforating clothes and skin at the same time. They both stilled. It was a stalemate.
"We shouldn't cause a scene now, should we? Wouldn't be in either of our interests." he murmured, not breaking the gaze. He was done playing and the blond assassin was, too, if his angry expression was any indication.
"Let's settle this elsewhere," Baekhyun murmured, "red Layer?"
The knife was twisted a bit and while he didn't wince, dots were dancing in his vision and he could feel his warm blood seeping through the flimsy robe. Damn, Chanyeol always managed to get him into trouble, he thought, as he pushed the blond away with all his might, the world fading into a blur of colors.
You're curious about what happened to Jongin? The answer is in my third Microcosm—

**Microcosm III**

♡
Chapter 8

Jongdae blinked, eyelashes fluttering as he tried to get a hold of himself and keep the panic at bay. He was alone. The realization felt like a heavy weight rooting him to the spot while the desperate urge to jump to his feet and search for the others fought against the lethargy like a thousand butterflies in his stomach. He had to find them, quickly. If they moved anywhere without him, he might never be able to find them and that was a terrifying thought. Being completely lost, that is.

Jongdae looked up at the ceiling. The magenta Layer was up there, approximately two meters above him. How was he supposed to get there?

Suddenly, the door slammed open and someone entered with heavy, dragging steps. Jongdae sucked in his breath. If someone found him in this position, he'd be in trouble. The slam of a cheap plastic door confused him until a very unmistakable sound made him wrinkle his nose in disgust. He appeared to be in a public restroom. Quick thinking made him tiptoe into another booth, closing it as quietly as possible before leaning against the door with his back.

Alright, he told himself, stay calm and think about what to do next, just like Minseok would.

He was in the men's bathroom of a club on an unfamiliar Layer. Judging by the modern looks of everything, it was probably a well-developed one. Unfortunately, the booth wasn't designed for climbing, especially not without catching attention. Logically speaking, he just had to leave and somehow get to the upper floor to shift to the magenta Layer and meet the others.

If he actually could, a nagging voice added. After all, it had went wrong before. His gaze dropped to his forearm where the faint scar was, looking all-too innocent. Maybe they had given him the wrong tracker? Did stuff like that happen, like, ever? Jongdae shook his head. He had time to think about his colossally bad luck later. If he didn't make it to the magenta Layer, he could at least return to cyan, hoping his friends might catch up with him there. Which brought him to the actual problem at hand - how was he going to get there, looking like this? Even though Jongdae hadn't seen anyone here, he could tell that his creamy, fluttery robe was completely out of place for any type of festivity.

He'd never get anywhere unseen, not like this. While people loudly staggered inside and out of the bathroom, Jongdae stealthily undressed until he wore nothing but a simple white shirt and matching pants, a bunch of wrinkled fabric in his hand. He didn't have a bag or anything on him. Only experienced shifters were able to take along anything above the clothing they wore and to be safe, any resources were left with either Jongin, Minseok or Chanyeol. What to do, what to do... for a while he stared down at the cloth and himself, his mind going blank. Finally he decided to wrap it around his hip sideways, tying the sleeves together in a way he'd seen stars do it. The robe was ridiculously long, sweeping the floor and so he tugged the seam into his pants, effectively folding it in half. Lucky for him, the fabric was so thin it didn't protest and after making sure the knot was tied securely and no one was around, he stepped out of the booth to check himself in the mirror. Well.

Jongdae felt like there couldn't possibly be any party in the world featuring an outfit like this. But he barely had any other choice and quickly exited the bathroom before he'd be faced with a one on one conversation with a drunk person.

 Darkness engulfed him, highlighted by specks of light in purple and green. He tried to get a good overview on the layout of the room but it was dark and extremely crowded. A colorful, undefined mass Jongdae had no time to pay close attention to. The spotlights kept blinding him as he tried to stay in a corner and faced the impossible task of not standing out and looking natural. He'd gone dancing before but never in a place like this. He was sure he saw barely clothed women dancing at a pole from the corner of his eye. Lucky for him, there were no security guards nearby and therefore no one paying attention to him. After a bit of awkwardly walking around, he saw a promising-looking door kept ajar. He hoped that it was no backstage room in use and snuck inside when no one was paying attention. A windowless room with a flickering neon light greeted him and the moment he moved the door into the previous position, he saw movements from the corner of his eye, almost
jumping out of his skin. In a less lit corner, just next to a stack of boxes stood a blue-haired man, his back turned to him and before his eyes got used to the darkness, very compromising sounds already told him that he was getting blown by whoever was kneeling between his legs. With a start, Jongdae tried his best to silently yet quickly cross the room, his steps drowned out by the lewd slurping sounds and degrading dirty talk of the groaning guy. There was only one door leading out and if anyone else entered or the guy turned around now, he'd be fucked, and not nearly as nicely as that guy, his brain added very unhelpfully.

One hand on the heavy metal door knob he waited anxiously for his chance. Goosebumps were wandering down his arms at the way the guy kept commanding her, kept telling her that she'd have to do better if she wanted a discount. The girl was obviously trying her best to appeal to him, her muffled moans growing louder in pitch and Jongdae saw his chance and pushed down the doorknob, hoping the squeaking sound would go unnoticed and slipped outside, extremely carefully closing the door behind him. The whole noise was almost completely blocked out and instead of calming down, Jongdae threw a quick look over what appeared to be an emergency staircase and swiftly took the first stairs until anyone who'd exit through the door wouldn't instantly see him. He padded around the landing, trying to feel the structures. The height was perfect and even though the coordinates weren't, he'd much rather walk around anywhere else than here, searching for the others. He inhaled deeply. Alright, the orange structures were easy to pinpoint. Then there was a faint clutter of others. Jongdae reached out. The world faded and changed forms, the ground breaking away below his feet once more but this time, Jongdae only fell for half a meter. He might one day be able to take minor obstacles like this in stride, but for now he tumbled, twisted his ankle and ungracefully landed on unforgiving stone bricks with a muffled yelp.

He knew from school and from Minseok's stories that the magenta Layer was an industrial one; a huge, complex base linking different factories and research departments. But experiencing it first hand was overwhelming, to say the least. Everything was so vast. He sat on the very ground of the main complex, various bridges above him connecting the four main buildings. An artificial roof covered everything in the far distance, protecting the building from rain and sunlight alike, leaving the countless, glowing details to cast a faint magenta hue on the dark metal dominating the place. Jongdae scrambled to his feet and went up to the closest wall. He could hear people bustling over the bridges far above him and really didn't want to remain openly on display like that.

He had barely touched the cool surface when a delightfully familiar voice hissed his name.
"Jongdae! To your right!"

His head whipped around to see the pale face of Minseok peeking out of a barely-opened door nearby. The moment he was let in, the door closed behind him and every other word was drowned out by the sudden amount of Chanyeol he had all up in his face, enveloping him in a hug tight enough to make him wheeze. It was a surprise how much force these gangly limbs could use.
"You made it, we were so worried." his deep voice mumbled into his hair and suddenly Jongdae felt like he was the one doing the comforting, weakly patting his back.
"You might choke me though so would you mind...?"
"Oh. Yes, of course." Chanyeol uttered, finally letting go and Jongdae involuntarily shook his head like a dog, trying to regain some sense. And air. He looked around what appeared to be a storage room with random cases standing around. His eyes wandered over to the pale face of Luhan, who looked a little sickish in the magenta glow emitted from various cases and keypads. Minseok was sitting on another case, already going through his bag. There was no sign of Jongin.
"So he hasn't returned yet."
Luhan didn't even look angry anymore - by now, an almost empty expression was spreading over his otherwise so lively features.
Minseok didn't waste any time and approached Jongdae with a syringe.
"No idea whether it's gonna cause trouble injecting two substances in one day but for you it's the first anyway, eh?"
Jongdae obediently offered his arm and Minseok placed the object in the crook of his elbow.
He quickly pushed down on the other end and the tiny needle pricked Jongdae, who only twitched a bit.
"I'm beginning to get the hang of this," Minseok mumbled as he took the emptied syringe away and placed a simple band-aid over the spot, "this is for the green Layer. We haven't had time to properly interpret the maps but it already looks like we'll be spending quite some time there."
"Besides, it's barely populated around this area and we'll get time to rest." Chanyeol added with Luhan cutting him off.
"And wait for Jongin."
Minseok nodded vaguely.
"Yes. And wait for Jongin..." he repeated and no matter how even he sounded, Jongdae saw just as much worry in his eyes as the rest of theirs.
"Alright," Minseok proclaimed, obviously regaining a hold of himself as he placed a hand on Jongdae's shoulder, "this time you'll go before Luhan. So we can confirm you end up in the right place."

With a sheepish look Jongdae massaged his arm a little, hoping to stimulate the blood flow.
"I'm sorry."

"Not the right time. We gotta get out of here. Who knows when someone's gonna turn up, looking for whatever they store in here. Try it over here, Luhan claimed it's a good spot." Minseok cut him off and he complied, trying really hard to block out every other sense. Against everyone's worry, it was easy - after all, those green strings were completely new, just freshly injected. It would always remain an otherworldly feeling, but it was getting shockingly easy all the same. Pulling those faint structures into focus, making them real just by really wanting it, by showing not an ounce of hesitation.

The air changed and the hard stone floor gave way to soft soil and high grass. Jongdae blinked, giving a thumbs up in the vague direction he assumed Luhan to be at and took a few steps away to give the others room. One by one they appeared, all showing various amounts of finesse. Minseok, for example -who was once used to shifting but never did so in unauthorized spots- was still taken aback by the minuscule height difference, stumbling a bit over his own feet, making Jongdae smile a bit at the adorable sight. He was so clearly used to the comfortable official platforms, all set up at exactly the same height.

Jongdae took the time to take in his surroundings and yeah, that was a lot of green. He'd always liked the fact that it was easy to memorize the attributes of this Layer just by taking the color literally. His home Layer had never been short of greenery either but this forest was way more magnificent than anything Orange had to offer. Foreign trees were standing proud, allowing only tiny specks of golden light to filter through the lush leaves and as far as he could see there was nothing but trees, in every direction. Birds were chirping, leaves rustled and faint purling made him wonder whether there was a stream nearby. Luhan didn't need a long time to recover and unerringly staggered a few meters away from them before plopping down into the soft grass, fatigue nipping at his usually straight posture. The other three followed his lead though Chanyeol hesitated a bit when it came to a spot to sit. Jongdae unconsciously followed him, sinking into the grass next to him. Obviously Luhan was sitting in the spot they had lost Jongin in. And not so obviously Chanyeol was wary of being in the cutting point of Layers including one with an assassin.

Which reminded him.
"Did you hear from Baekhyun? Is he alright?"

Chanyeol instinctively checked the pager strapped around his wrist though it would have alerted him of a new message by vibrating anyway.
"Not yet..."

"What? What happened to that guy?" Luhan suddenly perked up with an unimpressed expression, "he just left us, stating he had business to do, that jerk."

"Luhan." Jongdae and Chanyeol fell in unison, stumbling over whom to give the word to.
"Don't treat him like that," Jongdae finally said with a stern look, "he saved us, you know. He took care of our pursuer."
"He did?! But how-"
The rest of the question remained unasked as two figures appeared among them, causing all of them to flinch defensively before recognizing the shifter.
"Jongin!" Luhan called out and jumped to his feet just before hesitating in his tracks. Because Jongin wasn't alone.
Mashed into his side with their fingers firmly intertwined, stood the patient from before.
His posture seemed stiff, as if he was preparing to attack again at any moment, effectively keeping them from approaching the two.
"Why is he here?" Minseok asked cautiously, subtly going into a defensive stance Jongdae knew he remembered from his early martial art lessons. Jongin bit his lip but his fingers only tightened their grip and even though he was anxious, he held his chin high as he regarded them.
"He's... he's with me now." he replied in a quiet but determined voice.
"Do you know him?" Luhan inquired and the split-second of hesitation flickering over the shifter's expression said it all.
In an attempt to strengthen his argument, Jongin went on.
"I mean it. I won't go anywhere without him."
All the while, the eery boy was intensely staring at all of them as if daring them to make a move. His hair was even more messed up than before and while it may look like a cute bed-head, combined with rather fair skin and nightgown-like attire, his eyes were wild, almost feral. Luhan appeared ready to combust and even Minseok was eyeing him suspiciously. Jongdae had barely realized it, as he was too captivated watching the scene unfold, but at some point Chanyeol had stepped closer to him, seeking his proximity.
"I don't think this is a good idea." Minseok claimed in a deceivingly calm voice.
"I won't change my mind. If- if you don't accept it, I'll leave." Jongin stammered and Jongdae could see him closing off, turning defensive. A really bad sign. One quick look around told Jongdae that the others wouldn't want the shifter to leave. Following his instincts, he took a step forward, ignoring Chanyeol's low gasp.
"I'm Jongdae. What about you?" he asked the dark-haired boy who in turn only blinked, seemingly unwilling to gratify him with an answer until Jongin nudged him in the side.
"Kyungsoo."
The voice was surprisingly smooth and velvety, quite unlike the scratchy voice Jongdae had pictured a sick person to have.
"Alright. Nice to meet you. I'd offer you my hand but I got the vague idea you wouldn't take it."
"Jongdae." Minseok scolded him, less out of empathy for the crazy guy and more out of pure habit.
"Anyway, would you mind taking one step away from Jongin, just for a sec?"
The grip on Jongin's arm tightened even more and Jongdae couldn't help pitying the shifter who tried hard to keep the pained look off his face.
"I'm not gonna take him anywhere to shit-talk about you, don't worry - he'll remain right there."
Jongdae merrily continued as if that Kyungsoo guy wasn't a possible psychopath.
Only after another insisting nudge and a whisper into his ear did Kyungsoo let him go, a perfectly petulant expression on his face as he stepped away, crossing his arms. As if he felt empty without Jongin. Well, that or incredibly angry at Jongdae. The latter may currently be more accurate, judging by the piercing look he shot him. Ignoring this, Jongdae approached Jongin to draw him into a tight hug. He also ignored Kyungsoo's sharply intake of breath, giving all his attention to the shifter.
"I'm glad you're safe. We were worried out of our minds." he said and suddenly remembered Chanyeol's similar words from earlier.
"You think we'd shun you that easily? Have some faith, please." he added, playfully pinching his side and Jongin visibly relaxed, the tension finally leaving him. To Jongdae, the shifter had always been an open book. His fear of getting rejected was so obvious, it almost caused him physical pain.
"I can only speak for myself but I'm open to the idea. What about you guys?" he asked with a look over his shoulder. Jongin's fingers anxiously dug into the fabric of his shirt.
"Let's first focus on getting on the move, who knows who else might follow us." Minseok claimed and Jongdae didn't need to turn around to see him being much more amiable already, seeing the exchange between them.

"I think we can all agree that there's a lot to talk about but let's save that for later. Chanyeol, would you mind helping me a bit with interpreting the maps so we can get going?"

The following hours were silent and a bit awkward. Minseok and Jongdae were leading the group, concentrated on getting it right. Besides, the silence between them was a comfortable one, a routine between old friends. Chanyeol, however, was awfully silent, and tense from head to toe as he trotted behind them. He reminded Jongdae of a guilty kid very much aware that his scolding was long overdue. Up to that point, Jongdae hadn't mentioned the fact that their pursuer had been after the tall brunette but it was obvious that it couldn't stay a secret forever, for the group's sake.

Luhan was equally quiet, torn between taking in the surroundings and throwing wary glances at the couple behind them, Kyungsoo in particular. It was funny, Jongdae thought. Just a few days ago, everyone had presumed Minseok was the biggest threat. Now that Kyungsoo had appeared and Minseok was leading them so smoothly, everyone appeared to completely forget about that. Unlike Jongdae, who was very aware of the fact that his friend had only been clean for a little over a week. He would probably need at least three more before he'd consider Minseok anywhere near recovered. Lost in thoughts, he climbed over thick tree roots and stray branches, thinking about the meaning of the word recovery.

"Alright, there's a lot on our agenda." Minseok began and it never ceased to amaze Jongdae what a natural leader his best friend was when needed.

The sun had faded long ago and they had made themselves comfortable in a small clearing, sitting in a circle on the soft grass and enjoying the warmth of a few self-made torches -whose purpose was more about emitting light than actual warmth as it wasn't cold at all- while munching on a few snacks. Since everyone was still scared of Kyungsoo, Jongdae was the one to sit down next to the silent guy huddled into Jongin's side and Chanyeol, who didn't seem too happy about this arrangement, had taken the spot on his other side.

"There's the issue about... Kyungsoo here," Minseok spoke up, a heavy pause at the other's name, "then there's the question of who is after us and what on earth happened to Jongdae. Not to forget Chanyeol."

The latter flinched, his gaze lowered to the floor in obvious guilt.

"What about him?" Luhan asked and Minseok shot the tall guy a very pointed look, complete with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. What about him, that's the question. In fact, I suppose we start by you," he announced distractedly, pulling out a bundle of pens tied together by a rubber band and almost shoving them into Chanyeol's hands, "drawing markings for every single Layer you got permanent access to. No more fucking lies."

His tone was strict and impatient though not necessarily hostile even though Chanyeol looked like a kicked puppy.

"What do you mean by that?" Jongdae asked in confusion but only succeeded in directing Minseok's gaze on him, the sharp edge smoothing out.

"You too. But you should make markings for every single injection you ever had, alright Dae?"

Jongdae was still confused but decided to oblige since there was probably no harm in doing so. So he reached for one of the non-permanent markers Luhan had stolen during their trip to the orange council, deciding to begin with blue. Chanyeol had already reached for a nearby torch, digging it into the ground between them so they'd be able to distinguish the colors.

"Okay, so can we get to the point that includes telling me who he is?" Luhan inquired with an unhappy expression directed at Kyungsoo, who was currently watching the ground as if it did fascinating things other than simply being covered with grass. He showed no signs of actually being with them other than basically clawing at Jongin's arm.
"I'd like to know that, too. Jongin, who is he? Where did he come from, what does he do... any information at all?" Minseok inquired while Jongdae drew a simple blue cross on his left arm, seeing as he was right-handed. Chanyeol seemed to share the thought, already holding out his hand and he handed over the blue pen, including the cap. Jongin hesitated, his gaze flickering between Kyungsoo and the others as if waiting for him to speak up himself but of course he didn't.

"He... he was a stationed patient at the institution we were close to. There was apparently a huge commotion during the explosion and the security systems crashed, so he went out and kinda stumbled upon us." Jongin explained as if it actually was an answer to any of their questions. Jongdae was torn between looking up to decipher Jongin's expression and drawing a cyan cross on his skin.

"Yes but why was he stationed there? What's... wrong with him?" Luhan asked with an obvious gesture over at the quiet boy currently letting the fingers of one hand dig into the ground in an indecipherable pattern, intensely focused on it.

"I..."

Jongin trailed off, obviously not knowing the answer to that and Jongdae really wondered what had happened between them to make the ever-flighty Jongin so sure he could trust this guy. So sure he could just lean in and whisper into his ear, softly repeating the question to Kyungsoo who easily murmured something back, only for Jongin to hear.

"He is seeing things." Jongin slowly said out loud and Luhan gasped audibly.

"Are you a seer, too?!"

When Kyungsoo gave no reaction whatsoever and Jongin nudged him once more, Luhan's temper got the better of him.

"Would it be too much to ask of you to reply on your own? We're obviously willing to give you a chance here, so stop behaving like we're below you, would you?!" he complained loudly and only Minseok's warning hand on his upper arm seemed to keep him from jumping Kyungsoo. At this, Kyungsoo’s dark eyes finally flitted up to settle on Luhan, who didn't shrink away and only stubbornly held his gaze, as if to say 'so?'.

He shrugged, leading to Luhan being confused and re-evaluating his knowledge of the gesture. It would have been amusing, the way he'd unintentionally checkmated the seer's brain, if the situation wasn't this tense. Jongdae had finished his drawing task by now, the pen lying forgotten in his limp fingers as he watched the scene unfold.

"What do you mean? You don't know whether you're a seer?" Minseok asked patiently.

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not." Kyungsoo replied simply and Jongdae had yet to get used to his smooth voice.

"Can you elaborate?"

Really, it was good that Minseok had an everlasting amount of patience and the presence of mind to keep Luhan in check at the same time.

Kyungsoo fleetingly looked around him as if he was seeing stuff that very moment.

"How would you know what you're seeing exists? How would you know if it doesn't?" he gave back calmly, directed at Minseok, but with his eyes on Luhan. It hit a nerve and Luhan flinched back, a bit of his aggression seeping out of him.

"So... you might be seeing real things but also... surreal things?" Jongdae carefully threw in, wary of using the word 'hallucinations'. Kyungsoo slowly regarded him now and if Jongdae hadn't had such a ridiculously keen eye for people, he would have missed the way Jongin squeezed his hand before the boy graced him with a reaction and he barely registered the pen being taken from his loose grip.

"Maybe everyone does," he said, his eyes piercing Jongdae with intense attention, "and nobody realizes."

Jongdae nodded vaguely, deciding to let that sink in for a while. Kyungsoo's attention had already wandered back to a spot on the ground, one of Jongin's arms firmly tugging him into his side. They all shared a look and decided to let it go for now. Openly addressing mental health issues was kind of insensitive -not to mention it could be triggering- and by now, it was clear that he suffered from some form of hallucination, though it remained a mystery as to how much of it included actual Layers, like
Luhan saw them. One thing was certain, however; Jongin was the reason Kyungsoo was this stable. He was the one leading him through the conversation, letting him know when to react by squeezing his hand, an unspoken agreement. It was a little disturbing as it was fascinating to Jongdae, comparable to someone guiding a blind person. He wondered whether the others realized it, too. "So, did you hear from Baekhyun?" Luhan suddenly asked into the silence and Chanyeol's head flew up.

"Wha-? Oh. Yes, he texted me a few minutes ago, didn't want to interrupt." he quickly said, almost as if he'd been caught red-handed.

"Really? What exactly did he say?" Luhan went on, unwilling to let him off easily. Chanyeol shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"He said he got away with nothing but a scratch. That could mean anything knowing Baekhyun. Anything from a flesh wound to a missing leg."

"WHAT?" Luhan squeaked high-pitched, startling Kyungsoo and Jongin out of their couple time, "how do you know it's not just a scratch?!" Chanyeol pulled his lips into a lopsided frown, wrinkling his nose.

"Nah. That's not like him. See, if he'd gotten a scratch, he'd be all over me by now, nagging about the incredible pain and being all dramatic about me being the death of him."

"That makes no sense at all," Luhan claimed, shaking his head violently before reaching out, with his palm pointing upwards, "gimme that Pager thing."

Chanyeol didn't even show any resistance at all, picking the Pager off the ground and tossing it over to him. Jongdae knew the others couldn't see it due to the torch in front of them, but he definitely did see it and it sent goosebumps down his own arms.

"Chanyeol." he breathed out in a forced calm and collected manner. He saw him fidget, shoulders drawing up a bit, self-consciously balling his hands into fists... but ultimately he turned towards Jongdae with a lowered gaze.

"Yes?" he exhaled, oozing nervousness.

"What is this?"

Now he surely had everyone's attention on him and Minseok crawled closer, unceremoniously plucking out the torch in order to have free sight. He heard Luhan gasp and saw Jongin leaning in curiously, mildly startling Kyungsoo.

"It's... I'm not done, I'm sorry-" Chanyeol began but trailed off, biting his lip with his head hung low. Unable to stop himself, Jongdae trailed a finger over the bare skin of Chanyeol's left arm, as if the messily painted crosses and acronyms were actual tattoos. They started out neatly, one cross at a time, beginning with something purple-ish at his wrist, followed by a variety of other colors clumsily mixed from the few standard pens they'd had, until he'd obviously given up on that strategy and the symbols were lined up in rows of three, reaching all the way up to the crook of his elbow.

"You can't be serious..." he mumbled.

"Are you honestly saying you have a tracker for all of these Layers?" Luhan asked incredulously while Minseok sighed in defeat.

Jongdae softly tapped his fingers on every cross, silently mouthing the numbers to himself. He felt the muscles twitch beneath his fingertips but the other made no move to stop him.

"Twenty," he finally said, his eyes wandering from Chanyeol to the others, "Twenty. Is that even possible?"

"Actually... I think it's supposed to be twenty-three, but I really can't remember the others." Chanyeol admitted with a grimace.

"Why?" Minseok asked simply, shooting him a sharp look, "and no more-"

"I know, I know. No more lies." Chanyeol quickly cut him off, looking every bit as defeated as Minseok did.

"I'll tell you everything. I just. I'm not sure where to start." he stammered, fidgeting in his spot. Jongdae gently placed his palm over a few of the incriminating markings and gave Minseok and Luhan a look, clearly telling them to back off a little. Minseok followed, easing his posture a bit and so did Luhan, albeit reluctantly.
Unaware of the silent exchange, Chanyeol inhaled deeply. "Alright, so... I was volunteering as a research subject." he slowly said, his words chosen carefully. "You know, I moved houses sometimes when I was a kid and I already had three trackers injected before my 16th birthday."

Luhan looked as if he wanted to interrupt, presumably with a bunch of questions, but chose to keep his mouth shut.

"Here, I was born on the plum Layer," he continued, gesturing at the first symbol on his wrist and moved on to the others, "and I moved to the orange Layer, skipped the red one -due to a governmental exception- and then lived on the magenta one for quite some time since my parents worked there. When I turned sixteen, I was eager to do the tests and travel around the world. So I took the tests one at a time, moving up in the rankings."

"How exactly is it ranked again?" Jongin suddenly piped up. Obviously it wasn't of importance for an escapee shifter but most people learned their Layer’s spot during their first year at elementary school and the whole ranking during high school, where it was drilled into their head until they were able to recite it in their sleep. Jongdae took it upon himself to reply.

"If you start at the orange Layer, which is pretty much in the middle and go up from there it used to start with red; followed by magenta, blue, cyan, green, lavender, and so on and so forth. The higher up you go, the more qualities you gotta have, personality-wise. Someone lacking the curiosity to acquire new skills wouldn't be allowed to live on the cyan Layer, for example."

He underlined his words by gesturing on the mentioned symbols on Chanyeol's arm as if they resembled a map -which they did, in a weird way- and Jongin nodded while the taller one continued his tale.

"Yeah. Anyway. So I liked to travel. I made all the tests in a time span as short as I was allowed to and whenever my school obligations allowed it, I would visit other places."

"Why not temporary? Why go for a full visa every time?" Minseok asked with crossed arms and Chanyeol shrugged.

"I just thought 'why not?', to be honest. With a permanent visa I could also visit unpopulated Layers outside the ranking, that was my main reason I guess. And that's what I began to do after I got my cyan tracker. I was kinda in a hurry to get to the cyan one so I could one day study at their university, you know. But after that, I was traveling freely."

"Didn't you ever experience trouble with so many different trackers?" Minseok continued his interrogation with a raised eyebrow.

The way Chanyeol said it made it sound easy but there was a reason most people avoided having too many trackers. While some may be able to handle it and differentiate between many structures, others couldn't and suffered from long-term consequences. Over the time Jongdae had often heard about people who got so confused by an added structure that they lost the ability to shift anywhere and had to go through an extremely long rehab phase to desensitize their bodies and reset it, so to say. Therefore, many trackers were something to avoid, not actively seek.

"No, not at all," Chanyeol dismissed him, "I used to tell myself I'd take it slow if it got inconvenient but nope. Everything was just fine. I think I was around eighteen when they approached me. I had about eight trackers accumulated by then. The officials had begun to notice me and asked whether they could take some blood samples and whatnot. Just for science and everything. I agreed because, again, why not?"

At this point especially Jongin wore a grimace of apprehension, obviously aware of where this was going.

"Turned out that they found something interesting, or maybe it was all a farce in hindsight, who knows. Shortly after, they offered to... sponsor me. Sponsor my travels."

Chanyeol sounded a little bitter and Jongdae left his hand to wander up and down the expanse of the markings until he continued.

"It didn't sound bad to me, back then. I'd just keep traveling wherever and receive their support. In turn I had to go to regular check-ups. So... that's what I did, for over a year. Eight trackers plus one permanent tracker each month and a ridiculous number of non-permanent shots in between... it kinda
looked like this, in the end," Chanyeol ended, vaguely waving his arm, "what a mess, huh? What a damn mess..."
His voice trailed off and while Minseok seemed anything but convinced, Jongdae took over, his voice probing carefully.
"So they dictated when and which Layer you were supposed to visit?"
A quiet, bitter laugh escaped him. He only saw it in the way his shoulders shook as he was refusing to make eye contact.
"Dictated. You're smart. Yeah, that's what they did. It started out harmless enough but soon I was getting more and more involved. At one point the team I was assigned to changed and then it all went downhill. Then I was truly getting 'dictated', as you said. The Layers I went to were scheduled, I was being under observation for most of my time... Somewhere along the way, I'd become a project. I wasn't Chanyeol, the person. I was Chanyeol, the... the project." he ended unsurely, censoring himself.
"Still, why?" Minseok spoke up once more, his voice purposefully calm.
"Why would they go that far? What did they see in you?"
This was a crucial point in the story. Jongdae felt it in the way the muscles tensed beneath his palm. Still, Chanyeol pushed on, having come to terms with the fact that there was no going back. Instead of flitting around nervously, his gaze settled on Minseok. Firm and with a tinge of slight desperation.
"Do you know about Oh Sehun?" he asked evenly.

People were talking. Numbers and figures came out of their mouths, finding their way over rustled papers and squeaking pens onto a big white board.
Junmyeon was one of those talking people. One of the people thinking aloud, exchanging thoughts, rearranging ideas in order to find a solution. Was he on his way to becoming one of those gray, characterless council members he'd frowned at as a child?
He sure hoped not.

"So we're settling on the rose Layer. No more objections?" asked a petite woman -the neutral accountant. An affirming silence followed. She wrote a note into her report and lead them to the next point.
"We need to come up with resources. Food, medical supplies and personnel as much as accommodations for the refugees." Junmyeon spoke up, skimming his list. He wasn't exactly a leader but most council members didn't mind him taking initiative.
"Who would be able and willing to provide any of these?"

Junmyeon was aware of the fact that he'd never take the last step, never be a member of the ruling white Layer who had to give their go ahead for pretty much everything the council came up with. He'd seen them before and knew that he wasn't willing to pay the price. They were lacking every kind of desire and bias, were devoid of any human flaws, devoid of anything that made them human, really. Maybe he was meant to be incomplete, but Junmyeon was convinced that it was important to stay human in order to make the correct decisions for his people.
So he was sitting in the now all-too familiar conference room as a representative of the blue Layer, the tiny tell-tale brooch decorating his loose, woolen pullover. He'd long ago stopped worrying about what to wear to the regular gatherings. Most people dressed in an attire representing their people, but the blue Layer was so full of exotic fashion that Junmyeon had long given up on trying to represent it. And seeing as he was unwilling to stuff himself into a suit all the time, he'd settled on dress pants
and comfortable upper wear.
His gaze wandered around, giving the other representatives time to carefully think it through.

The council consisted of forty members, meaning that one simple table was no longer an option. Currently they had three levels, offering everyone a good view of all the other members as well as the opportunity to jump right into the discussion. The blue Layer ranked eleventh out of twenty-eight which enabled Junmyeon to sit in the middle row and have a good look at the higher-ranked people below him and the representatives of less-developed Layers above him. Just in front of him he saw Jin fidgeting, barely daring to raise his gaze. He really felt for the lavender representative. It was probably just his third gathering seeing as he was freshly chosen and fairly young, and yet most of the meeting was concentrated on solving the mess on his Layer. It wasn't his fault, obviously. An epidemic could hit anyone and that was the reason why they were planning the evacuation and momentary quarantine of the whole affected city, in order to find the source.

"We don't have a lot to offer but we'll give you all the medics we can spare." Orange representative Amber Liu spoke up firmly, as always one of the first to step forward.
"In addition we'll take part in donating food."
The spell was broken and Ryeowook, a sharp-looking man with kind eyes behind his thickly-framed glasses announced that the cyan Layer was going to contribute all the medical resources they could spare as well, though the exact amount would need further evaluation.
Junmyeon had been a member of the council for quite some time and was familiar with most names, faces and character traits. Very few Layers which inhabited a certain amount of people had two representatives. Currently those were reduced to five Layers, though the orange one was well on its way to achieving this status as well. Not that Amber would have waited for that day to come before dragging her trainee Henry along to the council gatherings. She was definitely unique, the only person who would dare to do so.
"What about the technical supplies?" Junmyeon asked into the round, causing people to turn to see another man wearing glasses. Magenta had two representatives but everyone knew that it was Kyuhyun they had to appeal to. Said representative sighed, tapping his pen against the documents, a frown on his face as he announced that he'd need time to do the math and organize something.
Yes, Junmyeon dared to say that he felt quite comfortable in his position without having mutated into a soulless, empty person. After the conference he patted Jin on the back, giving the poor lad a few encouraging words. He was usually the last to leave, preferring to sort his notes and take it easy instead of rushing towards the exit like the ever-busy red representative Siwon or the military admirals responsible for the dark Layers. So he took his time and nodded towards the accountant before leaving as one of the last members. He strode down the corridor, lost in his thoughts, until a familiar voice caught his attention and he changed his route, aiming for a forgotten conference room at the end of the hallway with a sigh and muttered complaints.
Without further ado, he entered the room and closed the door behind him.
"I don't even know what to say at this point. Why do people keep voting for you?" he complained loudly, letting his precious bag meet an empty table with a resounding thud. Only then did he notice that he wasn't alone with his irresponsible co-representative and blushed a little at the sight of a grinning Amber, who'd been witness to this unprofessional outburst. Henry at least had the decency to try and hide his amused expression behind a folder.
"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were here."
His quick apology was met with a dramatic sigh.
"Oh suuure. Just act as if I'm not the victim of your daily abuse in front of others!"
"Please. Kim Heechul. Just. Please." Junmyeon said, rolling his eyes and running out of complaints. It often happened with Heechul as your partner.
Currently his cause of despair was lazily lounging around, both feet planted on a table and his hands crossed over his chest. Kim Heechul was already in his mid-thirties, though he was still devilishly charming with long hair, youthful looks and an adventurous sense of fashion - though the deciding factor was the confidence he held himself with and his infamously sharp tongue. If anyone asked
Junmyeon though, he'd first mention his incredible laziness and lack of responsibility. Most of the time the guy just showed up and left whenever it pleased him, listened to nobody and was unhelpful in general.

But Junmyeon wasn't in his position without a reason; he wasn't stupid and therefore able to acknowledge the fact that Heechul wasn't, either. Heechul was a sociable person who connected easily with others while at the same time had guts that had yet to be outdone by anyone from the council. There had actually been situations in which Junmyeon only got things done because he had a very strong-willed Heechul backing him up.

He appreciated that. Still, it was part of his job and his gratitude only went so far.

"You didn't show up. Again." he sighed, sinking into a chair and regarding him with a tired look as if he wasn't even expecting an excuse anymore.

He usually didn't get any and today was no exception as Heechul only shrugged.

"Been busy. You missed me?"

"Frankly? No. I hate you." he answered dryly, lacking venom. Heechul only blew him a kiss.

"Were you bugging Mrs. Liu here to keep you up to date?" he asked accusingly and the blonde woman only laughed.

"Mrs. Liu. Now you're making me feel old. Please just call me Amber..."

With her eyes flitting over at Heechul she hesitated, a question visible in her eyes.

"It's alright, Myeonnie is cool." Heechul graciously said and while he felt the need to strangle his pretty neck for the nickname, Junmyeon's thoughts were already running wild as to what they might have been talking about.

Oh my. Please don't tell me they're romantically involved-

"We've been discussing a few fishy things going down on my Layer."

Oh. Junmyeon wanted to hit his head on the desk for assuming something this irrational first.

Alright, so he might have a little crush on Amber, but every man did, right? Besides, it wasn't anything serious.

"Why, what happened?" he asked, purposefully nonchalant even though the atmosphere somehow turned serious again.

Amber tapped a pen against the table, looking contemplative.

"I'm not even sure anymore. But lately, a few ominous things happened. A couple of young men have gone missing. First one man, a young and promising architect and then, about a year after, his friend followed, along with another guy about that age. Obviously people are being declared missing all the time," she added with a wave of her hand, "and without Henry I wouldn't have noticed the correlation between those people. But as always, my Mochi knows where to look."

Her assistant nudged her subtly with an accusing look hiding how flattered he actually was. Amber only spared him a fleeting side glance before continuing.

"And it's not only that. The last two people vanished on the same day four dead bodies were found outside the city's wall. It's obvious that they were assassins of some sort. There were no external injuries to be found and as we usually do, we called in researchers from cyan. They made sure our own medics didn't get a whiff of what was going on and told us they'd died from poisoning." Amber ended with a meaningful look. Junmyeon heard the clogs tick inside his head.

"Four assassins, all killed by poison? Seems unlikely. Unless you have secret gang fights going on outside your city walls, which I doubt." Junmyeon replied, already searching for possible connections and solutions. Amber nodded, frustration written all over her face.

"I know, right? And then we have the people vanishing on the same day. I've been wondering whether they might've been chased by those assassins, but according to Henry's research there was nothing out of the ordinary about those two. Still, something is definitely fishy about this. It's awful, having stuff like this happen right under your nose without being able to do anything."

Junmyeon nodded in understanding. As a representative of the blue Layer he was constantly faced with a terrifying crime rate and without their excellent police force, he'd be at a loss as to which crimes were even worthy of his investigation.

"I bet there's something bigger behind all this," Heechul said, twirling a strand of hair around his
index finger, "I have a feeling that this epidemic isn't completely unrelated either. We should keep
our eye on cyan. They've got some reeeeally shady people." he mused aloud but Junmyeon didn't
appear too convinced.
"I've always trusted Ryeowook and Hangeng. They've never appeared shady to me." he stated and
while Amber shared his conflict, Heechul shot him a pitying smile.
"You naive little thing. Still, even if the representatives aren’t, they're neither aware nor responsible
for *everything* that happens on their Layer."
Junmyeon swallowed, feeling a cold shiver run down his arms. He was right. It was easy to forget,
how enormous the number of people he represented was. An unpredictable mass that could bring as
much trouble to some as delight to others. The weight was heavy. Still, he wouldn't cave in, not at
this point.
"We'll all keep our eyes open," he reassured them, letting his gaze wander from Heechul to Amber
and her assistant, "and I'll do a little research myself. If anyone on my Layer seems suspicious, I'll let
you know. Whatever is going on behind the scenes - if it affects others, we have the duty to find out.
So thanks for entrusting us with this, Amber. I'll do whatever I can."
Heechul shot him a grin, a little more sincere than usual, maybe even proud.
"There goes the big politician. That's the spirit. Let's dig up some dirt, that's my specialty."
Chapter 9

Minseok's eyes widened and Jongdae racked his brain for the memory.

*Oh Sehun.*

It did ring a bell. Where had he heard this name before?

Everyone was turned towards Minseok with a question in their eyes.

Everyone except for Kyungsoo, who intently fixated Chanyeol as if searching for something.

"Oh Sehun." Minseok blankly said.

"The guy with the genetic anomaly. The one who was able to choke people by pure will, by somehow manipulating the flow of oxygen through their body."

Oh. That guy. Jongdae remembered now. It had been a big thing on the news, more than a year ago. There had been surprisingly few articles on the frightening guy in the first place, which was suspicious, to say the least. The whole thing only got public after an incident where the guy went crazy and killed seven innocent people. Now he supposedly lived on some non-populated Layer, killing whoever dared to try and approach him. Jongdae shuddered. That story was scary as hell and had occupied his thoughts quite a lot. The only reason he hadn't remembered him immediately, was that the news barely ever mentioned his real name, preferring to give him nicknames such as 'mutation', 'freak', or something equally scary.

"Well. Oh Sehun wasn't a genetic freak. Not really." Chanyeol slowly said, his earnest gaze wandering from face to face.

"If you actually think about it, he was just really, *really* good. To be completely honest, I don't even think he had a mental problem. Met him thrice and he seemed stable enough."

"You met him? Where?" Luhan threw in, looking more alarmed than ever.

Obviously this story had made it to the Yellow kingdom as well. Chanyeol grimaced and continued, no matter how reluctant.

"Well, first at the research facility. Second time during the civil war on Black-1, third time when they sent me to try and get him back after he fled."

There were many questions rolling around Jongdae's head but he pushed them to the back in favor of letting Minseok do the questioning - he had a good sense on quickly getting to the core of everything.

"Alright. Why do you bring him up?" Minseok asked as if he'd read Jongdae's thoughts when in reality it was the other way around, obviously. Nice to see that under all the drug-induced unpredictability his friend Minseok was still there.

"Because I was just like him," Chanyeol admitted, sadness shining in his eyes, "we belonged to the same project. The thing Sehun was able to do... they called it 'the pull', simple as that. You know how you can take something with you while shifting, if you're talented enough? You basically pull it along. But this goes further - you pull something from another Layer to you."

They all looked mildly confused as Chanyeol made vague gestures. It was obvious that he wasn't used to explaining stuff.

"Uhm... alright, let's take Oh Sehun for an example." he began anew and cleared his throat.

"Imagine me as him. I'm Oh Sehun. I'm pretty good at shifting which was undoubtedly drilled into me by using me as a lab rat."

His voice was neutral but Jongdae definitely didn't miss the rare, bitter undertone.

"In any case, structures are very familiar to me. Personally, I have an affinity for wind. You know, I just really enjoy a gush of fresh air wafting over my face after spending hours in a hospital bed, being stuck to an IV or whatever it is I pass my time with. In fact, I like imagining such a gush of wind so much that one day, I actually make it happen. I want some wind twirling up the dry leaves, so I pull it into the Layer I am in. I just take the wind from somewhere else without bothering to go there, so to say."
"Taking wind? You can't take wind, it's just... air that moves. You can't stuff it into your bag."

Luhan lamely trailed off, looking mighty unconvinced of the whole thing while Jongdae could see the gears turning in Minseok's head. He himself wasn't sure what to think. Taking something from a place you're not even in, one that you probably don't even know anything about in the first place? It sounded surreal, to say the least.

"How does it work? And does it work with anything?" Jongin asked curiously, obviously interested in learning this skill himself. Chanyeol hummed pensively, ruffling his hair in search of the right words.

"It's... it's hard to describe. I think it's technically possible to do it with many things but it's incredibly hard. And so far, people only showed tendencies of the pull on one or, at most, two areas. You need to have a high affinity and it's still extremely challenging, mostly mentally. For Sehun, it happened to be air. I was told it started with small gushes of wind and morphed into him being capable of replacing the air in someone's body with something the body can't adapt to. I'm not sure how exactly it works, but that's how people died." Chanyeol ended solemnly.

It was Jongdae's turn to grimace. It sounded like an awful way to die.

"And you can 'pull' something as well." Minseok concluded.

Chanyeol inhaled sharply, straightening his posture a bit.

"Yes. I can pull heat. More often than not, heat results in fire, hence the phoenix nickname. I guess I've always been the kid that fooled around with matches," he added with a nervous grin, a weak attempt at brightening the atmosphere, "I also have really advanced healing capacities. Please don't ask me how that works - no one has had any idea about that yet."

Jongin suddenly paled and Kyungsoo picked up on his distress, squeezing his arm with an imploring look.

"That's how you got rid of the guys chasing us back then." he breathed out, wearing an expression torn between fascination and revulsion. Chanyeol lowered his head.

"Yes."

It was the quietest Jongdae had ever heard him, a faint whisper almost drowned out by the sizzling noises of the torches around them.

"Can you show us?" Luhan suddenly piped up and it startled Chanyeol out of his reverie.

"W-what? What do you want me to do?" he asked reluctantly; Jongdae couldn't help but to feel sorry for him.

"I don't know. Just... something. It sounds so unbelievable, so I'd like to see it with my own eyes."

Luhan's simple honesty lifted a bit of the heavy tension and Chanyeol hesitated, looking around until he aimlessly scooped up a bunch of crumpled leaves decorating the grass. He loosely held them, palm facing upwards as he regarded them with an intense look. It didn't take longer than a second for the leaves to start glowing at the edges and crumple together even more, bending desperately to escape the heat that slowly but surely reduced them to ash. Several sharp intakes of breath were taken and Luhan silently cursed in his mother tongue. Jongdae watched them burn down with utter fascination, his eyes flitting between the leaves and Chanyeol's face which betrayed no extraordinary amount of effort.

"Won't you burn your skin?" he asked in worry but Chanyeol dismissed him easily, absently shaking his head.

No one said a word and only when the last leaf had turned to ash with a faint trail of smoke, did a pale hand slowly reach out. To everyone's surprise it was Kyungsoo, leaned forward on his knees, intent on touching the ash. He saw one of his fingers dip into it experimentally and while the exchange was odd at best, Jongdae felt a prick of apprehension at the whole thing. Chanyeol not only let him, he even offered all of the ash and let it trickle down in Kyungsoo's awaiting palm. With an expression of uncanny fascination the boy retreated to Jongin's side, his eyes glued to the dusty particles in his hand.

No one seemed keen on addressing this incident and once again, it was Minseok who got back to the matter at hand first.

"You just stated that Sehun 'fled'. Does this mean you fled as well? Is that the reason there are people
"after you?"
Chanyeol nodded. 
"Yes. I grew to hate it and then there was an incident where I got hurt. I wanted to quit but they wouldn't let me. My parents didn't support the decision either, so I just ran. Baekhyun helped me with removing the tattoos, I took on a different identity, settled on the Orange Layer... you know the rest. I've been living there for almost two years and a few lies about my background had kept me safe from trouble. But I think I'm officially back on the radar now..."
"So who exactly is after you? Who was that guy?" Jongdae asked. All of this made him feel uneasy. How many more people were chasing them?
"I don't know. It's usually officials who occasionally come by and check the Layers. That guy though... He's tried to kill me before and failed. Maybe he wanted a second chance. Maybe he's been sent by the officials in the first place. I don't even know anymore-"
His voice got a desperate ring and he ruffled one hand through his hair, spreading the last specks of ash in the brown curls.
"I just- I really just wanna be left alone at this point. I'm sick of the attention, I'm sick of being played around with. I just wanna belong to myself again."
"I understand that." Jongin quietly said and Kyungsoo nodded, maybe more to himself than anything.
Jongdae wished he could agree but he had no idea what it felt like, to be so obligated that it felt like his entire being belonged to someone other than himself.
"Still, you should have told us." Luhan suddenly said and Minseok wore a look of discontent as well.
"All of us have been honest. Even though I'm a seer and Jongin's a shifter and Minseok has suffered. We all put the cards on the table from the start - so why didn't you?"
"You could have gotten us killed. Seriously." Minseok added with a frustrated sigh.
"I'm sorry." Chanyeol whispered and a subtle look told Jongdae that he was digging his fingers into the markings in a way that made the tips of his fingers white.
"Guys, let's call it a day." Jongdae finally threw in, unable to stand seeing the tall boy suffer any longer.
"I think that was a whole lot of information and we're all tired, so... let's just take a rest?"
"What about you, Dae?" Minseok gave back with a reluctant look at the markings on Jongdae's own arm.
He only dismissed him with a wave of his hand.
"Let's worry about that tomorrow. It's getting late, anyway."
In between mumbled agreements he felt Chanyeol throw him a long look he didn't dare to reciprocate.

When Jongdae woke up, it was still in the middle of the night. Judging by the position of the moon he guessed it to be past midnight. He was about to simply turn around and sink back into dreamland when a couple of noises made him aware of what had woken him in the first place. The sounds were irregular, soft and breathy-
*Oh, come on,* Jongdae thought, realizing that it was the sound of two people making out. He didn't have to look to know that it was Kyungsoo and Jongin; he recognized the shifter's voice. It wasn't like they were being purposefully loud or anything but the sounds were unfamiliar and even though Jongdae wanted to roll his eyes at them and go back to sleep, an involuntary blush crept up his cheeks at a tiny, repressed moan. He chided himself severely for it - getting turned on at sweet, innocent Jongin was just wrong on every level. Still, they didn't seem keen on sleeping any time soon and guessing from the way the shifter mewed quietly from time to time made him feel like Kyungsoo was devouring him-
Alright, enough. He really had to get some fresh air. Metaphorically speaking. Lucky for him, Jongin
and Kyungsoo were effectively hidden by a few trees, though that didn't change the fact that they were mere meters away. Well, it hardly came as a surprise that Kyungsoo lacked bashfulness.

Jongdae sat up, the thin blanket crumpling down and his eyes met those of Minseok who was clearly awake as well. A few gestures later they had both silently gotten up, slipped into their shoes and taken off into a random direction for a nightly stroll.

"They don't waste any time, huh?" Jongdae mumbled when they were out of hearing range.

Minseok only shrugged, a jug of now cold tea firmly clasped in his hand.

"Maybe it'll keep the guy from strangling us."

"He's... really odd." Jongdae hesitantly said and Minseok nudged his shoulder with a soundless laugh.

"Odd? He's a complete psycho. Dae, sometimes I wonder how you haven't gotten yourself killed yet. You're way too nice."

"Well, we don't know anything about Kyungsoo yet..." he defended himself with a pout reserved for the teasing elder, "I'm sure we'll get to understand him in time. Just like Chanyeol."

The last part had slipped out before he knew it and somehow, he regretted them. Minseok hummed and left Jongdae to silently brood for a while, his eyes set on the bright moon peeking out from in between the leaves.

"You like him, don't you?"

Jongdae almost froze in his tracks, his voice calculating and careful.

"What makes you say that?"

Minseok tilted his head from one side to the other, thinking about it.

"You don't like him touching you." he finally said.

Despite everything, Jongdae laughed.

"What? How is that an indicator for me liking him?" he asked, playfully bumping his shoulder into his friend's.

Minseok remained undeterred.

"You're touchy as hell. But with Chanyeol it's different. You keep avoiding his advances and don't initiate anything even though you don't dislike him. I'm concluding he makes you nervous." he simply added and Jongdae's smile faltered a little.

"What are you, a detective?" he threw back, "besides, I do initiate body contact, you sure it's not your imagination?"

He thought back to the way he'd caressed the markings on his arm. Yes, 'nervous' was maybe not that far-fetched of a description.

"Just cause you wanted to comfort him. Dae, we both know that you'd go through hell in order to comfort others. Besides, the way you're defending yourself is not as subtle as you may think it is." Minseok gave right back, the knowing smile never fading. Jongdae groaned in defeat.

"I know...! But it's just that... I don't know!" he groaned helplessly, hands swinging at his sides, "I'm probably just being stupid. I barely know him. It's probably gonna go away soon."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Minseok replied with a shrug.

"Every crush has to start at some point, so who cares whether you don't know him well?"

The words echoed through the silent forest. They'd come to a halt at some point and Jongdae grimaced, looking at his friend's moonlit face.

"You think so? Don't you hate him?" he asked almost sheepishly, as if he was betraying his friend by liking someone he didn't approve of.

Minseok snorted quietly.

"Hate him. I don't 'hate' him, Dae. I think he's dangerous and possibly gonna turn your life into a huge mess. Then again, so might I. So who am I to complain?" he ended with a bitter, lopsided grin. Jongdae weakly grinned back, leaning his forehead on Minseok's shoulder. He neither denied nor agreed to that statement.

"We're all gonna be alright," he quietly murmured into the fabric instead, "eventually, we'll be alright."
Minseok exhaled soundlessly, breathing a faint "Yes", one hand firmly placed on Jongdae's shoulder. It was a rare moment of weakness on Minseok's side and Jongdae put him at ease by avoiding eye contact and let him relish in the silence for a bit before they'd head back. Between Minseok and him, things were always alright and Jongdae wasn't sure what they'd do without each other.

The way back was spent in comfortable silence with Minseok's words echoing through his head. Of course he was right, Minseok knew him like the back of his hand. There was definitely something about Chanyeol. Jongdae wasn't a complete idiot. He's had crushes before. And it was easy to tell that he was eager to be noticed, always trying to please those around him. Jongdae wasn't one for the cold city guy fantasy you'd read about in books. In real life, good traits like friendliness, humor and empathy were much more captivating. Sure, Chanyeol could be kinda dumb, in a way. He got way too excited over small things and was almost too eager in basically anything he did. His attempts at profiling himself were clumsy, at best. Still, the air between them was different and Jongdae would be a fool to deny it.

They had reached their makeshift camp and luckily, Jongin and Kyungsoo seemed to have gone back to sleep. Minseok silently waved him goodnight and Jongdae returned it with a wry smile. Before he could return to his bed, his eyes landed on the tall lump of Chanyeol whose blanket was only half-covering him. His eyes were closed and while he was terrible at faking to be asleep, Jongdae's eyes were drawn in by the way he was subtly covering his marked arm with one hand, over his sleeve. It was the first thing he'd done after their talk earlier - dress into something long-sleeved - but his hands were still unconsciously covering the spot. Jongdae felt a prick of pain at the sight.

Without thinking too much into it, he silently went through their bags and returned soon after. Chanyeol only visibly reacted when he touched his shoulder by flinching hard, obviously startled by the proximity. Big eyes looked at him quizzically and Jongdae silently tugged at his arm in an unspoken question. Still confused, Chanyeol sat up and hesitantly presented his arm. Without further ado, Jongdae gently rolled up the sleeves, uncovering all the marks one by one until the fabric was bunched up on his upper arm. Chanyeol did it again, the thing were he self-consciously balled his hand into a fist, tempted to draw away but ultimately staying. He fleetingly trailed a thumb over the darkest symbols close to the crook of his elbow before reaching to the side where he'd placed Minseok's healing cream and a slightly wet tissue. While holding Chanyeol's arm in place, he dabbed the tissue into the cream and then rubbed it across the topmost row of markings, showing two crosses so dark they appeared black in the dim moonlight. As predicted, the non-permanent marker caved in easily to the oil-based cream. The marks got smears, creating a rather ugly mess but Jongdae wasn't deterred. With utmost patience he kept swiping at the color, changed the angle of the tissue and applied more dabs of cream to slowly but surely remove the two crosses.

"What are you doing?" Chanyeol whispered as quiet as he could,"they'll want to see those, won't they?"

"Those two won't make a difference." Jongdae whispered back, his eyes not straying from the smerey, dark spot. He fished out a fresh tissue and continued his task with the meticulousness of someone used to decorating wedding cakes.

Yes, the others would want to know. But they surely wouldn't ever go to these particular two Layers and Chanyeol really didn't have to be reminded of those. He'd mentioned Black-1, one of the six Layers surrounding the black spot on the map. All of these were constant danger zones caught up in warfare. Chanyeol had permanent access, meaning that he'd surely been there more than once. Besides, he'd mentioned getting 'hurt' and however badly it must have been, to Jongdae it was obvious that a part of him was traumatized by the events. It may be a weak consolation but it was all he could come up with at this point. He finished up by cleaning the last faint trails of black with water and even dried the spot to let his thumb trail over the now fair skin.
Somewhere, on his other arm, all those markings are hidden below a skin-colored tattoo, Jongdae thought. They're all still there, a constant reminder. They'd never fade and he couldn't do a thing about it. Absently, he placed his palm over as many markings as possible, letting it slide down to his wrist in a firm movement. A demonstration of his wish to erase them all.

"There you go," he whispered to break the tension and only then did he dare to look up and meet Chanyeol's gaze. Shadowy outlines of leaves danced across his face, making him seem even paler and the intensity in his searching eyes made him all-too aware of their current position. His expression was entirely unreadable, a mystery to Jongdae. Was he grateful? Sad? Conflicted? What kind of emotions were currently running through his head? He itched to know but didn't dare to ask. It would cross the line. Had he crossed it already? Where was the fine line between platonic friendliness and something more?

He thought that it might lie in Chanyeol's eyes, in the way he didn't tear his eyes away like he usually did. Could you do that, cross the line without a word or action?

Finally, Chanyeol averted his eyes as they flitted down where he reached for Jongdae's right hand who just let it happen. He watched the light accentuating his curls as he lowered his head to place a soft, lasting kiss over his birth mark, right on his pulse point. He was sure he could feel it picking up beneath his lips, his heartbeat jumping violently.

It tickled when he drew back a hair width, his lips still brushing against Jongdae's skin.

"Thank you."

It was still tingling about an hour later, when Jongdae finally managed to fall asleep, one hand wrapped around his wrist in order to suppress the feeling.

Now that his mental exhaustion outweighed the physical, Jongdae's dreams became more clear. His bare feet were dipped into foam but when he looked ahead, there were no waves carrying it. He took a few steps forward, captivated by the pale, rose-colored bubbles rising up to his bare ankles like mold. It moved in gentle waves, nipping at the solid walls around him. For a moment, Jongdae felt like a stray raindrop had hit his cheek and he looked up at the stars twinkling in the night sky. He watched it turn from navy blue to a dark, smudged gray in mere seconds, darkness engulfing him. The signs of an upcoming storm.

Jongdae liked thunderstorms, he really did. So he stood there, his eyes fixed on the sky, hoping that he wouldn't wake up before he'd be able to see the lightning strike. A stray thought reminded him that it was bad, standing in water during a thunderstorm - but this was just foam, no, just a dream. The wind was picking up already, shaking up the leaves in a sweet melody and Jongdae really wanted to see blinding bolts of light splashed against the dark sky.

When Jongdae awoke the next morning, he couldn't remember whether he'd ultimately seen lightning or not. All that remained was the memory of waiting, anticipation somehow still fluttering inside his stomach. Until he remembered the nightly happenings and felt giddy for a different reason. Chanyeol seemed determined not to mention any of it and Jongdae gladly followed suit, plopping down next to Minseok during their modest breakfast. Jongin appeared a little tired and Jongdae would never have wasted a second thought about that if not for their obvious nightly make out session. Still, he really wasn't the type to tease introverted people, so he brushed it off. Luhan had apparently heard them as well, judging by the daggers glared Kyungsoo's way, only interrupted when his eyes were drawn to the vibrating pager around his left wrist. It was cute how protective he was over the shifter.

Minseok wasn't fazed at all, busily going over the maps they'd collected and comparing them to different ones in the books-

"Wait. Since when do we have those books?" Jongdae muttered sleepily. Repetitive blinking and eye-rubbing revealed that they were indeed there. Two massive books containing maps.
"Since we went to the library." Minseok simply shrugged, not even lifting his gaze as he added a note to their copies.

"You stole them?!” Jongdae asked incredulously, inspecting one of them. Yes, that was the book they'd read from. Minseok only hummed.

"Ripped out the magnetic tracking thing so no worries." he absently murmured, disregarding the way Jongdae stared at him. So that's what he was doing when everything went down in the library. Only a few beats of heavy silence talked Minseok into looking up to meet the judging gaze of his friend with one of playful exasperation on his own.

"Oh come on. We're wanted people anyway, who cares about stuff like that anymore?"

"Kim Minseok. I'm worried about your morals," Jongdae mock-scolded, nudging his shoulder, "and kinda impressed by your quick thinking. Don't let yourself get recruited by Baekhyun."

Minseok mumbled something along the lines of him doing the recruiting before going back to interpreting the maps. Jongin announced he'd go and get them some food on another Layer (in exchange for actual money, since Luhan insisted) and left behind a very reluctant Kyungsoo who appeared almost accusing that Jongin would even consider leaving his side.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." the shifter reassured him before leaning down to whisper something into his ears that no one else was particularly keen on eavesdropping on. Kyungsoo still grabbed his sleeves like a petulant child and only let go after Jongin cupped his cheek, shooting him a shy smile. Jongin vanished -after repeatedly assuring them he'd be careful- and Kyungsoo looked after him even when he was long gone. Jongdae felt the atmosphere tense up now that they were sort of alone with him. Luhan and Chanyeol seemed especially wary and Jongdae subtly watched the way Kyungsoo's eyes wandered all over the place as if searching for something. His eyes grew more and more glassy, fingers balling into a fist and loosen up again with no apparent reason and Jongdae was frankly worried he might lose it.

"Kyungsoo." he called out softly and his dark orbs instantly fixed on him as if he'd been waiting for someone to call him, every sign of haze gone. Jongdae didn't hesitate, running on autopilot.

"I was gonna go and get some fresh water. You wanna tag along?" he offered with a friendly smile. He felt Chanyeol looking at him with all sorts of disapproval, itching to jump up and protest but Jongdae shot him down with a shake of his head. Kyungsoo seemed to consider him closely for a second before slowly getting to his feet. His movements felt calculated and fully disregarding the protest of both Chanyeol and Luhan, Jongdae gathered anything able to catch some water and handed Kyungsoo a couple of bowls before staggering through the high grass. He heard the other follow in a respectable distance though he still refused to talk.

They'd almost reached the small river and had yet to say a word.

It almost felt like an illusion, the memory of his smooth voice. Jongdae did want to hear it again though. He wanted to get a better idea of what type of person Kyungsoo was and the easiest point to start was obviously Jongin.

"So..." he began neutrally when he was crouching down to catch some water in a can, "Jongin seems to like you."

From the corner of his eye he saw Kyungsoo imitate him, dipping the bowl into the fresh stream.

"I guess." he finally said, and while this had no real statement, he still chose it over not answering which had to mean something, so Jongdae went on carefully.

"You guess?"

Kyungsoo filled the next bowl, stacking it neatly over the first.

"Yes. He shouldn't, but I feel like he does."

Kyungsoo was quiet in everything he did but at the same time not timid in any way, making it hard to believe such an explosive character was slumbering below the collected demeanor. It was definitely an attitude Jongdae wasn't used to but there he was, talking to him and baring bits and pieces of himself.

"I also think he does. I'm pretty sure, actually." Jongdae softly gave back and with every container filled, he cupped some water in his hands to wash his face. A sigh escaped him at the cooling sensation and only when he was halfway done with his face and arms, did Kyungsoo also cup a bit
of water, to drink it.
"You don't have to worry. I'll keep watching over Jongin." Jongdae casually but genuinely remarked and Kyungsoo stilled in his movements, as if irked by that statement. It took him a few seconds of brooding with a lowered gaze before he looked up almost defiantly though his voice stayed perfectly calm.
"We belong together though."
At this, Jongdae couldn't help cracking a smile as he pretended not to get the jealous innuendo.
"What, you want me to protect you, too?" he playfully asked and Kyungsoo blinked, looking genuinely taken aback.
"No?"
It came out as a confused question, baring a tiny bit of hesitation and the minuscule display of vulnerability did it for Jongdae. With a gesture of surrender he got up, still smiling.
"I'll do it anyway if you belong to us. But don't worry. I won't take Jongin away from you. I have my eyes set on someone else, anyway. See? No worries."
They got up to make their way back, balancing the containers of water and this time Kyungsoo broke the silence.
"Who?"
He didn't elaborate but it was obvious what he was referring to.
Jongdae shot him a fleeting side glance, hesitating for a second but deciding it was only fair to open up himself.
"Chanyeol. The tall one. With the curly hair."
Kyungsoo nodded faintly.
"Uh, don't tell anyone though, will you? It's kind of a secret." Jongdae added sheepishly and the other showed no further indication that he'd heard him. Still, both of them wordlessly agreed on pretending that Chanyeol wasn't hastily falling back into his spot, having spied on them from afar. Until the shifter returned, Kyungsoo was seated besides Jongdae.

Their plan wasn't too complicated. They'd walk South for about a day or two until they'd approximately reached the desired height level. Then they'd shift to another, more even Layer and walk back until they found the coordinates Luhan was searching for. Without his abilities to see and a shifter on their side, this task would have been nearly impossible. But as things were, the scheme was almost too easy.

"My legs are dying. I'm dying!" Jongdae whined and Minseok patted his shoulder with a crooked smile.
"Hang in there, big boy. I thought you were a tough baker?"
"This has nothing, and let me emphasize that, nothing to do with my ability to climb hills!"
"Hills," Minseok snorted, "this is a gentle slope of grass, Dae."
"Gentle, my ass. If I stumble now, I'll roll aaaaall the way back down." he grumbled back, huffing as he staggered forwards.
"The tree trunks will eventually stop you." Chanyeol threw in unhelpfully. Even though he was sweating profusely, he was still quite chipper.
"Gee, how comforting. Why aren't you tired? Didn't you, like, sit at a workbench all day long?" he huffed back and Chanyeol shrugged.
"I have longer legs? Besides, I do work out, you know?"
Jongdae laughed breathlessly.
"I'd totally taken you for the type to only train the upper body to impress."
Chanyeol chortled, the tips of his ears turning red already.
"That's not true! I also do--"
"Save your breath before you're the next one whining." Minseok intervened strictly and Chanyeol pouted while Jongdae stuck out his tongue childishly. A look around told him that he wasn't the only one who was exhausted. They had been walking for six hours, only stopping for a single half hour
break. Luhan was far too tired to voice any more complaints and a slight tinge of red spreading over Kyungsoo's pale cheeks told him that he wasn't used to exercise, either. Jongin seemed to fare well enough but it came to no surprise, considering how fit he was.

By now they'd left the populated territory so far behind that no one even considered worrying about being seen.

And even if a lonely soul were to cross their way, they'd just claim to be on a hiking trip. As long as no one notices Kyungsoo's bare feet, they were all good. Jongdae made a mental note to check the boy's feet for injuries later and get him a pair of shoes as soon as possible. With all the silent walking, he had lots of time to think. He mostly spent it pondering what had happened to him the day before. How could he have ended up in an entirely foreign Layer? No matter how hard he thought about it, nothing came to mind. Maybe his body was messed up and unable to properly read the structures. He was fairly certain that he wasn't a shifter. That would make no sense. But what else could it be?

"I think your body is overly sensitive." Minseok stated an hour later, leaning against a tree while trying to even out his breathing. They were forced to take a break after all, seeing as Minseok wasn't feeling too well. No one even considered teasing him with the way he was trying to keep himself together and go through with it until Jongdae forced him to rest when the nausea reached its peak. It wasn't his fault, after all. Besides, the others were quite grateful for their well-deserved break as well.

"Sensitive? Are you saying I'm a wuss?" Jongdae asked jokingly and Minseok weakly shook his head, closing his eyes.

"No. You see, I've noticed Chanyeol holding back information because he didn't need any substance to shift. He claimed that his last temporary visa didn't lie too far in the past, remember?"

Jongdae looked over to the tall brunette who was hunched over the Pager with Luhan, explaining the world of emojis, with the translator earnestly debating whether a winking smiley sticking out its tongue could be considered harassment.

"Yeah. So?"

"Come on, Dae. He was talking as if his last visit was ages ago. And a temporary injection only lasts two days, at most." Minseok replied and yes, this was kind of obvious and Jongdae should have noticed it sooner.

"And when he stated he was good to go for this Layer, too... it was so obvious something was off." "What does this have to do with me being sensitive...?" Jongdae asked carefully and without bothering to open his eyes, Minseok blindly flailed his arm before getting a hold of Jongdae's.

"It's the temporary injections that are the key. Look at your markings. You don't have that many. You went from Cyan to a place that wasn't Magenta. Even including all the injections you had in your life, that only leaves Blue and Orange. Was that our home? I doubt it. So it was Blue. The description would fit, too. Simple process of elimination."

Minseok's voice was getting slightly shaky and he wordlessly offered him his water bottle. The water source nearby was rather muddy, but his friend didn't complain.

"Thanks. Thing is, you've only had a temporary injection. And that was over a year ago. I conclude that you're either pretty sensitive or have a damn good memory. Maybe a bit of both."

Jongdae thought about it. Sensitive.

"Maybe that's why my body reacted so badly to the tracker. You think that would make sense?" he voiced out pensively.

"Absolutely. It was probably too much. Especially with this testing substance, the one everyone gets."

Again, Jongdae replayed all the previous happenings in his mind. Maybe he really was experiencing everything different from other people, how was he supposed to know? The first time he felt the structures... maybe other people didn't feel weighed down, didn't feel that many of them enveloping him like a cocoon of spiderwebs.

"So... that's kinda good, isn't it? I mean," Jongdae went on, trying to wrap his mind around the idea, "I can return however often I want after just one visit. Oh, but maybe it also includes not being able to take in too many different injections."
Minseok hummed vaguely, wiping cold sweat off his forehead. "We'll see about that. I bet you'll be alright though. I think you're a natural at shifting."
"Hah, a 'natural' might be a little too far-fetched," Jongdae mumbled, and Minseok laughed breathlessly. "Just wanted to boost your confidence- shit. It's starting again, Dae."
Jongdae hushed him soothingly, placing everything aside to wait until he had to guide Minseok through it. It was nowhere near as bad as before, but maybe it was due to the fact that they'd all learned how to deal with it, including Minseok himself. He didn't need a cloth to bite on anymore and instead of outright screaming, he was able to tone it down to mostly soundless gasps. In order not to get freaked out by hallucinations, he kept his eyes firmly shut. With the help of Luhan who had dropped everything as soon as he noticed Minseok losing it, they firmly held him to prevent Minseok from hurting himself while Chanyeol stayed behind to watch the scene unfold with misery in his eyes. Luhan even started to massage his upper arms which seemed to help a bit; the calm security he was dealing the situation with surprised Jongdae and maybe he was now getting a rough idea of why they kept rooming together.

At one point, Jongin was creeping closer to place his hand on Minseok's head, despite Jongdae's warning and Kyungsoo looking highly alarmed as he urgently tugged at his sleeves. "It's okay." Jongin whispered quietly and kept petting the auburn strands. "Minseok won't hurt me."
Said one groaned quietly, and though it must have been even more stressful to have a third person approaching him in this state, he tried his best to smile despite it coming out more like a grimace. "Thanks, Jongin." he croaked, attempting to keep his body from convulsing against his will. He even recognized him. A good sign. Maybe it wasn't too bad that he was trying to be strong for the shifter.
"What's wrong with him?" Kyungsoo asked though it sounded more like a demand than anything; since he seemed unsettled and worried about Jongin, Jongdae deemed it wise to answer before they had another unpredictable guy on the loose. "He's just sick. It's a phase, it'll pass." he said as casual as he could over the pained whimpers. To his surprise, Minseok spoke up himself, displaying that he was still fairly conscious. "I'm fucked up," he let out bitterly, his voice cracking, "so if you do anything stupid... I can't guarantee your safety. I might fucking kill you-"
Jongdae hushed him again, and Jongin placed an arm around Kyungsoo in slight worry. For whom, Jongdae didn't know. Maybe for all of them. But to their surprise, Kyungsoo's lips stretched into a tiny smile, and when Jongin had gently pulled the pliant boy away to give Minseok some room, Kyungsoo regarded the writhing boy with new-found interest. "I'd like to see you try." he announced quietly, albeit audibly, and something about the genuine fascination flickering in his eyes was creeping Jongdae out far more than a simple threat should have managed to.

Minseok needed quite some time to recover, and when they set off, it was already late afternoon. The few hours remaining until dawn passed by quickly and to be honest, Jongdae was more than keen on getting some rest. They had to hold back a bit on their resources, since Luhan claimed that there was no civilized Layer nearby where they could send Jongin to. It was fine by Jongdae, who sat back and relaxed at their small campfire (Chanyeol was surely making friends with his handy ability of igniting basically anything) while Chanyeol was already dozing a few meters away. The other three were busy trying to pick a few apples and while he couldn't see them, Chanyeol's and Jongin's banter made for rather relaxing background noise. On other occasions, Jongdae might've joined them but right this instant, he was tired out from walking and so was Luhan, apparently.
"This guy drives me crazy." he muttered more to himself than anything, and Jongdae looked to the side with half-hearted interest, mumbling an eloquent 'hmm?'.
"After teasing me for 'typing funnily', he now writes that Jongin is cute. Jongin is a sweetie, to be
"exact. What's that supposed to mean, huh?!" he grumbled as if it was a personal insult.
"Are you still texting Baekhyun?"
"I told this shady guy to stop corrupting him and now he says he's cute. You think he likes him? You think he likes men?"

Jongdae scrunched up his brows, thinking about it carefully. A few beats of silence followed.
"I think Baekhyun likes anyone willing to touch his dick." he finally said and yelped when Luhan nudged him not too gently.
"What? It's just an educated guess. Why, are you bothered by people liking those of their own gender?" Jongdae asked casually, stretching his back against the tree trunk which he was aware wouldn't get more comfortable anytime soon. Luhan only laughed quietly as his fingers flew over the tiny keys to finish replying. Only when the message was sent did he regard Jongdae with his full attention.
"No, why would I? I've grown up with two mothers and one father, sort of. I'm not new to this." he replied easily, and Jongdae tried to process this.

"Like, all three of them living together or how...?"

Luhan dismissed him with a wave of his hand, another gesture he'd taken a liking to.
"Oh no. I keep forgetting none of you have any idea about the Yellow Layer. See, my mother only likes women. Every person preferring those of their own gender ought to register, and everything's fine. If the kingdom's birth rate is decreasing too much, those people are expected to bear a child. It wouldn't be right to burden the women only, so men are also expected to volunteer. Which parent raises the kid isn't decided by law. If none want to, the government will take care of it, and the child is raised collectively. My mother wished to keep me though. So I've been raised by two women. I do know who my father is though it's not of much importance to me. I met him occasionally, and he feels more like an uncle or anyone of distant relation."

Jongdae stared at him, unsure of what to say.
"Isn't that... awful?" he finally asked, unable to hide his shock.
"Awful? What is, exactly?" Luhan asked with a disapproving expression, and he could basically see him suppressing the urge to tilt his head, "having two mothers?"

"No, no!" Jongdae hurriedly clarified, "having homosexual people register and force them to bear a kid anyway. Isn't that kinda cruel?"

Luhan calmed down a bit at the realization that Jongdae was merely questioning the system and not his family.

"You think so? I think it's a very pragmatic solution for a kingdom as small and secluded as ours. It doesn't even happen a lot, so as long as the country is flourishing, homosexual people won't even notice any of what you call a burden. They are accepted and respected."

"Unless they refuse to bring forth a child." Jongdae added skeptically. Luhan thought about that, and he really had to hand it to him for being so open about questioning the system he'd grown up in so objectively.

"I... I think it's a question of honor. Barely anyone thinks of it as a burden. But yes, people who refuse lose most of their status. It's not like a punishment by law, more of an... unspoken rule. You see, the kingdom grants them this freedom and they'd show ungratefulness towards it by denying to play their part."

Jongdae looked anything but convinced and Luhan regarded him with a challenging look.

"So tell me then, are you handling it any better? What's it like, being homosexual on your Layer?"

Jongdae couldn't do anything but grimace.

"Not that nice, huh? I've heard that for others it's something to be frowned upon and to be kept a secret."

"Well... there are some places that are more tolerant than others." Jongdae hesitantly gave back but there was really nothing he could actually say in his Layer's defense. Sure, the highly developed Layers as well as a few really eccentric ones were more accustomed to gay couples. But as for his plain birth place... up to this day Jongdae hadn't openly addressed his sexual preferences towards his parents though he had a vague idea they knew. It wasn't forbidden, it wasn't something to be
shunned for but still. People were still frowning and talking and the public was extremely unfamiliar with the idea.
"I don't know..." he mumbled instead, accepting that he was losing this debate, "it still seems wrong, in a way."
Luhan only shrugged and went back to typing.
"It's our culture. You don't need to like it, but please show a little respect." he simply gave back, and Jongdae thought about it. The idea wasn't entirely stupid, and it was always fascinating to see glimpses of the foreign Yellow culture, to understand a bit more about what made Luhan into the person he was.
After a while, he spoke up once more.
"Still, I think it's not perfect. If anyone was just simply accepted the way they are, that would be ideal. I mean, you're right. It's your culture and I respect that. Though it's obviously not like people who hate this concept could just leave, so that's where I see the problem."
Luhan looked a bit tired of the discussion, so Jongdae hurried to come to the point.
"But I'm not judging you, you know? After all, your mothers have obviously done an amazing job at raising someone as free-spirited as you, so the system surely works for you, doesn't it?"
Luhan smiled gratefully at that and resumed his typing.
"I sure miss my parents. I mean, I'm not missing them to death after such few days," Jongdae corrected himself, pensively looking up at the night sky, "but I'd feel much better if I could have let them know I'm fine. Yifan, too. I bet he's worried."
The typing ceased but since Luhan had nothing to offer for consolation, it picked up soon after.
Jongdae didn't blame him, he'd just been thinking aloud.
"So, what's Baekhyun saying?" he asked casually to rid himself of the gloomy thoughts.
Luhan made a confused noise as he stared at the screen, waiting patiently.
"He said he has no parents but a big family with lots of uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. He's being kinda vague about it so I'm not sure what he's trying to... Ugh, he's sent me another one of those smiley faces! Two eyes and a... star? What does this one even mean and why would you waste so many of your few precious symbols for this stuff?!"

In his dream, he was looking at the sky again with high expectations, through a roof of glass. Maybe this time he would get to see the thunder. The sky didn't look too promising though; what a disappointment. He really wanted to see it cloud up since it happened so rarely in real life, but a sudden distraction made him lower his gaze to skim over wild plants and colorful tiny stones glittering from the source of an unknown light. They made a crunching noise as he moved over them and oh, there was Chanyeol. Somehow it was nice, dreaming of him. This way he could be a little bold, watch him a little closer. He seemed fast asleep and Jongdae inched closer, pondering whether he wanted to try and kiss him. Before he could further consider the tempting idea, the movement returned and now that he focused on the watery textures, he noticed the snake, gliding smoothly over Chanyeol's arm. The fear went through him like an electric shock, sending his muscles to tense nervously. Chanyeol could move any moment and then the snake would startle and bite him. Was it poisonous? He wasn't too fond of snakes but if he could calmly steer it away... he looked around for a suitable branch, but this was a dream, and there were miraculously no branches - dreams were tricky like that. Still, Chanyeol was in danger and he was running out of time. So he hesitantly inched closer, one arm slowly reaching out for the snake leisurely curling itself close to his body. It wouldn't hurt him if he believed in it. After all, this was a dream. His hands inched further and further until-

His wrist was grabbed harshly and everything vanished, quickly washed away by reality. Jongdae blinked hazily and was met by the startled orbs of Chanyeol looking up at him, while his firm grip kept Jongdae from reaching out to touch him.
"Jongdae? Are you... sleepwalking?"
Chapter 10

Jongdae was still a little distraught the next day while they staggered through the woods. Not even necessarily embarrassed, as he was one to walk on the bright side of life - after all, he at least hadn't actually tried to kiss Chanyeol. Yes, distraught might be a more accurate term. He couldn't remember having sleepwalked before. It was an unsettling thought. The feeling of being half-conscious throughout your dream and then ripped back to reality in a split-second was terribly disorienting. Chanyeol had even apologized afterwards for waking him this abruptly but the sudden proximity had startled him. The incident had woken Kyungsoo and Minseok too, but Jongdae brushed them off and they all went back to sleep.

No one had made a big deal about it the next morning but that hardly changed the odd feeling in his stomach.

Was it silly to beat himself up over dreaming this intensely while still being too weak to simply wake up?

Those were questions he'd never been faced with before.

Still, he held back on his comparatively insignificant worries in regards to the overall tense atmosphere. It had started with Jongin being more fidgety than usual. They'd felt it, even before the shifter had finally opened up towards an incriminating Luhan. Being on the run for most of his life he'd grown used to certain patterns. He couldn't always be on high alert, it would have driven him crazy long ago. Rather than that he explained that whenever he changed Layers, he'd be rather calm the first day (maybe even two, regarding the location he was in) before going back to getting antsy. The reason was simple - while it was close to impossible to track down a shifter, the probability rose with time. Jongin always had to stay on the move and while he'd probably never wandered through abandoned woods on the green Layer before, staying on the same Layer for too long just made him nervous. He'd reassured them that it normally took people at least three days until they'd tried all the Layers they knew about and stumbled across him.

Still, the whole group was more alert, paying heightened attention to the sounds around them, infected by Jongin.

"Either way, there are also people going after Chanyeol," Minseok rightfully threw in around noon, "or after me, for all we know. In any case, we should watch our guard."

They'd discussed it this morning. Three of them were wanted - Jongin, Chanyeol and Minseok. Kyungsoo mentioned that people would probably not actively search for him, stating that he was worth nothing. The casualty with which he spoke the harsh words led to Jongin to drawing him in closely, earning himself a mildly confused look in return. However they looked at it, they couldn't be sure about the identity nor number of their pursuers.

For Jongdae, it was a strange sensation to be constantly alert. Sure, the danger hadn't been absent the last days but for some silly reason he'd felt safe, wandering between the Layers. The others around him were still chatting, still laughing, but everything was tuned down subtly as if someone had dimmed down the volume of their voices and mood. Sometimes he felt like he wasn't alert enough, as if the tension was slipping through his fingertips in a moment of careless banter. At the same time he couldn't fully enjoy their conversations, silent whispers of warning still in the back of his head. So far, nothing terrible had happened to them, and maybe that was the reason his mind failed to come up with horrible scenarios like people popping out of nowhere and shooting them. He couldn't visualize those, but the mere idea of danger possibly appearing any split-second was making him queasy.

Maybe that was one of the reasons why he accepted Chanyeol being so close and touchy throughout the whole day; it was oddly comforting, even though there were so many unspoken issues between them lingering in the air that it should feel awkward. Instead, he silently enjoyed the weight of Chanyeol's arm resting around his shoulders as he listened to the others talk.
"I get the feeling that you actually like this criminal!" Luhan was just whining in disbelief, "what do you even see in him?"
Jongin turned slightly defensive and Kyungsoo clung to his arm, watching the exchange with mild interest.
"I do like Baekhyun. He... a lot of things I'd never imagine being capable of come easy to him." he hesitantly said, one hand absenty confirming that he was still wearing the stud.
"Like stealing?" Luhan threw in sharply.
Chanyeol snorted at this but retaliated at the glare sent his way.
"No! It's just. He's supposed to be a wanted person as well but instead of hiding away he's just so confident. He's still... free. If that makes any sense." he trailed off quietly, suddenly self-conscious.
Not even Luhan had an immediate reply to that and so the silence was finally broken by Kyungsoo, who hadn't said a word ever since breakfast.
"How much do you like him?" he asked simply, bluntly with a straight face.
While the others were still kind of on edge whenever Kyungsoo did anything, really, Jongdae couldn't help breaking into a small smile.
The shifter reacted with confusion.
"How much? How do I measure it? By comparing?"
"Good idea," Jongdae threw in with a smug grin, "preferably in comparison to him."
The statement alone flustered Jongin but when Kyungsoo didn't even bother to deny it and just patiently looked at him, waiting for his answer, the shifter turned slightly red from all the attention.
"I... I can't compare," he stammered, eyes flitting all over the place, "it's too different. I mean, there are different types of like and-"
"Let's take a quick break, I think we should get the substances ready." Minseok called in, head flying up from his maps in order to save the awkward boy from his misery.
They were indeed close to reaching the correct height level, and Minseok wisely proposed injecting the temporary shots in advance, so they'd have time to sink in.
Jongdae had to reassure them multiple times that he was just fine but Minseok still knocked down on his dose. Regardless, Jongdae was convinced that since he now knew about his body's sensitivity, he'd be able to handle it. They all received two shots each - one for a barely colonized Layer and the other one for the Lavender one. They were slowly running out of substances but Minseok claimed that they ought to have an escape route up their sleeves, and those two were rather flat in their height level, enabling them to freely switch in between them. Together with Chanyeol, he'd settled on these particular Layers for multiple reasons they briefly shared. For one, the possibility of getting caught was less likely on an unpopulated Layer, and while they ultimately had to go through Lavender in order to find Luhan's mysterious destination, Chanyeol strongly recommended not to stay there for longer than necessary. He produced an article he'd ripped out earlier, stating that the lavender Layer was suffering from an epidemic and evacuation was discussed.
"Why did you even keep this?" Jongdae asked incredulously, skimming the article.
"Well, it names the facility that had been in charge of me," he shrugged with a look of poorly concealed bitterness, "besides, it's useful to keep track of these things."
Oh. He read it more carefully while Minseok continued handing out the shots with calm precision. It only stated that the Cyan Research Departments C to E would, among others, participate in both finding the origin and developing a cure.
"Which of these named facilities is the one?"
"Department E." Chanyeol gave back quietly, not even batting an eyelash as Minseok placed the needle of his personalized syringe on the crook of his elbow.
If even Chanyeol needed an injection, the place they were going to must be truly forgotten, Jongdae thought in the back of his mind while his fingers thoughtfully circled around the words on the article. **Cyan Research Department E.** It sounded so vague.
"Should you get one, too? Can you do it?" he heard Minseok ask Kyungsoo, who responded with the tiniest of shrugs, obediently offering his arm.
"He's shifted before," Jongin said in his place, "and if anything fails, I'll take him."
Jongdae could perfectly imagine that shifting was a hazardous matter for Kyungsoo, who could barely trust his own senses. Well, he'd try and a few precious seconds could mean everything. Jongdae slowly got to his feet, stretching his slightly sore muscles from toes to fingertips with a pleased groan. Maybe he could get used to this much walking, but most certainly not in a matter of two days.

During their break, he practiced shifting with Jongin securely holding onto one of his hands so he wouldn't get lost. It wouldn't do him any harm to get a feeling for the two added structures so he'd be able to distinguish between them. Luckily, he experienced no trouble at all and while the unknown Layer featured another forest full of thick greenery but lacking in slopes and hills, the lavender Layer appeared to consist of nothing but vast meadows of grass with a pristine-looking city at the far end of the horizon. They didn't stay too long even though the probability of being seen was extremely low - both places were completely deserted.

He'd barely made it back when Minseok claimed that the break was over, and Jongin was tugged away from his side by a very impatient Kyungsoo. Jongdae barely held in a sigh. Great. Time for more walking.

They crossed the turning point shortly after and shifted to the foreign Layer to go back through another forest, this time on an even ground. To be honest, Jongdae was looking forward to them getting back to civilized areas soon; they were running low on food and sometimes even had to take elaborate detours to find water. It wasn't like Jongdae was naturally gluttonous, he was probably the exact opposite. While he loved to indulge himself in snacks, more often than not he completely forgot to eat in stressful situations, having to be constantly reminded by those around him. Still, the complete absence of the opportunity to eat was a different thing altogether. Unlike Chanyeol, who had been whining about it once in awhile, he kept the complaints to himself though, making his joking remarks a little louder to drown out the sound of his stomach grumbling.

They were advancing smoothly, and when they settled for a break in the early evening, Minseok claimed that they were already very close to the lavender city. Jongdae had to hand it to him for managing to keep himself together so well. It was partly due to his friend's fallout that they'd taken so much longer on the first day, though the perpetual uphill wandering definitely added to it. Everyone was sprawled out somewhere, catching their breath, and upon Luhan's sharp observation, they found out that they were close enough to civilization now and that Jongin could go to purchase some food. Luhan stated that the village he saw may be a little small but with a flourishing market, and while it still remained dangerous to send out the shifter, Jongdae really looked forward to eating something. Ever since the evening on the day before, he'd had nothing but two apples and from his work in a bakery he knew that those only sparked hunger instead of curbing it.

Jongin obediently left with the most suitable clothing they could muster up, so he'd blend in as much as possible.

Rolling around with a grumbling stomach would only remind him of his hunger, so Jongdae got up and padded over to Kyungsoo, who had been sitting nearby with his back turned to them. Maybe they could go and search for some more water; Kyungsoo certainly looked tense without Jongin around so he figured he could use the distraction. The vegetation clearly alluded that there was some water nearby, at least according to Chanyeol (the only one out of all of them who'd spent a considerable amount of time in forests before).

"Hey-" he began, placing his hand on a narrow shoulder, and it happened in a split-second, too fast to grasp the situation. A shocked gasp turned into a yelp of pain as his hand was pulled forwards and twisted in a sudden and violent motion until a nasty cracking sound was heard. Jongdae tumbled forwards and saw nothing but Kyungsoo whirling around, his free hand moving, the feral look in his eyes-

and then Kyungsoo was the one to wince in pain, his hot fingers suddenly letting go of Jongdae who helplessly landed on the floor.

"Stop it! Get away from him!" he heard Chanyeol's deep voice as he ushered closer. There was indeed anger lacing his voice (the first time he actually heard him angry, Jongdae hazily noticed) but
the worry clearly outwon, and Jongdae saw him, obscuring his upside-down vision. Jongdae only fumbled with his wrist, not really looking at him and it felt quite unnatural, so in a surge of panic and without sparing it a glance, he pressed his fingers together until it lowly cracked again and a surge of scorching pain shot up his spine along with a faint curse leaving his lips.

"Oh god, stop that Jongdae. Don't touch it, don't-" Chanyeol muttered, carefully wrestling his hand free, and from the blurry corners of his vision he could see more heads looking down at him.

"Ow, ow, it hurts-" he hissed, drawing his arm away from Chanyeol's gently prodding fingers as he sat up slowly, momentarily tuning out the questions of his well-being. His slight dehydration made the world a little woozy but other than the excruciating pain in his arm, he was fine. The first thing he managed to focus on was the face of Kyungsoo who had been pushed aside and looked at him, genuinely startled as he rubbed his own hand that had turned a dark shade of red. Right. He'd let go of him so suddenly, as if he'd been burnt. One might blame it on the pain, but Jongdae's brain was working in weird ways and he pushed aside Chanyeol to scoot closer to Kyungsoo, swatting at the hands trying to hold him back, barely even hearing the protests. All he focused on were the big eyes of Kyungsoo, emitting shock and slight pain.

"Jongdae, you really shouldn't-"

Even Minseok was now pulling him away, his much stronger hands clasped firmly around his healthy shoulder and waist, effectively stopping him. Jongdae only stubbornly groaned in protest, holding his right hand out to the cowering boy, his left one uselessly dangling at his side.

"Show me your hand." he commanded quiet but insistently. Kyungsoo hesitated, obviously contemplating whether he'd want to get revenge, wide eyes trying and failing to predict him.

"Don't be silly now, come on." Jongdae urged him on, shooting a meaningful look to Minseok, who in turn loosened his grip slightly, even though he refused to let go completely. He finally felt hot fingers shakily brush against his and turned to see Kyungsoo offering his hand with the palm showing upwards. They were indeed red and while his eyes betrayed nothing, he felt him twitch in pain as he turned the hand with his own nimble fingers to inspect a long but thin line of burnt flesh on the back of his flushed hand.

"Ah, damn," Jongdae mumbled breathlessly, pain contorting the edges of his casual voice, "I suppose we both need some cooling now."

"You burnt him?" he heard Minseok sharply ask Chanyeol behind his back, and the other snapped back that it was the quickest and most effective thing he could've done. Jongdae still didn't pay them any mind, carefully letting go of the burnt hand while Luhan ushered away both of the people holding on to Jongdae and kneeled down to inspect his hand with the light and precise pressure of someone knowing what he's doing.

"Sorry if this hurts, it'll be over soon."

Jongdae tried very hard not to grimace and failed spectacularly. At least most of his pathetic whimpers were swallowed by his bitten lips.

"It's okay. All good. I think... yeah. It's gonna be alright." Luhan mumbled, sounding less like he tried to comfort him with nonsensical words but rather like he was actually convinced. He finally drew back, supporting the injured hand on his lap and shot him a look speaking of both amazement and disbelief.

"Damnit Jongdae. It looks and feels like your wrist got dislocated and you set it right yourself? That's-..."

"I did? Fuck." Jongdae murmured, looking at his own hand, almost afraid to touch it again.

"I didn't know, I was just panicking. I guess... fuck, I set in my own wrist. That's actually kinda gross."

He vaguely noticed that he was rambling, and Luhan shook his head violently.

"No! I mean, sure, but it was the quickest and most painless way to do it. It could have gone wrong but it doesn't look like it. You did great." he ended softly and was he adapting to Jongdae's mulled state of mild shock? Because Jongdae was sure he was already ninety-five percent back into it.

"I don't know whether you strained or bruised it; I'm no doctor, after all. Still, in any way you need to cool it now, and we gotta keep an eye on it. The swelling should go away soon, or we gotta get
you some medical attention."
"We both do. Kyungsoo, let's go find a river, I meant to get water anyway. I'd appreciate if you don't
do this to my other hand, though. I'm right-handed," he claimed lightly, shakily getting to his feet.
"Are you serious?" Chanyeol inquired, and Jongdae tried to blink away the pain to give the tall guy
on the ground as much of an exasperated look as he could manage.
"You burnt him. I'm a baker. I know that burns are painful as fuck. So we gotta cool it. Quickly."
Kyungsoo was already standing at his side obediently, as if nothing out of the ordinary had ever
happened.
Before Chanyeol could sputter more nonsense, wasting their time, Minseok nudged him towards the
injured duo.
"Just go with them, and watch over them. Burn him again if he tries anything funny." he added with
surprising cruelty Jongdae made a mental note to address another time.
For now, Jongdae gratefully staggered towards the direction he assumed the water was in, and
Chanyeol followed with a sigh, squishing himself in between Jongdae and Kyungsoo protectively.

A good five minutes of peacefully blubbering water sounds passed. Chanyeol was still hovering
close to them, though he had to stay back a few feet in order to give the two guys room to hold their
hands into a small but steady stream of water. Once in awhile Jongdae stopped Kyungsoo from
withdrawing his hands already, stating that the aftermath of a burn was nasty and that he should hold
on to the cooling water as long as he could. A few minutes passed before Kyungsoo himself spoke
up.
"You didn't call my name." he said quietly, his voice smooth and calm as ever, though the words
themselves were obviously thought through well. They came out less like a defense and more like a
neutral observation. Jongdae let the statement echo around his mind for a bit. So that's why the
reaction had been so violent - he'd startled him, touching him with barely any warning. In a way, it
was really scary. Without premonition, Kyungsoo could snap this easily. It wasn't like he'd forgotten
about his condition but he had simply no clue what it was like, being prone to hallucinations. Had no
idea about Kyungsoo in general, actually.

Jongdae knew he needed a little more time to come up with a conclusion, and it relied mostly on the
question of whether Kyungsoo would have stopped the assault upon recognizing his face. Jongdae
couldn't remember and while that might be a curse, it could just as well be a blessing. Maybe it was
for the better if he didn't know.
The silence stretched on, and when he realized that Kyungsoo wasn't going to add anything to that,
he scoffed playfully.
"Well, gee, you're forgiven. No need to get that desperate."
Kyungsoo turned towards him, the slightest confusion on his face.
"I didn't apologize?"
"I know," Jongdae sighed in half-faked exasperation, "it was sarcasm."
Kyungsoo's generous lips formed a small, silent 'o' as he nodded to himself, his attention back on his
own hands, dipped into the water. Another scary thing was how quickly and purposefully Chanyeol
had hurt him; a fact that was easily overlooked in this extreme situation. Both of his hands had gotten
a share, though the hand that had been gripping his wrist was worse off, far worse. His eyes
wandered up. A side-glance told him that the discontent frown on Kyungsoo's face hadn't dissolved,
and he pressed on.
"What's bothering you?"
Maybe Kyungsoo had been waiting for him to ask, maybe he was eager to get it off his chest.
In any case, Jongdae didn't have to wait long for the next reply.
"Jongin will be mad..."
Oh. That was his problem.
"I'll tell him not to be." Jongdae replied easily and fished Kyungsoo's hands out of the water to dry
them with careful dabs of a clean cloth. Kyungsoo didn't complain since it didn't hurt (yet). With his
intact hand, Jongdae added a generous amount of cream to the injured spots.
He still felt the other's dark eyes on him as he attempted to bandage his own wrist until Chanyeol's
deft fingers invaded his vision, silently taking over the task.
"Even though I didn't apologize..." he murmured quietly, as if the sudden remembrance of
Chanyeol’s presence caused him to withdraw again. As if whatever he had going on with Jongdae
went deeper than his relationship with anyone else, excluding Jongin, obviously. It was little details
like that which never went unnoticed by Jongdae. He could basically hear Luhan's strict voice,
warning him not to get manipulated by the unstable boy. But he felt like he knew better, understood
a fraction more with every word sent his way.
"You didn't apologize because you're not sorry." Jongdae simply said, wincing silently at a certain
tug of the bandage around his wrist.
Chanyeol's fingers halted in their movements as if caught, but continued shortly after.
"I get that. It's okay. I didn't know this would... affect you like this. I won't do it again. So," he went
on, searching Kyungssoo's eyes to get across his genuine intentions,
"if you ever change your mind about me in the future... you can apologize then. I'm alright with
that."
This proposal was met with surprise and a pensive nod. He saw the dark eyes darting between his
and the slightly swollen hand that was being wrapped up firmly in their only set of bandages.
Jongdae mumbled his thanks to Chanyeol afterwards, who still hadn't said a single word, which was
slightly eerie. He got to his feet and looked down at Kyungssoo, who hesitated, complicated thoughts
wrestling with each other. Jongdae waited patiently.
"I think..." Kyungssoo began slowly, his fingers tentatively hovering over the bandages and resisting
the urge to touch, "...I'm a little sorry already."
Jongdae smiled and pulled Kyungssoo to his feet, careful not to touch his hand.
"Good enough for now. Let's go back, I bet Jongin returned ages ago."
The incentive was good enough, and Kyungssoo slowly walked ahead, leaving Chanyeol to stick
closely to his side, the golden rays of an impending dawn painting their skin golden. His sudden
silence was unnerving, to say the least.
"Everything alright?" he asked meekly, not sure what to make of the atmosphere. The response was
an exasperated sigh he hadn't ever heard coming from Chanyeol before. He stopped in his tracks,
one heavy hand effectively holding Jongdae back as well.
"Really now?" he inquired, frustration reflected in his features. "You're not the one who’s supposed
to ask this. You're not alright. I just..."
He sighed again, ruffling one hand through his hair before continuing to pull Jongdae along.
"Forget it." he curtly said, closing off in terms of voice and proximity, his hand finally leaving
Jongdae's shoulder.
The words stung, and he'd never realized it before but rejection from Chanyeol actually hurt. A lot.
"If you're beating yourself up over hurting Kyungssoo - you shouldn’t," he went on, unsure of
whether or not he had the right idea but keen on getting the issue sorted out quickly, "we were all
kinda caught off guard and-"
"That's not it." Chanyeol cut him off, exasperation already fighting against the passiveness.
It was obviously hard for him to keep whatever it was inside.
"Besides, he tried to hurt you! I'm not sorry-"
"Don't say that. You should also apologize to him."
Chanyeol stopped in his tracks once more, now obviously angry.
"'Also'? Like he apologized to you just now? As in 'didn't apologize'? Or like you apologized to him
for doing nothing at all?"
"That's not it." Chanyeol cut him off, exasperation already fighting against the passiveness.
"This has nothing to do with you, how I accept my apologies. It doesn't change the fact that you, too,
should apologize for the damage you’ve caused."
"Should I apologize to you as well, for stopping him from breaking your bones?" he snapped back stubbornly, and Jongdae sighed, unwilling to get riled up.

"Don't be so childish. An action isn't necessarily just good or bad. You know I'm grateful, and I surely would've let you know if we weren't having this silly discussion right now."

"You're the one who's so keen on talking about him. You're also the one who can't keep away from him, not me." Chanyeol accused, though most of his anger had already passed at Jongdae's tired tone, making way for moodiness.

"Why do you even have to be so good to people? Why do you need to be so close to everyone?" It felt like the argument was trailing off to an entirely different issue and Jongdae decided that he'd much rather have this discussion without Kyungsoo's eyes burning holes into their heads, so he suppressed another sigh and firmly met Chanyeol's defiant gaze.

"Just apologize, Chanyeol. I'm sure he'll forgive you."

For a moment, Chanyeol stared at him with a mix of frustration, anger and incredulousness, his mouth opening as if searching for words before he finally huffed, and the fight seeped out of his tense shoulders. He whipped around and staggered over to Kyungsoo, who showed no sign of fear, staying perfectly calm in his spot.

Chanyeol halted, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, exhaling as slowly to regain his composure.

"Alright." he finally said, purposefully calm as he looked down at an unwavering Kyungsoo.

"I'm sorry. I meant to stop you, yes, but I'm sorry I had to hurt you like this."

Kyungsoo's gaze was piercing, and for a second, Jongdae thought that there was more trouble ahead. But then the shorter one's eyes flitted over to Jongdae before settling back on the conflicted male with a faint nod.

Before Chanyeol could make another comment, Kyungsoo had kneeled down to sweep a handful of leaves from the ground, his nose twitching ever so slightly as they met his sensitive skin. With expectation all over his face he offered them to Chanyeol, who looked confused at best.

"What... is it?"

Kyungsoo only rustled them a bit and understanding was met with apprehension.

"Really now? After all this?"

He complied with a defeated sigh under Kyungsoo's insistent gaze, and with a wave of his hand, the leaves burnt down peacefully, ashes fluttering away without an actual flame. It obviously hurt quite a bit, but a rare, small smile etched across Kyungsoo's features nonetheless.

"You have an unhealthy fascination with this, you know." Chanyeol stated without any venom.

"You make things disappear." Kyungsoo quietly said.

"You affect them and then they're gone. You touch them... and then they're gone."

Chanyeol threw a helpless look over at Jongdae, who smiled at the odd exchange of affection when a sudden, panicked scream interrupted them. It sounded suspiciously like Luhan, followed by a loud commotion and rustling in the distance.

Jongdae froze in place while Chanyeol immediately tugged him behind a large tree, hiding him from possible danger, one finger at his lips. Jongdae was just about to go and get Kyungsoo as well when another choked scream -this time of Jongin- echoed through the forest and Kyungsoo dashed towards the source without hesitation, effectively slipping beneath Chanyeol's fingertips.

"Goddamnit." the latter cursed, taking after him, and Jongdae followed, trying his best to keep up. Thankfully, the others weren't too far away and Minseok waved at them from the distance, urging them to hurry. He saw Kyungsoo basically flying in Jongin's arms and thank God he was unharmed. When they finally reached the clearing, Jongdae almost stumbled over an unexpected obstacle that turned out to be a lifeless body. With a gasp he jumped away and tried not to stare. He was immediately tugged on by Minseok, who threw a heavy-looking bag over to Chanyeol.

"Gotta run. Chanyeol and I know the way. Luhan, stay focused. Dae, stay with Chanyeol." he curtly instructed, and the way he was not so gently nudged towards Chanyeol made Jongdae feel like he was being handed around. Chanyeol firmly grasped his right hand and set off running. Jongdae stumbled alongside him over uneven ground and while he tried his best to hurry, the taller one still ended up having to adapt his steps.
The sounds enveloping him were as blurry as the landscape but when a foreign voice yelled after them, told them to stop, Jongdae felt it like an electric shock, spurring him on to pick up his pace and go even faster. A blur of dark colors told him that Jongin and Kyungsoo were nearby. A gunshot ripped through the air, and his head whipped around, but Chanyeol wouldn't let him, dragging him on and keeping him focused on the sight before him.
"Luhan, are we clear?" he heard Minseok somewhere behind him. Jongdae was barely listening, had no idea what was going on exactly.
"Not yet-" the seer huffed back, and another shot resounded. More voices were shouting after them. Were they increasing in number?
Minseok cursed, and Chanyeol called back to the seer as well.
"Do we have options? Any?"
"Yes but-"
"Then let's get outta here! Jongin, get us outta here!"
Jongin huffed out a breathy 'okay' and instantly vanished with Kyungsoo, only to reappear a few feet behind them, running to catch up with them.
"You go first." Chanyeol ordered and detached himself from Jongdae, who came to a halt and turned around just as Jongin almost collided with him and the world vanished before he could identify the moving specks in the distance. Forests made way for dry air and stone. Jongin immediately let go and set off to vanish mid-step, leaving Jongdae disoriented for a second. With mountains to his right and left, he stood in a narrow valley. A sudden wave of prickling pain hit him and for a second, he felt dizzy. Were those clouds in the sky? Thick, gray clouds? Before he could catch his breath, Kyungsoo darted past him, grabbing his arm to harshly tug at him.
"Hurry!" he urgently said and Jongdae obliged without thinking, hurrying into the direction Jongin had run off to. The others followed one by one. First Luhan, then Chanyeol and finally Minseok. They all gathered in the same spot and Jongdae skidded to halt, intending to rest but Minseok ushered them onwards, towards their destination.
"No stopping now, they might follow us."
Jongdae vaguely wondered why he was so sure they'd be followed so instantly. He had no idea where they were and neither did Jongin, probably. After all, a shifter danced between the worlds blindly - there were no names and regulations. A look to the side told him that Jongin was shivering so violently, it was noticeable while jogging. He probably needed a break very soon.
"He's damn right - can we go to Lavender yet?!" Chanyeol belted out towards Luhan, who furiously shook his head.
"No! I keep telling you guys- if we shift to Lavender now, we'll be on wide grassland before maybe collapsing with some city walls in the near future! We'll be completely out in the open!"
Chanyeol groaned and pulled Jongdae along who was slowly but surely running out of breath.
"Still, I know this place and it's such a well-known Layer, I bet they'll-"
The first shot resounded before Chanyeol could even finish his prediction and Jongdae's head flew around to see three people approaching with guns raised. His stomach flipped and he picked up on running with new-found energy. They were heading towards a narrow passage at the foot of the mountain and by now he was more skidding than running, tumbling over the sea of rough stones.
"Can you take them out?!" Minseok shouted from behind and Chanyeol denied.
"From this distance? Not that quickly!"
He heard his friend curse generously as more shots missed their targets.
"Luhan, tell us where to go and when it's safe to cross over - we're relying on your eyes!" he ordered, and Luhan belted out a quick 'Got it', taking up the front and running down the passage. Jongdae's mind was blank. There was no time to think, just to concentrate on the ground, trying not to stumble at any cost. Whenever he lost his balance, Chanyeol held him up by his arm to tug him forwards again. Luhan was in front, Minseok in the back. He hadn't heard of Jongin in a while, was he still there with Kyungsoo?
"No!" he heard from the front and looked up just in time to see Luhan skidding to a halt and turning around.
"It's a dead end! But we're so close!"

Jongdae and Chanyeol slowed down when they turned a corner and saw it with their own eyes - the narrow passage framed by two mountains was blocked by a pile of debris that must have fallen from a mild avalanche. The wall was easily four times their size and climbing would take forever.

Minseok halted next to him and flew around, crouching down to aim with his own gun. By now, the pursuers were less than ten meters away and offering a solid aim. The repercussion almost made him fall if not for Jongdae's wobbly legs steadying his back. Instinctively, his eyes darted up to see whether Minseok had hit his target and indeed, one of the guys was falling, grasping his arm. In just that moment, a second guy tackled down Jongin who fell with a pitiful cry. Jongdae wanted to jump forwards, but a firm hand to his chest not only held him in place but shoved him back and he fell into the sea of hard rocks as Chanyeol darted forwards to stop the last pursuer from reaching any of them. He saw limbs collide as they messily wrestled each other and Minseok was already up to his feet and about to charge for Jongin, when a shiny knife blinked in the setting sun and he froze. The guy was sitting atop Jongin, who was quickly losing the fight over dominance.

"Leave!" Minseok called out in panic. Jongin kept struggling and why wasn't he shifting? Minseok didn't understand and repeated the order but Jongdae tugged at his pants to get his attention.

"He can't, he'll take the guy with him-"

And before Minseok could come to a decision, Kyungsoo all but flew into said guy, throwing him off Jongin with brutal force, and while Jongdae and Minseok ran forwards to help the shifter up, Jongdae couldn't keep his eyes off Kyungsoo. His auto piloting brain told him to look away, in order to avoid seeing where the knife landed, but he couldn't. There was Jongin hanging off his arm and Luhan calling after them and Chanyeol grunting in pain and everything was way too much. He still stared at Kyungsoo and Jongin did the same while Minseok aimed for a second shot at the wounded guy already approaching again.

Kyungsoo ended up on top, and four hands were wrapped around the knife's handle, shaking with effort. Jongdae didn't know why, but for some reason he was fixated on Kyungsoo's face, his eyes. The strain wasn't too visible, and while his thighs firmly held the guy in place, he twisted the knife almost deliberately slowly until the pointed end was touching the throat of the writhing guy. And he pushed it in. He slowly forced the metal into the body and there were screams, loud and tortured, blood splashing and coloring Kyungsoo's pale skin with sprays of red. He only squinted his eyes for a split-second, eyes that were wide, intense, insane.

"Stop..." Jongin whimpered beside him, shaking like a leaf. Jongdae wanted to puke. There was so much blood everywhere, running out in rivulets, running down Kyungsoo's face, pouring out of the wound - he wasn't aware of how much blood the human body had and Kyungsoo was slowly pulling the knife sideways and those screams. A sudden rash tug made it look like Kyungsoo had hit an obstacle and they rose in pitch before dying into a garbled mess of sounds and did he cut through the air pipe? Jongdae couldn't help it anymore and retched, averting his gaze as bile rose, and he threw up everything he'd eaten the past days. It really wasn't much, but whenever he saw the body convulsing from the corner of his eye, whenever he imagined the knife scratching over the vertebrae, the urge to retch returned. By now he wasn't sure who was holding on to whom anymore - Jongin and him were both clawing at each other, and the endless string of silent pleas to stop it from the shifter only made Jongdae hold him tighter.

"Stop, stop, STOP!" he finally burst out, and Jongdae didn't have to look to know he was crying, the wails reaching him numbly until Jongin ripped himself free, leaving him to tumble to the ground. Minseok pulled him up before he knew it, and it took a bit for him to register the words his friend was shouting at him, as his eyes were still settled on Kyungsoo and the way Jongin ripped him off that guy with the knife still in his hands. Jongdae's headache returned, pulsing like a sharp knife-

"Dae! Luhan, we gotta get to him. NOW."

Minseok gave up and just pulled Jongdae around, whose eyes finally fell on the second mess of limbs.

"But- Chanyeol-" he muttered weakly and got instantly dismissed.

"He's fine, now come on!"
Jongdae finally tore his eyes away to comply, and they staggered towards Luhan, who had pushed a bit of the rubble around, creating a path of sorts and crawled up about two meters. He extended his hand towards them and helped Jongdae climb up to his level.

"Here, it'll be fine to shift here. To Lavender, just as planned, you hear me Jongdae?"

While Jongdae did sort of hear him, his eyes kept flitting all over the place, looking first for Chanyeol who finally got back to his feet, his enemy unmoving, then at Jongin and a bloody Kyungsoo approaching.

Suddenly his vision was blocked by Minseok, who drew him into a tight embrace.

"You can do it, Dae. Let's leave. Concentrate. Now."

It was easy to follow someone’s orders, and Jongdae complied, closing his eyes from the whole disaster.

The lavender structures were there, fresh and vibrant, and even though he was aware that his own head was a complete mess, he just really wanted to get away from Kyungsoo this very moment, so shifting came easily to him.

The loose stones vanished, and he tumbled onto a solid stone floor, all the dim light of the impending night replaced by darkness. He had no idea where they were, and it appeared like a huge cellar of some kind, not unlike the one they'd met Luhan in - though this one was decisively less impressive. They were seated on a ledge a couple meters above ground, and only vague flickers of light from the hallway below reached them. A perfectly sheltered point. Minseok ushered him to the side where he awkwardly crawled to and squeezed himself against the cool stone. They were making so much noise, appearing one by one and accommodating to the new environment. Jongdae listened carefully for any other sounds and harshly squeezed Minseok's arm when faint footsteps resounded.

Minseok soundlessly gestured at him to be quiet, and Jongdae almost jumped when he felt a hand on his side and another one looping around his front to tightly hug him from behind. Messy curls tickled his cheek as Chanyeol hovered over his shoulder, and he relaxed a tiny bit. Chanyeol's grip wasn't too hard but firm and secure, making him feel the illusion of shelter and protection. For a moment, he felt like he could blissfully drown like this, just doze off to this odd sensation that wouldn't leave him.

The feeling of his aching head, the wish to cross over into the hazy dreamland, to let go of everything...

He blinked the urge away, clenching his jaw. This really wasn't the time to drift off.

He didn't dare looking for the others and kept his gaze fixated on the sliver of the hallway's ground he could see from his position, trying his utmost to stay alert.

One head popped into view, and Jongdae could immediately tell it was a police officer by the tell-tale white uniform embracing broad shoulders.

"I don't know. You sure you're not hearing things?" he mumbled, presumably to another person. Jongdae held his breath. He had no idea what the police were even doing here - the last thing they'd heard was that the complete city was supposed to be evacuated due to this mysterious disease. Now that they knew about this, they had to be much more careful-

"Hey, what are you doing here?!"
scheduled with Amber's assistant Henry who gladly shared his research results – with her permission of course. He liked Henry. He and Amber made for a really good team; both of them have a knack for people while Henry also had an eye for detail but lacked Amber's brashness. Junmyeon really hoped there was no reason to be jealous of the quirky guy but his childish crush had to wait. There was work to do, after all.

With this thought in mind, he swiftly stepped into the blue circle marking the spot for trainees, a gentle smile on his lips to reassure the lady behind the counter and then he was already shifting and suddenly looking down on a blonde mop of hair.

"O-oh." he stammered and the guy who had been sitting at the edge of the platform jumped up, eyes wide and apologetic.

"Ah. I'm sorry. I wasn't blocking your path before, right?" he uttered and stepped away as if he could redeem himself this way.

"Uhm. No worries, no harm done. But you do realize you shouldn't just sit in this area, right?" he asked the stranger not unkindly.

The poor guy seemed every bit miserable.

"Yes. I'm sorry." he simply offered and Junmyeon frowned, stepping down the platform to place a comforting hand on the stranger's upper arm.

"You're having difficulties shifting? You shouldn't worry too much and get some rest. Everyone has bad shifting days."

It was a little comical, how he comforted someone about two heads taller than him, but the guy only avoided his touch, taking a step back.

"I can't. I just can't do it. It doesn't matter how much I sleep or whatever I do. I just can't-" he trailed off in frustration, ruffling his hair. Oh. Junmyeon didn't really have any words of comfort to offer in this situation. Some people just really couldn't shift and there was nothing to do about it. You could tell them to never give up but that was kind of insensitive.

"I'm... sorry." he carefully said, keeping his polite distance.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

Yes, that was essentially Junmyeon's being in a nutshell. His source of success and all his problems alike.

He just couldn't see people suffer. The stranger laughed bitterly.

"Yeah. Sure. You could go to the council and pester some higher ups in my name."

Junmyeon blinked.

"What do you want from the council?" he asked slowly.

"Ah, Junmyeon, there you are." Henry brightly said, already rummaging through his papers.

"I've got the background checks ready, as well as-

"-we've got a lead." Junmyeon cut him off, and when the secretary looked up, he saw a much taller figure looming behind the representative of the blue Layer.

"We do?" he gave back cluelessly, and Junmyeon nodded, stepping aside to make room for the awkward blond.

"We gotta find a shifter. Yifan here is convinced the two lost boys are in the company of one." Henry raised an eyebrow, but Junmyeon was still higher up in the ranks so he didn't straight-out question it.

"A shifter. That's... obviously close to impossible. I guess you could pay a visit to the divisions responsible for tracking shifters...?"

"I'm planning to do so. They're stationed on Cyan, research department D, right?" Henry nodded, and before he could add anything to that, Junmyeon had pushed the blonde guy into the seat across him and turned to leave the office.

"I'll go right now but I'll be back soon. Meanwhile you should interview this guy, and pay close attention to what he's saying. I really think we're on to something."
Henry watched him go, and when the door closed, he made eye contact with-
"Wu Yifan. You're the best friend of both Minseok and Jongdae, the boys who got lost." Henry stated neutrally and the blond grimaced.
"Why are you only coming to us now?" he asked suspiciously, and Yifan's shoulders sagged a bit, a look of defeat on his face.
"I don't have any proof and only vague assumptions. But I know Jongdae and Minseok better than anyone else. And I'm here now. I'll tell you everything, if you're willing to listen."
Henry sighed. 'Fine, why not?' he thought to himself, placing the tip of a pen on the back of some unimportant piece of paper.
"Alright. I'm all ears."
Chapter 11

The policeman whirled around to look down the hall when two dull thuds followed, and the head disappeared from Jongdae's view, collapsing to the ground alongside his colleague.

"Are you wasting ammo again?" another voice snarled as two people swiftly approached the two bodies on the floor.

"Pfft. Ammo. Those are stun guns, who even cares?"

Another head popped into view, this time of someone definitely not associated with anything legal.

"And why do we have those? Exactly because of retards like you with this stupid attitude. You'd shoot him right in the head, and imagine explaining that afterwards." a women he couldn't see butted in, obviously very annoyed at the fact that they had no actual guns.

"And what about all his little friends? No harm in shooting them-"

"I've heard there's a shifter among them. You're not shooting anybody today, asshole."

The guy sighed in an exaggerated motion, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

"Let's just leave. He wouldn't be in this godforsaken place anyway."

"Will you stop being such a pain in the ass?" the woman hissed, and Jongdae saw a hand pushing at the stranger’s upper body, "you saw the burnt corpse! You wanna tell me someone ran around randomly killing people with a match?!"

Chanyeol's hands tightened around him, and Jongdae returned the gesture, if only in self-defense.

So it was Chanyeol they were after.

"Fine, goddamnit. Just go ahead, I'll frisk these guys here."

The woman went away, silently cursing to herself about the uselessness of her partner, whose head moved out of sight as he noisily frisked the unconscious policemen. Jongdae didn't feel safe at all anymore. What if he picked up a weapon? What if he looked into the darkness and noticed them?

Right on cue, the head came back into view and Jongdae saw the guy looking down at something in his hands. A movement out of the corner of Jongdae's eye got his attention, and he caught sight of Minseok, who had somehow managed to soundlessly draw their only gun, steadily aiming at their enemy's head. Calmly, patiently. Jongdae almost sucked in a breath, and then the guy did look up, and Chanyeol’s warm hand covered Jongdae’s eyes when the shot ripped through the air.

It all came crashing down again after that; the spell was broken.

"Quick, we gotta get away before the other one returns." Minseok mumbled, already jumping down the ledge to land in the hallway with a dull thud. Jongin followed him with the elegance of a cat, already pulling a stumbling Kyungsoo back up to his feet. Jongdae was decisively less elegant and almost fell backwards, if not for Chanyeol steadying him.

"In case we get separated - where do we meet up?" Luhan asked urgently, his fingers digging through the clothes of Chanyeol covered his eyes again by swiftly stepping in between the bloody mess on the floor and Jongdae before he could get a too-close look.

"The clock tower." Minseok mumbled, reaching for the policeman's gun as his own magazine was empty.

"It doesn't have any doors, go through another Layer to get in." Chanyeol added, already tugging Jongdae away from the scene. One of the policemen stirred with a moan, and Jongin jumped away from him. No one had to tell them to run, they just did. They flew down the corridor the two hunters had come from, ignoring the confused shouts of the policeman - which died abruptly when he realized he was almost lying in the gooey mess of a shot man. Jongdae only hoped his confusion would last a little longer and dully realized that the cop would think they were the criminals. And he’d be right. They had killed that guy.

The hallway made way for what looked like a patio and they kept running, parting ways at the first opportunity. Jongdae didn't even protest and let himself get dragged along by Chanyeol, gratefully clinging onto the only person who probably knew his way around this city. Once in awhile, Jongdae
would catch a glimpse of a dark tower looming in the distance, but for the most part, his gaze was set on the ground to avoid tripping on the rough cobblestones. Around him, he heard people shouting and had no idea how close they were. Everything was so chaotic - he didn't know where the others had run off to. Didn’t know how many people were searching the streets for them, how many policemen were around fighting them. The only thing he knew was that everyone was an enemy at this point. His lungs were burning, but the moment he heard people shouting after them, he sped up with his last bit of energy, fueled by sheer desperation. Chanyeol pulled him down the narrow streets in sharp turns. Jongdae felt the panic radiating off him but had no choice but to have faith in him. The footsteps were coming closer, echoing off the stone walls of high houses right and left. The whole city seemed to consist of nothing but arches, corbels and annoying indents in the ground - apparently for draining purposes - that Jongdae kept tripping over.

With a sudden tug, Chanyeol pulled him into a side street and into some equally stony porch where they pressed into the darkness, against the glass of a high window. People came closer, and since they weren't calling out for them to stop and surrender, Jongdae figured they weren't policemen. His heart was thumping wildly, and it took every ounce of will to stay completely still. After what felt like forever, the pursuers took another turn, and Chanyeol grabbed his hand to pull him back into the street. His left, injured hand. Jongdae gasped loudly, a pained yelp leaving before he could help it and he saw it in Chanyeol's wide eyes, the dim light of streetlamps reflecting shock and apology. "Back, turn back, I heard them!"

With a curse on their lips, they set off running again, and Jongdae tried to ignore the fresh wave of pain in his hand.

He was getting tired, he couldn't run anymore. He couldn't, he really couldn't. The continuous chants in his head drowned out the yells, the footsteps, the fear. And then it returned, the odd ringing sound, the floaty feeling. As if his brain was shutting down. Or opening up-and then they were faced with a dead end. Chanyeol skidded to a halt, looking around frantically, while Jongdae looked back at the enclosing pursuers and knew they were trapped. Like rats, chased around the whole city. The clock tower was so close that the shadow already engulfed half of the patio. He really hoped the others had made it. Coming to the conclusion that there was no going back, Chanyeol positioned himself in front of Jongdae, attempting to protect him from the approaching men. Jongdae felt a brief feeling of déja-vû. How often had he found himself in this position already, being shielded by Chanyeol?

The pursuers came to a halt, guns raised. Jongdae really hoped those were stun guns, too. But how could he be sure? What were they supposed to do? Jongdae clawed at the fabric of Chanyeol's shirt, his thoughts running in circles. There had to be a way out, there always was. There was always a way out. Minseok had told him that. Think, he had to think. If only the ringing sound wasn't so prominent-

"Separate and hands up. Surrender and we won't harm your friend." one of them said, and while Jongdae felt him tense against his own shaky body, Chanyeol made no move to expose him. A shot followed and Chanyeol flinched, quickly ripping out what looked like a tranquilizing dart and throwing it on the ground.

"They don't work?!" one of them said, and a more authoritative voice replied calmly. "They will. Eventually. We'll give you a lot more if you don't comply."

Jongdae looked past Chanyeol to catch a glimpse of the four uniformed people and was that Luhan creeping up on them from behind? Their eyes met and it was indeed him, standing a few feet behind them, soundlessly approaching. He held up ten fingers, then nine, and when the leader turned around to follow Jongdae's gaze, the blond was gone and Jongdae hid behind Chanyeol again, not minding the threats they were spewing. Eight. A countdown. He mustn't lose track. Seven. There were four of them. One for Luhan, at most two for Chanyeol... one for him. He tapped his fingers on the back of Chanyeol's thigh, counting down and hoping he'd get it. Four. How he was supposed to attack him, he didn't know. Three. How to hurt someone, he didn't know. Two. But he wouldn't let them hurt Chanyeol. Or Luhan. One. How fast would tranquilizers kick in?
"Now!" he yelled, mostly for distraction and darted to the front while Luhan appeared out of nowhere, effectively twisting the stun gun to shoot its owner in the blink of a second. There were shots fired but Jongdae moved in a ducked zig-zag fashion, taking advantage of his small height and frame to tackle down the second guy before he could hit him. The world turned and he struggled to get a hold of his enemy's wrists, tried to keep the end of the gun away from his face. He heard screams but the ringing sound, it was much louder. The body beneath him was writhing and kicking and so strong. Jongdae was quickly losing the fight, too busy to avoid the kicks and too tired to restrain him. His left hand was burning. He really was losing. He got kicked to the side but ignoring all the pain, Jongdae jumped to his feet to charge again, to stop him from attacking Chanyeol, only to get thrown off roughly. He collapsed with Luhan, and everything moved as if in time lapse mode. While falling, he saw the dark, dark sky above him, and then a blinding bolt of lightning lit up the whole world, crashing down with a growl as vicious as a wolf snapping. For a second, everything was scorching white, and his hearing felt dull and fuzzy. Even with his eyes open, he saw nothing at all and blinked several times, rubbing his face with trembling fingers. A thousand pulsing dots prickled over his vision in shades of purple and green, when someone pulled him to his feet. He was so tired. But the hands were tugging him along regardless, and he did nothing but follow blindly. An undefined amount of time passed by lazily, and it felt like a mere few seconds when they were faced with a solid wall of stone and someone - Chanyeol, he noted with conviction - told him to shift somewhere else to cross it. Jongdae didn't know why he sounded so worried. Why wouldn't he be able to do that? It was so easy, holding on to the structures. For once, he didn't close his eyes while shifting. If he closed them, he'd only feel floaty and lose focus. In a matter of seconds they were inside the clock tower, tumbling up the many stairs. His legs were aching so much that every step felt like the last he'd make before collapsing. But behind him, Chanyeol kept walking and so did he, clawing onto the railing so he wouldn't give in to his nausea and fall down the entire tower, pulling Chanyeol with him. It was extremely dark, save for the pale moonlight shining through stained glass and once or twice he missed a step, only barely saving himself from tumbling. By the end, he felt Chanyeol half-pushing him along until they finally, finally heard Minseok calling out to them. "Over here- Dae? Are you alright? Fuck. You're bleeding." Without further ado, Jongdae sank to the floor, his back leaning against a wall. His vision was back to normal, his hearing barely fuzzy at this point. Bleeding? He hadn't noticed. He definitely noticed when Minseok fussed around him, prodding around abrasions and yes, Minseok was alright. Luhan and Chanyeol were there, too. And in a corner of the basement-like area, just in front of the huge clock mechanism, sat Jongin with Kyungsoo. The latter still looked like he'd taken a bloodbath, he could tell even in the semi-darkness. Jongin looked as distraught and battered as Jongdae felt, but they still shared a weak smile. The shifter got to his feet, and Kyungsoo followed almost mechanically. "It's good to see you all made it. I'll... be upstairs with Kyungsoo." he stated quietly, his voice rough and dry. "I don't think that's a good idea-" Luhan began but Jongin already had one foot on the stairs leading to the roof, shooting them an unusually firm look. "I just wanna be alone with Kyungsoo at the moment. Call me if you need me." There was no question in this statement. Luhan was about to further protest, but Minseok shushed him, stating that it was none of their business. "What happened to you guys?" he then asked, and Jongdae blinked heavily. "We were confronted by four people and then Luhan came to help us..." he muttered slowly, looking to his side to confirm Chanyeol's presence. There he was, looking slightly out of breath but unscathed. It was strange. Jongdae was the person who watched after others, who made sure everyone was fine. It was rarely Chanyeol he'd look for first. He cared, a lot even. Maybe more than he should. But for some reason he'd look for Minseok first. Then Jongin and Luhan, heck, even Kyungsoo. Chanyeol was able to watch after himself. Maybe not naturally, but all the experience and power he had was enough for him to get by far better than any of them.
"And you took them all out?" Minseok continued with a skeptical look.
"I... guess?" Jongdae muttered back, quite frankly unsure of what had happened. Luhan decided to answer for him, after he'd taken a few deep gulps of water from one of their few plastic bottles.
"It was crazy! One of the guys was struck by lightning, just like that! Completely out of the blue, I didn't even notice a single cloud before. There were a few more bolts of lightning but then it was all gone again. It was really..."
He ran out of words, making a few aimless gestures until Minseok offered a "...fucked up?"
"Is that what you'd call it in this language?" the blond innocently asked.
"Definitely." Chanyeol fell in surprisingly. Now that things had calmed down, Jongdae had the time to check the taller one for injuries more carefully, but besides a few minor scratches, he really did seem alright.
"Are we really safe here?" Luhan asked, his eyes wandering all over the place and flitting towards the ceiling ever-so-often, as if he'd love to see through it and make sure Jongin was alright.
"We gotta stay alert. And quiet," Minseok gave back with a sigh, already back to his feet, "I'll take the first watch, you can rest."
Jongdae weakly reached out for him, his hand grasping nothing but air.
"Are you alright, Min? Won't you need rest?"
But his friend only dismissed him with a smile and toed his shoes off to silently pad down the stairs.
Before he could even begin to figure out where he'd sleep, Chanyeol was already kneeling in front of him, tugging at his sleeves. Unlike before, it was a careful tug, the question clearly written across his barely illuminated face.
"Come with me for a sec?" he asked, uncharacteristically quiet. Jongdae found himself obeying, swallowing down the question of where they'd be headed to. He shrugged towards Luhan, who only lazily waved goodbye before curling into their only thin blanket, always quick to give their few sleeping bags up for the others. They went one story down, and he thought they'd catch up with Minseok, but instead, Chanyeol took him outside onto some sort of balcony. While the high walls were covering any type of view and sheltered them from being discovered by anyone below, Jongdae instinctively raised his head to watch a strip of starry night sky far above him. One deep inhale of crisp night air and it was knocked right out of him, the sky tumbling out of sight as his back met the wall and he suddenly had Chanyeol wrapped around him, crushing the living daylights out of him.
The proximity sent his senses into haywire, a shudder running down his spine.
Yes, Jongdae was a touchy person but there'd been a reason he avoided this - he enjoyed it a little too much for it to be casual.
"You're alright. I'm so glad you're alright." the deep voice mumbled into his ear, breaking off into a whisper mid-way. Jongdae tightened his own grip and decided that the way he couldn't breathe felt good. Tethering. Comforting.
"I was so scared, goddamnit Jongdae. Don't ever do that again, aimlessly endangering yourself like that."
Jongdae didn't reply to that. Instead, he held on with his right hand firmly buried in the curly strands, unconsciously leaning into the way Chanyeol's lips tickled his neck as he whispered how glad he was that Jongdae was alive, over and over again.
"I'm so fucking sorry. This is all my fault. I brought you in danger. I'm sorry."
His breathing was becoming heavier and the way his arms - his everything, really - enveloped him left Jongdae a little dizzy.
"I'm sorry for pulling on your hand. Sorry for being such a jerk earlier. Sorry for being so goddamn selfish."
"Why?" Jongdae asked right back at him, his gaze set on the wall behind Chanyeol without really seeing it.
He drew away just enough to look down at Jongdae, who caught himself almost mewling at the loss of his warmth. Goddamnit, he was so lost on him.
"I should have left you alone. But I didn't, because I'm so selfish. I keep thinking about where I
might’ve gone wrong, but I can't come up with anything I could've done differently. I wanted you to find Minseok. And I wanted to protect you from Jongin's pursuers, I had to. And then I'd already left traces of me in the way their bodies were burnt. It's all so... fucked up. It feels like it's my fault but still..."
Chanyeol didn't seem to know whether he wanted to tighten or loosen his grip, unconsciously mirroring the predicament he was in.
"You didn't do anything wrong." Jongdae began slowly, thinking the statement through carefully.
"Sure, maybe I would have been better off, physically, not knowing about any of this. But even if I were to die a gruesome death tomorrow," he halted for a second, stroking down the taller one's spine when he felt the shiver at his words, "I'd be glad I gave my all and didn’t abandon those close to me. Whatever kind of life you made me miss out on... I would never have forgotten about Minseok. So... no, I genuinely don't think you did anything wrong. It's quite the opposite. I should actually thank you for always jumping to my aid without hesitation."
Instead of cheering up like Jongdae had intended for him to, Chanyeol deflated even more and withdrew himself until they were no longer touching.
"It's not like you're any different. You're helping people all the time."
Before he could ask what he was getting at, Chanyeol visibly snapped back into it, raising his palms in defense.
"I'm not jealous. Look. I know you thought I was jealous of Kyungsoo earlier, but that's really not it. You being such a people person and how you connect well with everyone, it's great. Really, it makes you look even more perfect, but I was just- Look."
Jongdae didn't know whether his stomach was flipping in adoration at the way Chanyeol fell into the habit of repeating words when he got nervous or whether it was due to the compliment he hadn't even attempted to conceal.
"I'm just worried. You're great at... well, doing your thing. But it also got you hurt today and... you just don't look after yourself. You keep looking for others but there's no one to take care of you."
The statement had much more of an impact than Jongdae was willing to let on. It was something only Minseok knew about - his habit of neglecting his own needs. And while his friend was sensitive enough not to touch on the topic often and instead silently watched over him, it was a whole different thing to get openly confronted like that.
"Well..." he hesitated, shuffling his feet a bit, "it wasn't me who got kidnapped or hunted down or suffers from mental disorders."
Chanyeol made a tiny, frustrated noise and placed both hands on Jongdae's shoulders, waiting for the latter to look up at the contours of his face, sparsely illuminated by moonlight.
"So? Everything that's currently happening isn't awful enough for you? It's not stressful, not scary? And even if you think it's not - just because nothing awful happens to you, don't you think you deserve attention and care? That's not how it works! You have every right to have people watching over you. Can't I care for you?" he asked almost desperately, his voice dropping to a low, serious tone.
"Will you let me?"
That was it. The question that had been lingering in the air for days now, maybe even ever since they'd first met. He didn't use the words 'love' or 'boyfriend' or even ask for a date, and yet that was exactly what it was all about. Jongdae stared up at him and for once, he was at a complete loss for words. Misinterpreting his reaction, Chanyeol slowly withdrew his hands to let them awkwardly sink down at his side, eyes widening in upcoming panic.
"Uhm. If you're not into guys, then sorry. Uhm. We could pretend I never asked." he uttered slowly and Jongdae couldn't help a breathy laugh.
"Don't worry, you're lucking out on that one."
Chanyeol nodded a half-surprised "oh" to himself, patiently gauging his reaction.
"It's just... I barely know you. I mean, we've met about two weeks ago. I don't know how long you've been stalking me."
"I wasn't stalking you!" Chanyeol protested so loud that Jongdae had to hush him.
"I just heard you sing one day and it sounded so nice, so I kept coming back to your bakery. I never looked for you anywhere else than at your workplace. I swear." he whispered earnestly as if fearing Jongdae might report him to the police. Or even worse, to Minseok.

Jongdae couldn't fight an amused grin off his face before getting serious again. "While this is still mildly creepy, what I'm trying to tell you is that this all happened so fast. I've-okay, I'm being completely honest here," Jongdae interrupted himself, "I've never been in a relationship before and jumping right into one during all this crazy stuff happening... I don't know if I'm ready for this. I-it's a little scary, okay?"

Scary to think about the what-if's. About what kind of a future would await them. If there was a future.

"Oh." Chanyeol replied numbly.

"I can wait for you?" he offered with a hopeful certainty that twisted Jongdae’s insides.

"Unless this is you dumping me in a gentle manner. Then I won't. That is. I might still do it but I won't show you. Uh. I'm sorry, I'm being a mess again." Chanyeol rambled, and Jongdae internally agreed. An awkward mess. What an accurate description of Chanyeol.

Still, or maybe just because of that, Jongdae shook his head in a patronizing manner.

"No, I'm not! I mean it. I'd really like to be with you, just... can we maybe take it slow? See where it goes? I can't promise you anything right off the bat but still... yeah. I do like you." he ended in an almost casual voice, falling into the habit of masking his nervousness with a seemingly light attitude. What a match they were.

Chanyeol audibly exhaled in relief, and a mere second later he was much closer and their lips were touching. Jongdae felt the taller one relax instantly, sighing quietly into his lips as if this was the moment Chanyeol had been desperately looking forward to. It would be a lie to say that every thought was blown from Jongdae’s mind. This was his first real kiss, a kiss shared with someone who actually made him feel a bunch of things and boy, Jongdae was really, really nervous. He had to move his lips, right? Lucky for him, Chanyeol didn't give him too much time to dwell on the question and gently nibbed on his bottom lip. Jongdae pressed back carefully, trying to mimic his movements. A warm hand came to a rest on the back of his neck, but there was no pressure behind it, and Jongdae blindly reached up to cup his cheek in return, feeling a little awkward while doing so. Chanyeol only placed his other hand above it, keeping it in place. How long was it appropriate, to go on like this? Chanyeol sure appeared like he wasn't minding this, like he had all night to keep seeking his lips with his own. He'd been smart enough to breath through his nose but for some reason, Jongdae was still running out of breath. Before, he'd assumed that kissing would lose its appeal over time. He hadn't expected the sensation to surge in intensity with every second. Maybe it was due to him finally relaxing a bit as he got used to the way their lips moved, giving him a tiny, shaky foundation of comfort and security. Now that he was convinced Chanyeol wouldn't draw away from his inexperienced self any time soon, Jongdae dared to experiment a bit, nipping a bit harder at his upper lip, letting his tongue shyly trace it before retreating quickly. He felt the fingers in his neck twitch and his own cheeks burnt up. Teach me, he asked internally. Teach me how to do it. Please.

Being so pliant and vulnerable was exhilarating, and if it was anyone other than Chanyeol, he knew he'd be downright terrified. But when a warm tongue traced out his own bottom lip, he felt nothing but excitement and curiosity. He parted his lips instantly, but Chanyeol took his time to very slowly trace the shape of his lips to leave moist kisses in its waking. It was oddly endearing, just like everything else about him. Jongdae definitely wasn't prepared for the spark he felt when their tongues actually touched, and his breath hitched audibly.

It was even more exciting, albeit much more difficult, he decided. Even with Chanyeol's gentle strokes, he wasn't sure whether he was doing it right and it felt slightly messy. Was it too wet? Just when he was getting skirmish, Chanyeol returned to open-mouthed kisses, and Jongdae instinctively moved his healthy hand between his shoulder blades, to keep him from stopping in case he'd messed up too badly. The gesture only appeared to edge Chanyeol on further, and he increased the pressure their wet lips met with, a choked groan vibrating into the kiss and alright, he should've known...
Chanyeol's voice would be a terrible turn on. The way he kissed him now - hard and slightly urgent - made his body tingle all over, and the world was spinning slightly as he was further pressed into the wall, one of Chanyeol's hands now securing the back of his head, making him feel trapped in the best way possible. Jongdae was beginning to get frantic, a sense of hot urgency filling his lungs and then Chanyeol was pressing even closer, one leg wedging between his, and to his surprise, a pathetic, choked off whimper escaped his lips. Abruptly waking from his haze, Jongdae pushed against the other's chest and Chanyeol immediately drew back, though his eyes clearly lingered on Jongdae's lips.

For a second, Jongdae just blinked and desperately tried to regain enough of his breath and sanity to form a sentence. "Taking it slow. Remember?" he finally uttered and Chanyeol looked equally dazed, his lips parted slightly as he nodded. "...right. Sorry."

He seemed genuinely sorry, and Jongdae couldn't help noticing how their activities had left his voice just that little bit rougher. It had him fighting the urge to reach out to pull him forwards so they could resume where they'd left off and he slowly shook his head, talking just as much to Chanyeol as to himself. "No, it's alright. Let's... let's go back. It's getting late."

"Yeah." Chanyeol replied breathlessly.

They didn't hold hands on the way back. They didn't say a word about it to Luhan, whose head momentarily popped out of the blanket upon their return. They didn't cuddle. What Jongdae did, however, was place his sleeping bag right next to Chanyeol, as close as he dared to, leaving only about a hand's width between them. Sure, he'd been closer to people before - heck, he and Minseok had even cuddled in their sleep on multiple occasions. But this was definitely different. Even this innocent position had his heart thumping almost painfully at the attentiveness Chanyeol was studying him with, even in the dim light. With a last shy grin, he placed his hand between them for comfort, closed his eyes and a few heartbeats later, he could feel Chanyeol's hand resting on top of his, rubbing slow and warm circles into the skin, gradually coaxing him to sleep.

Jongin had one hand placed on Kyungsoo's upper arm as he led him around the spacious basement area that was covered in dust and slight moisture from where the tower's structure had ultimately lost the daily battle against wind and rain. It wasn't a necessary gesture, as the shorter one obediently followed his steps without a hitch. They crossed the room, until Jongin stopped in front of a broken window where an almost dried puddle of rainwater had been sheltered from the soaring sun. He crouched into the dust and Kyungsoo followed suit, his gaze naturally resting on Jongin. It was something he did a lot, looking at Jongin, that is. And Jongin would always be the one to break down first, to blink and avert his eyes before he could get lost in the dark orbs. Today, Jongin didn't even attempt to return his gaze and instead shrugged off his hoodie to dab the fabric into the puddle, trying not to catch too much dirt. The wet fabric was lifted up to the pale, blood-stained face, and Kyungsoo obediently closed his eyes while Jongin dabbed at the dried streaks of red. It was a tedious process - wetting the blood, smearing it gradually, wiping it off with the dry part in order to save the sparse water, and repeat. Every single inch of skin had to be treated multiple times, everything had to be re-lived over and over again, and Jongin's movements were slow, they had to be. Otherwise Kyungsoo would see him shaking. The occupation created a form of peace contrasting his inner
turmoil. It wasn’t that his thoughts were running wild, rather, his emotions weighed him down heavily, tossing and turning him around. It was a pressure that felt suffocating, a mess that could mainly be reduced to the primal colors blue and red, cold and hot. He was scared. But also angry.

All the edges where the colors blurred and bled into each other… they were too complex for him to understand at this point. With resolute motions, he moved from Kyungsoo’s face to his lower arms where the fabric of his sleeves had ridden up. Cleaned every single finger. His ankles, too. Finally, he dipped his fingers into the water before carding them through midnight black strands until he could feel the crusty red giving in. Kyungsoo was still watching him attentively. He visibly enjoyed being touched like this but was able to read Jongin well enough not to act on it. And somewhere in the way Kyungsoo’s eyes fluttered close just to open again, willing himself not to relax too much, lay the reason for Jongin’s anger. One of them. Kyungsoo was able to read his mood and adapt to it. He was enjoying the touch, but just because it was him, not because he was cleaning all the filth off him. Not because being bathed in blood was bothering him. Jongin peeled the blood-stained hoodie off him and reached for his pants in an almost clinical fashion, opening the button and the fly, and Kyungsoo obediently got to his feet to step out of them, once again without a hint of hesitation. Jongin saw him twitch inside his tight underwear but instead of acting on it, Kyungsoo settled back into his proper sitting position, gauging Jongin's expression. And something about the way he did it stirred all the feelings again. Jongin was so conflicted, so worried and so, so angry.

Before he knew it, he had smashed their lips together, pressing the barely resisting body down until his back collided with the hard floor. Kyungsoo barely even made a sound but his breathing sped up, and smaller but much stronger fingers found Jongin's back. His kisses were hard and demanding, and he could taste Kyungsoo's confusion on his tongue. Hovering over him, he used his free hand to firmly palm every exposed inch of cold skin. The moment Kyungsoo's hands got a little too adventurous, he harshly pressed down on his shoulder and Kyungsoo got it, stilling in his tracks. Jongin had never initiated anything so far. It was always Kyungsoo. Jongin was the one to follow along, willing to take whatever Kyungsoo wanted to give, willing to give whatever Kyungsoo wanted to receive.

It was Jongin waiting for him to make the first move. Who let himself be moved around. Who would spread his legs. And after holding Kyungsoo back during the first night, reasoning that he had no supplies on him, he'd easily given in the next day and the day after that. He harbored no regrets because no matter how hard Kyungsoo would push him, he'd never once felt anything but treasured, maybe even worshiped. Still, today was different, and while Jongin gave in to the sick urge to take some form of control he could barely grasp himself, Kyungsoo wore a look of elation. Instead of showing discomfort, he was sighing soundlessly against the rough way Jongin's hands roamed his body, simply taking the way the shifter nipped and bit around his collarbone.

"You like this?" he muttered against the slightly sweaty skin where he'd left moist kisses and red blotches from spots he'd sunk his teeth into.

Kyungsoo only nodded dazedly, the tiniest whimper leaving his closed lips. It only fueled Jongin’s anger, and he scratched down Kyungsoo’s side particularly viciously, causing the body trapped beneath him to flinch violently. Jongin knew it was wrong, oh so very wrong, but he was torn and desperate and he didn't want Kyungsoo to enjoy it. He wanted him to feel pain, wanted to push his limits, to make him complain until he asked Jongin to stop. But he didn't.

"Mark me. Everywhere." Kyungsoo whispered into his hair, sounding almost yearning.

"Pick me apart."

Jongin was a mess on the inside. He let it show in the way he devoured the other’s lips, languid but hard kisses switching with frantic ones, full of tongue and teeth. Let it show in the gentle movements of his slick fingers exploring and stretching, first one, then two. A contradiction mirroring the fire flickering inside him. Kyungsoo's fingers alternated between clawing and loosening the grip almost spasmodically, as if he was unravelling slowly. It was a gratifying thing to see, in a sick way. Kyungsoo, who always remained in control. Kyungsoo, who was so close to Jongin, and yet
unattainable. Kyungsoo, who would do about anything for him just because it was him, not because he had any sense of what's right or wrong.

Kyungsoo, who had taken another person's life, slowly cut them open and didn't feel the tiniest shred of remorse.

The writhing boy beneath him was quiet, as always. Jongin's harsh breathing almost drowned out the low, choked sound he made when Jongin sank into him, bit by bit.

The anger was seeping out of him, and by the time he was reaching as deep inside him as he possibly could, looking down at the glassy orbs and slightly parted lips, Jongin felt delirious from the pleasure mixing with his overwhelming emotions. Kyungsoo returned his gaze, concentration fighting pure lust as he shakily placed both hands next to his own head, fingers digging into his palm in the rhythm his muscles were fluttering around Jongin. A sign of surrender, just like back then. Only now it was Kyungsoo giving in. Jongin moved slowly, dragged himself out so painfully slow he could feel the shudder racking his slim body.

They were so messed up, both of them.

Pushing himself inside again, torturously slow, earned Jongin a silent moan through Kyungsoo’s still closed lips, their eyes never once straying from each other.

Kyungsoo would do anything for him, and that meant responsibility for Jongin as well. Jongin was the only one who had power over Kyungsoo, and it was up to him how to use it. Just like Kyungsoo had power over him and chose not to do anything with it.

His next thrust was slightly harder, went slightly deeper, had Kyungsoo gasping and finally parting his lips. It truly was selfless love, no matter how rough and demanding Kyungsoo would physically love him; at the end of the day he asked for nothing, and it was all up to Jongin. He chose to pass all the power to Jongin and so Jongin felt that he, as well, should choose not to use it.

Because that's the right thing to do. He knew that.

Jongin intertwined their hands as he put enough force into his movements to see the pliant body below him move across the rough, wooden floor, his strong thighs desperately seeking hold behind Jongin's back. More noises kept spilling from his swollen lips, all small and choked off. Surprised, desperate, lewd.

It was the right thing to do. But that was not how they worked. They were crooked, both of them.

"Kyungsoo."

Dark and slightly teary eyes blinked up at him, and when he tried to tone down on his little groans, Jongin retaliated with an even stronger thrust, making him mewl in surprise, his eyes widening a tiny bit.

"I want you..." he began quietly, voice strained with effort as he kept up the pace and finally placed a hand around Kyungsoo's erection.

He sucked in a breath, his hazy gaze obediently set on Jongin.

"...to never enjoy the death of a person."

His grip tightened, but the strokes were slow, far too slow for Kyungsoo, who was so close he was shaking.

"Ever. Again."

Jongin added, and Kyungsoo opened his mouth, but wasn't able to form words, only cut-off moans escaping him. Jongin waited, waited until Kyungsoo met his eyes and nodded frantically before moving his fingers in earnest. Before giving him the sweet, hot release he craved. Before breaking down himself and pulling him into a tight embrace. Before falling asleep huddled together under nothing but dirty clothes, both of them holding on to each other as if it was the other being their anchor.
"Your ID, Sir?"

With a friendly smile, Junmyeon tapped his finger against the blue brooch adorning his simple dress shirt, and the guards made way immediately. The innocent-looking accessory really did open doors. Literally even, in this case, Junmyeon thought while someone guided him down the hallways of the Cyan Research department. The help was direly needed. Not only was the whole place huge and immensely complex, Junmyeon also hadn't been there all that often before. Even back then, he'd either payed a visit to department A or B, the ones in charge of medical aspects of shifting and research about structures themselves, in order to push along the colonization. Those two were the main departments, taking up about 80% of the space. People rarely talked about the departments C to F, seeing as they weren't exactly relevant to many, rarely produced results and were extremely secretive overall. Junmyeon himself knew that the other departments specialized in different types of anomalies. As far as he knew, they only had one partial seer volunteering as a research object, but they were known for being on the constant lookout for shifters, seers and other people showing unusual behavior. While it wasn't something they rubbed into the public's face, Junmyeon also knew they cooperated closely with the authorities in their efforts to track down shifters.

They turned yet another corner and finally entered through an inconspicuous door into what looked like a laboratory. Junmyeon didn't know much about science, and just tried to appear as casual as possible. His escort hesitantly rapped on one of the closed doors.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

A messy mop of blond hair popped out of a slightly opened door to their right. Sleepy eyes blinked at them from behind thickly framed glasses.

"Oh? Do you have an appointment with anyone?"

Junmyeon ignored the lack of formalities and countered with a stretched out hand and a disarming smile.

"Kim Junmyeon, co-representative of the Blue layer."

He got a slightly raised eyebrow in response, but the man took the gesture nonetheless, being casual and very unfazed by his status.

"Kim Jonghyun. I'm flattered by your attention, but I'm afraid you're not looking for me."

"How can you be so sure?" Junmyeon asked back mildly confused.

The guy made a nonchalant wave of his hand.

"I'm not even working here. You're here to see someone from D? I'll see if anyone's around. Take a seat for now."

He proposed, though not unkindly. Junmyeon followed him into the room he'd come from, bidding his escort goodbye. The room turned out to be a cramped, yet neat, archive. Folders, boxes, stacks of paper - definitely the type of place that was familiar to Junmyeon.

"It's not the actual office, but those guys get a little cranky if people roam around their offices while no one's around. I hope you don't mind."

Junmyeon should mind. He was a representative of one of the most influential Layers and should very well have access to some office and reprimand this aloof guy in his wrinkled lab coat. But Junmyeon was also mild-tempered, not seeking trouble, and he found the archive much more interesting than a plain office room anyway. Not to mention that he preferred this scientist's casual behavior over the awe and wary looks others would give him wherever he went. The people in this facility, on the other hand, had always seemed very unimpressed in general; probably due to the fact that the Layer's respective representatives, Ryeowook and Hangeng, frequented this place. The blond strode away, not even looking particularly hurried, and Junmyeon sank into one of the office chairs, looking around mindlessly. Everything was neatly labeled - from shelves and drawers to multiple boxes and singular files lying around. Despite what people thought of him, Junmyeon was far from being this tidy and could only admire the dedication someone must have put into the organization of this room. He was working on improving this flaw of his, though not terribly so (even Heechul was tidier than him), and as long as he knew his way around what others called 'the mess' that was his office, everything was fine. He skimmed the labels closest to him. Most of them were dedicated to the mechanics of shifting, but there was one shelf that read 'sightings', and Junmyeon edged towards it curiously. He hesitated for no longer than a second before reaching out
to pull out the folder that had apparently been created five years ago. It would be alright. He and
Ryeowook were on extremely good terms, and he'd left him a note at the entrance, briefly summing
up his business with the research department. Therefore, he was pretty sure he wouldn't take this as
Junmyeon invading their territory. Ryeowook was a reasonable man, perfectly mirroring the spirit of
this Layer - he was convinced that science and research were things everybody had a right to know
about. Maybe the people in charge disagreed, but at the end of the day, Ryeowook's word stood
above theirs. With these thoughts in mind, Junmyeon flipped through the pages. Most of them
consisted of texts and only very few of them showed blurry pictures, most of them taken by
surveillance cameras. Sightings. It didn't sound nice, as if they were talking about a rare kind of
animal. And the reports sounded exactly like that, as well. From what he gathered from the folder,
there were about a handful of shifters on their radar. They all had numbers, and a small copy of a
facial composite was printed below every encounter. There was number 12, a middle-aged, scrawny-
looking woman, number 14, a young teenager and nine, a rather old male. Junmyeon stashed away
the folder and searched for the latest one, carelessly crawling over the carpet. The one for the current
year was already as thick as the others even though spring had barely passed. Junmyeon opened it
and quickly flipped the pages, surprise slowly washing over his features. It was mostly number 14
who looked at him from the pages, his youthful features having grown into devastatingly handsome
ones, if the sketch was to be trusted. They were obviously really close to him. There were a lot of
photos showing the lean male shopping - or shoplifting. Unlike most other photos he'd seen so far,
number 14 seemed to be in company an awful lot, too. Junmyeon squinted his eyes and leaned in
until his nose almost touched the paper, but it was impossible to tell whether the people with him
were the ones who went missing on the orange Layer. Then again, they had a promising silhouette,
looked both young and male. It wasn't much, but he felt his senses tingling and skimmed the
description of the latest sighting. The date was about a week ago, the location near some insignificant
storage room on the magenta Layer. A shifter shouldn't be silly enough to move around an industrial
place like this which was littered with cameras, but maybe he really didn't care anymore. The report
stated that he was with four males, all given a certain ID to keep track of the witnesses. Junmyeon
hesitated, the tip of his finger hovering over one of the complex numbers. All the other numbers were
identical, besides the last digit. They had obviously all been created at the same time. The fourth one,
however, looked completely different and even had letters in it. How very strange-
"Excuse me, Sir, may I know what you're doing down there?"
Fuzzy, watery, blurry. It was hard to focus on anything. The world appeared to evade his searching eyes, melting into a stream of muddy colors that lazily swirled, slower than the movements of his head. It was a dizzying experience. Jongdae blinked several times in case something had gotten caught in his eye but the world refused to sharpen its shapes. His limbs felt a little too heavy, and his whole mind and body reacted slowly, as if every thought had to make it to the surface of the thick sea of colors. There was a small window that caught his attention. It was barely anything above a square in the wall, a hole to the outside world, but it reminded him of stormy clouds and flashes of light. With slow steps, he made his way to it. The moment he was only a few steps away from getting a proper view, he suddenly took notice of the low ceiling above him and lifted his gaze. Lush greenery, grass, ropes and even flowers grew from the ceiling, their tips so close they grazed the top of his head. As if in trance, he carefully lifted his hand to let it brush over the grass before cupping an exotic-looking flower. Silky petals, silent life.

The world was upside down. Upside down, uncaring that Jongdae's world remained unmoved, and making him wonder whether he was the one upside down. Making him wonder what it would be like, to sink into the grass, to float up, to turn the world around-

Everything vanished like he'd suddenly ripped off a band-aid and without thinking, his fingers tightened, inevitably tearing off the flower's head as its body disappeared.

"Jongdae?"

It was Chanyeol's voice, quiet. Probing. Thick with sleep. It trickled into Jongdae's muddy brain like hot chocolate, and he slowly turned towards where he lay on the ground, took tentative steps to crouch down beside Chanyeol, offering the palm of his hand where the head of a flower rested, dark pink against his pale skin.

"Shit."

Chanyeol's widened eyes came into view suddenly, and hands were shaking Jongdae into consciousness.

"Are you with us, Jongdae?"

The voice and hands belonged to Luhan, who sat beside him, and then there was Chanyeol's warm hand covering his open palm, trapping the flower between them.

"Wha-?" he only mumbled disoriented, and Chanyeol looked over at Luhan, wide awake and highly alarmed by now.

"You see that? Shit." he repeated with a mix of astonishment and disbelief, retreating his palm and plucking the flower from between Jongdae's fingers to hold it up to Luhan's face.

"I've seen much more than that." the blond breathed out, his grip tightening on Jongdae's shoulders, who winced in protest.

Slowly, his senses were coming back.

"I've been sleepwalking again? Sorry-"

"How did you do that?" Chanyeol interrupted him, his eyes flitting to the flower and back to Jongdae.

The latter looked down at the flower, clogs ticking in his head as everything slowly caught up to him.

"...oh." he finally said, the realization sending goosebumps down his arms. He hesitated, opening and closing his mouth before shaking his head quickly.

"I don't... know. I- it was just a dream. It was just a dream and I'm awake now, right?" he stammered, his voice turning from shaky to slightly panicked.

"Yes." Chanyeol replied firmly, but Jongdae kept shaking his head, talking mostly to himself.

"But the flower's here. That's wrong. I'm still dreaming?"

"No. Calm down, everything's alright." Luhan stated somewhat helplessly, pushing him towards
Chanyeol.
"Just go back to sleep you two."
Chanyeol gently pried away the flower and handed it over to Luhan who distanced himself, speaking to Chanyeol only now, lower and less patronizing.
"Watch over him, will you?"
The tallest only hummed and drew a still confused Jongdae closer. After a bit of fumbling, Chanyeol managed to open his sleeping bag completely and pulled Jongdae down until they were sharing the make-shift blanket and Jongdae had his nose buried somewhere against Chanyeol's clavicle. Chanyeol's skin was slightly damp and his scent heavy, but even if he was still dreaming, Jongdae thought as a firm hand encircled his upper back to keep him in place, there was no way he'd move away right now.

When Jongdae woke up, he felt unreasonably warm and sweaty, one of his arms numb and the other embracing Chanyeol, his fingers half buried under the fabric of the other's shirt. With a start, he realized his current predicament, subtly removed his hand and willed himself not to get aroused. It was difficult with Chanyeol being all over him, one hand loosely draped around his waist, effectively invading all his senses and yes, Jongdae really should put some distance between them. Now. When he sat up, careful to move the sleeping bag in a way that Chanyeol wouldn't feel a gush of cold air, his eyes met Minseok's across the room. If he hadn't been scarlet before, he surely was now. Being the best friend he was, Minseok only shrugged with a small, lopsided grin. He'd probably tease him about it later but not now, where Jongdae was genuinely flustered and confused.

And to think it had been him originally insisting on personal space. Mortifying.
Wait, he'd had this dream... Maybe he'd dreamed a little too vividly, throwing himself at Chanyeol in real life, too. It had been a dream, right?

His gaze wandered across the area where Luhan sat huddled under his blanket below a window. Odd. He was so sure Luhan had set up his camp far away from the window to avoid the cool air. The blond was sleepy but awake, stretching his arms thoroughly. Jongdae was the last one to hold it against him, sleeping on wooden floor wasn't exactly comfortable at the best of time, and by now they could all use some proper sleep. Which reminded him that Minseok never woke him up for a night shift. He'll have to talk to him about that.

The three wordlessly communicated and came to the conclusion that breakfast was overdue in the way hungry people usually do in the mornings. Jongdae volunteered to go and get Jongin and Kyungssoo but Luhan seemed determined to do it himself, leaving Jongdae to unassertively tap his fingers against the sleeping bag Chanyeol shared with him, pondering how to rouse him. Were they in a relationship now? Not technically. But kind of. How exactly did one behave in a 'kind-of' relationship? Jongdae was definitely not confident enough to wake Chanyeol with a kiss or anything. Especially not in front of Minseok, even if said one was purposefully turned away as he rummaged through the bags for something edible. Instead, he decided to bury his hand in the shiny curls (they could also really use a proper bath, Jongdae mentally added) and gently massaged his scalp, careful not to tug at minor knots. Chanyeol stirred almost immediately but the crease in his brow straightened out when the nature of the touch was successfully identified. He could see him sigh rather than hear it, as he leaned into the touch, lazy and content. Jongdae couldn't help a small smile tugging at his lips. Now that didn't go as planned. His thumb wandered over Chanyeol’s forehead one more time before he drew away, getting up in order to assist Minseok - and to drown out his hammering heartbeat. A quiet, confused groan and more stirring followed.

Maybe next time Jongdae would have the courage to wait for Chanyeol to actually open his eyes and meet whatever emotions were mirrored in them.

"What do you mean?"
"It's just what I'm saying, Jongdae. Look, I still have the flower." Luhan calmly said, and everyone in their small circle eyed the already slightly wilted flower head with mixed emotions. Interest on Kyungssoo's features, disturbance on Jongin's and worry on Minseok's.
"I... I have no idea how I did it, I swear." Jongdae mumbled, moving the flower across his palm. So it hadn’t been a dream. Or it had, but not all of it. The thought gave him a light headache. At what point had the dream ended? He felt the comforting weight of Chanyeol’s hand on his shoulder.

"I saw it, Jongdae. This low ceiling with the grass and the flowers... I saw it, too. And then it was gone, just like that." Luhan insisted.

"You saw it? So it was there? It was... actually there. Wow, I don't know whether this calms me down or freaks me out even more." Jongdae joked lightly but the harsh grip on his own forearm only loosened when Chanyeol's hand traveled down his arm; firm, warm, distracting. Jongdae let him.

"Don't panic. There's gotta be a reason for all of this. How long has this been going on?" Minseok asked calmly but Jongdae knew him well enough to hear the hint of urgency.

"I- I don't know. How would I know?"

Suddenly, Kyungsoo's words flashed up in his memory.

*How would you know what you’re seeing exists? How would you know if it doesn't?*

"I saw it too. It was there," Luhan stubbornly threw in, "Maybe you're a seer like me."

"A seer? I don't... know. It seems a little weird, don't you think? It shouldn't go like this, right?"

Jongdae mumbled nervously, the possibilities already running wild in his head.

"Keep calm Dae," Minseok quietly said, a comforting smile gracing his lips, "you didn't do anything wrong. It's just a quirk. You gotta find out its workings, learn to control it and you're good to go. Maybe your body is just confused by all the substances. It may go away for all we know."

"Still, you shouldn't be allowed around windows at night. That was really scary." Luhan added, the hunger finally winning as he bit into a sandwich.

The others followed his example, and Jongdae relaxed a bit, now that he didn’t have all the attention on him, giving him time to think it through himself. Only there was not a lot to think about. Minseok was right, as usual. He had no chance of finding the reason to his sudden nightly wanderings. All he could do at this point was accept this tendency in order to properly confront it.

"That's also the reason you didn't wake me for a watch shift, right?" Jongdae asked around a mouth of toast. Admittedly, it was a little stale and crushed with all the happenings that went down the day before. but no matter how traumatizing, the human body still needed food. A pretty sobering thought.

Luhan shrugged, dismissing his worries.

"It's okay. Minseok and I handled it alright. I was awake either way, so it would've been a waste to keep you up as well."

Right. Now that he mentioned it, Jongdae noticed how tired he looked. Luhan always looked pretty unhappy in the early mornings, but now it seemed like his eyes would stay red for a little longer.

"Because of... yesterday?"

The seer shook his head again, eyes wandering down to the floor.

"We're so close," he murmured in a hollow voice, "the sight keeps me from sleeping."

The dusty, wooden floor was solid, and Jongdae was actually grateful he wasn't a seer. Luhan hadn't been too colorful with his description of this place and yet the information had sufficed. Seeing violence and abuse being performed on innocent children... Jongdae didn't want to imagine what it'd be like, to see this horror playing out before your very own eyes, day in and out. His eyes wandered over to Kyungsoo at this train of thoughts. The pale boy looked unblemished and unfazed, mindlessly eating from a cold container of fried noodles, as if the gory happening from the day before had never even taken place. It made it all too easy for Jongdae to forget about it for now. Maybe forever, if he managed to. He had his fair share of doubts but continuing to freak out would help neither Kyungsso nor himself.

"Kyungsoo," he quietly called, the voice probing.

As expected by now, the dark orbs instantly flitted up to meet his. When they'd first met him, Kyungsso had refused to acknowledge any of them. He was adapting pretty quickly already, Jongdae reminded himself. Kyungsso was changing, constantly. Like everyone, really. And even considering the previous day, even with all the blood that had been running down his face, Jongdae still stubbornly felt safe around him. Alright, maybe not entirely safe, not yet. But he would soon.
Despite all of Kyungsoo’s unpredictability, he found him to be very straight-forward and actually willing to open up if one went about it the right way.
"Say... how do you see the world? If you don't mind me asking." Jongdae questioned, trying not to rush himself with the sandwich so he wouldn't suffer from a stomach ache later on. Kyungsoo blinked slowly, his eyes flitting through the room before settling back on him.
"Right now?"
"Yeah," Jongdae agreed, breath hitching barely audibly when Chanyeol placed his chin on his shoulder, "right now. If that's okay with you."

What was he doing? Fortunately, no one seemed inclined to address the subtle display of affection as everyone was more than busy with their breakfast, with Minseok explaining a few of the ingredients to an astounded Luhan. He'd noticed the air between Kyungsoo and Jongin being different, but only Chanyeol's gesture tipped him off as to how exactly. While Kyungsoo seemed nonchalant as ever, Jongin looked fidgety. They were sitting so close to each other that their sides were pressed together but Jongin was still reserved in terms of bodily contact. No hand draped around his waist or shoulders, no intertwined fingers. Unusual.
"Clogs." Kyungsoo finally said, his eyes still roaming the place.
"Many, many clogs."
Jongdae nodded along, gazing at the twisting metal and asking himself whether Chanyeol was able to understand mechanisms this grand.
"Dark wood. A bat."
He had to look up and into the shadowy corners and when he found the little bat, Kyungsoo had already moved on, lowering the wooden chopsticks in favor of letting his fingers glide over the floor, without paying it any attention.
"Shadows. They're moving slowly. A three-colored cat. It only has one eye. It's blue. A girl with red hair. Sticky wadding."
He saw Minseok tensing, his gaze curtly flitting over to Kyungsoo before he directed his attention back on Luhan, leaving them to their little private conversation. The way he listed all these things in a clear and slow manner sounded simple and straight to the point, just like Kyungsoo himself was. But it also included oddly chosen details, as if he was falling into a routine dictated by the hospital he'd basically grown up in. Maybe he was.
"How do you know it's sticky?" Jongdae asked, and maybe this wasn't what people normally asked, but Kyungsoo turned his attention back on him and then down at his own fingers, which were still moving over the wood.
"Because it's red and crusty. From the bloody foam."
Jongdae stared at him, urging the flashbacks of bright red sprays on white skin away, his eyes traveling down to Kyungsoo's fingers which hovered over the ground, moving through the air with purpose. A purpose he wasn't capable of understanding. When their eyes met again, Kyungsoo looked nothing but patient, gauging his reaction. He could just as well be lying to see how Jongdae would take it. Maybe he was waiting for him to freak out. Or to assure him it's fine, like the doctors had probably done before. The truth was, Jongdae had no idea how to react.
"Oh. Alright. Thanks for telling me." he said somewhat lamely, though the reaction seemed good enough for Kyungsoo, who picked up on his chopsticks to resume eating as if the conversation was over. Still, Jongdae did have a few questions that only surfaced as the seconds ticked by.
"Does it make you uncomfortable?"
"What?"
"Anything."
Kyungsoo considered the question before shaking his head.
"No."
"That's good."
It should be awkward but Jongdae had gotten used to this conversational style and found it surprisingly comfortable - though he was fairly certain Kyungsoo would use fuller sentences if the others weren't around. Still, a definite change of routine for his usual, chatty self.
While it was intriguing to talk to him, there was no pressure at all, giving both of them time to thoroughly consider their responses.

"Why is it good?"

"Well. I'm glad you're not suffering."

"Because you feel bad when things suffer." Kyungsoo stated neutrally.

"You're not a thing."

"Everything's a thing." Kyungsoo replied with calm certainty.

Jongdae leaned his cheek against Chanyeol's hair that had been tickling him for awhile now. He felt his breath fanning over his neck. Steady. Unobtrusive but present.

"Living beings aren't the same as things."

"So when they die, they become things again?" Kyungsoo retorted, unfazed. Jongdae couldn't help exhaling in amused disbelief. He was dead sure that most people Kyungsoo had been surrounded by in the past had either brushed off or forgotten how smart he actually was.

"You... you're really some... thing."

Kyungsoo heard the emphasis on the last syllable and a tiny smile etched across his features at the acknowledgment of his thoughts. Jongin smiled even wider at their exchange, though a certain degree of misery couldn't be denied. Maybe he should try talking to Jongin in private later. A warm kiss was placed at the side of his neck and Jongdae shivered involuntarily. No one had seen it but Jongdae definitely wasn't imagining it.

"You mind handing me the water?" he went on in his best impression of casualty and while Kyungsoo turned to do so, he saw his face contorting in a sudden fit of pain. Instantly overcome by worry, Jongdae leaned away from Chanyeol's touch and towards Kyungsoo, inspecting him closer.

"Are you in pain?"

Kyungsoo nodded once, not even trying to hide it.

"Where?"

"My back." he replied in a monotone manner, already reaching for his noodles again.

"Your back? Why does it hurt?" Jongdae asked, puzzled, and Kyungsoo looked at him unblinking.

"The floor was hard." he simply stated and suddenly, Jongin turned very red next to him.

"Ah. No kidding, it really wasn't comfortable. I can apply some cream later, if you want to. If we still have some, that is." Jongdae offered easily, and Luhan choked on his sandwich, making a pathetic gurgling sound as Minseok patted his back.

"Not necessary. T-thank you but, uhm. I'll do that later." Jongin stammered, finally drawing Kyungsoo in closely and yes, Jongdae was still very much confused over their violent reactions. Was he afraid he'd steal Kyungsoo away? Why was Luhan so flustered anyway? What was he missing out on?

"Let it go, Dae. I think you're making a fool out of yourself." Minseok suggested lightly, obviously not being on the exact same page himself, but if his raised eyebrow that had Jongin blush even harder was anything to go by, he had a better idea than him. Jongdae was about to start whining and pester his friend until he shared his assumption when Minseok's expression suddenly hardened and he flew around, one hand flitting over the ground and grabbing one of their guns in one smooth motion, pointing it at a corner behind himself. In the blink of an eye, Chanyeol had wrapped his arms around him protectively while the others went into a defensive position of their own. There, half hidden in the shadows, was a silhouette Jongdae would have never noticed between the giant metal mechanisms.

"Come out. Slowly." Minseok commanded calmly, making hand signals towards Luhan with his free hand. Jongdae's eyes stayed glued to the silhouette and a guy stepped out, one hand clutching a knife, the other half-raised. He heard Chanyeol's sharp intake of breath and his grip tightened to a point where Jongdae wasn't sure whether it was meant to protect or seek protection.

"Put down the knife. If you don't comply, I'll shoot. You better believe me." Minseok ordered steadily, his gaze cold as he watched the stranger. He was tall and lean, exotic features on tan skin, sandy blonde hair with obvious specks of dirt. Alertness and exertion mixed on his features, and Jongdae wondered whether he was hurt somewhere. Chanyeol was positively shaking now and
when the blonde guy made a sudden movement, the world spun around and Jongdae was almost brutually thrown to the ground, pinned down by Chanyeol, who tried to shield him with his own body. The air was knocked out of his lungs with a small cry, but when he'd wrenched himself free to turn around, he saw the blond already lying on the floor with Luhan still pointing the stun gun at him, daring him to stir.

He didn't. They all gathered around him, Luhan still keeping his position.
"Who is that?" Minseok mumbled warily, and before Chanyeol could attempt to clear it up, Jongin recognized him and backed off with a gasp.
"It's the guy who chased us through Cyan, after that explosion." he uttered, looking at the figure on the ground with a mix of fear and intrigue.
"Why is he here? Did he follow us?"
"Either way, we gotta tie him up first. I don't want any nasty surprises when he comes to. Is he a trained assassin?" Minseok asked over his shoulder, addressing Chanyeol as he got to work, searching for a suitable rope.

Chanyeol shrugged helplessly.
"I don't know. I would think he is, from the way he's attacked me before." he agreed unsurely.
"Then he hasn't followed us." Jongdae threw in to everyone's surprise, pointing at the guy's feet.
"He's injured. If he's trained, he wouldn't be so stupid as to go after someone in this state."

Luhan kneeled beside him and absently handed the gun over to Chanyeol, who held it loosely in his shaky fingers - even though it was nothing but a stun gun. Unlike Luhan, Jongdae was well-aware of the taller one's jumpy state and gently pried it out of his fingers.
"He's right. The bandages are soaked. Whatever it is, it's right above the achilles tendon and can't be pretty."
"Baekhyun." Chanyeol breathed out, one hand still gripping Jongdae's shoulder tightly.
"That's Baekhyun's doing. He probably cut the tendon. It would be like him."

Luhan inhaled sharply, his face scrunching up in sympathetic pain.
"Nasty." he mumbled and went to assist Minseok in tying him up.
"But strategic." Chanyeol retorted, and while Jongdae felt highly grossed out at the mere thought of having his tendon injured, let alone cut, he couldn't disagree. That guy was taller than Baekhyun, more fit and trained to kill. Baekhyun wasn't any of those things, but Jongdae could imagine him being quick and agile. And willing to play dirty.
"So if he wasn't following us, what's he doing here?" Jongin inquired, asking the most pressing question. It was Luhan who came up with an idea first.
"Maybe he was on his way home to lick his wounds. Maybe..." he hesitated, his eyes flitting down repeatedly, "maybe he wanted to go down there. B-but he couldn't, because one of us was always around and awake. After all, there are barely any weapons on him and if he'd wanted to attack us, he would've done so at night."

It made sense.
"We gotta question him to find out." Minseok stated, looking with hesitation down at the knot he'd made until Luhan re-tied it a bit, mumbling something about traditional knots.
"Jongin, what do you say? Is there any suitable place on this height level? We really shouldn't cause any more noise here."

The shifter considered this, feeling the air around him and wandering around the room, vanishing and reappearing mid-step. No matter how straining it was to take people with him, whenever Jongin was on his own, shifting appeared to come as natural to him as breathing; it was a sight that would never cease to fascinate Jongdae.

He quickly found a place, and this time he took Chanyeol with him first, to see whether the Layer in question was a common one. They decided to move there, entirely brought over by Jongin since no one knew the code to this particular place. He assured them that it was fine, that taking people was getting much easier over time and the progress was indeed visible in his relaxed features. He only needed Jongdae's hand by now, and the dusty clock tower gave way for a cave with a ceiling so low,
it grazed Chanyeol's hair. Dim light came from a nearby source and together with Luhan, he scoped out the surroundings until they found a nearby exit that gave them an excellent view over a landscape consisting solely of mountains. The ground was so far away that it got lost in the fog, and the sight made Luhan slightly nauseous. Still, this was a completely uninhabited place, and the thought comforted Jongdae. The poor translator almost fell off the cliff when an angry cry resounded from deep inside the cave. They returned to the sight of an angrily hissing assassin who was tied to a heavy stone structure in a secluded, tiny part of the cave. Stray flames were licking at the stone, and if it wasn't for Chanyeol sitting in a corner of the room, they'd certainly fill the air with poisonous smoke. Their captive was desperately fighting the restraints, but it was futile. Jongin and Kyungsoo had stayed behind, and that left Minseok standing in front of him, the gun in his hand dangling loosely by his side.

"I demand you to tell us everything about you and the people who sent you."
"No-" the blonde hissed between clenched teeth, pulling at the rope. Jongdae padded over to the spot where Chanyeol was crouching against a wall, legs drawn up tightly. He looked extremely wary and unhappy, and even smooth strokes through his hair and over the back of his neck or shoulders didn't help ease the tension out of him.

"You do realize that you have no choice? I clearly have the upper hand. Your life is in my hand. And I want nothing but information. If I would have wanted to kill you, I'd have already done so." Minseok had his mask back on. The one he had acquired during the year Jongdae had failed him. If he hadn't known him so well, it would've scared him. And while he was certain Minseok wouldn't just shoot this guy without a reason, he still felt an uneasy prick in his stomach, wondering how far Minseok would go in order to get information out of him.

"Fuck you- you can kill me, I don't care-" the blonde guy huffed viciously, though he was already noticeably breathy.

His sweaty skin was glistening in the flickering light and Jongdae saw him shiver irregularly. Suddenly, he reminded him of Minseok.

"I won't kill you. That would be too easy. I know I just gotta keep you alive and the suffering will come all on its own, right?" Minseok replied calmly with his arms crossed.

"I won't tell you anything!" he almost squeaked, a sudden surge of pain apparently racking his body; which looked more and more fragile with every passing second.

"We'll see about that. I've got a lot of time, you know?"

Jongdae caught a movement from the corner of his eye and saw Jongin and Kyungsoo peeking inside with the shifter's hand hovering over the smaller one's shoulders without touching him. Right. Something was off. Since everything seemed in control, Jongdae got to his feet and stepped over to them. The shifter looked a little sheepish, as if they'd been caught sneaking in on adult's business, but Jongdae just flashed him a weak but inviting grin.

"You have some time to spare?" he asked quietly and the brunet nodded, curiosity obvious on his features. Jongdae looked back to where Chanyeol sat, his eyes repeatedly flitting from the captive back to Jongdae and it really stung to leave him alone like this. Only for a few minutes, Jongdae told himself. If I'm not completely mistaken, this is gonna get much more ugly later, and that's when I'll be back.

An idea popped up in his mind and he quietly addressed Kyungsoo, who obediently teared his fascinated gaze away from the tied up male to look at him.

"I'd like to talk to Jongin for a bit. Would you mind keeping Chanyeol a little company?"

His eyes wandered to Jongin with reluctance clearly written all over his wide orbs, and Jongdae lowered his voice a little, so no one else would hear his next words.

"I'm trusting you with Chanyeol, yeah? He could really use some comfort."

Kyungsoo looked over to said bundle of misery and back to him, nodding slowly as he got the underlying message - I'm entrusting the person I treasure most to you in exchange for you doing the same.

"You think I can do that?" he asked neutrally, and Jongdae smiled encouragingly.

"I'm sure your company will help him. Sometimes, it's enough not to be alone."
Sure enough, Kyungsoo squeezed Jongin's arm a last time, seeking his eyes for permission before slowly going over to Chanyeol and sitting down next to him, close enough to have their sides touching each other. Chanyeol shot him a surprised look before doing his best to ignore him, his attention drawn in by a strangled whimper of the assassin. In a swift and nonchalant motion, Kyungsoo plopped his head onto the other's shoulder and all the flames in the room flickered precariously when Chanyeol flinched, throwing a disturbed look at the shorter male who didn't even spare him a glance, much less move an inch. Despite everything, Jongdae grinned slightly. Full of surprises, as always. Chanyeol was obviously uncomfortable, but Jongdae figured that any distraction would be welcome. Jongin kept throwing wondrous looks back at the two while Jongdae guided him away.

"You really know how to talk to Kyungsoo," the shifter stated as soon as they were out of hearing range, sitting close to the cliff and looking up at the cerulean sky. "It's not that difficult. I think Kyungsoo is less complicated than he appears to be. It also helps talking to him on eye-level. Figuratively speaking." Jongdae shrugged, throwing a tiny pebble and watching it travel down the rocky walls. Jongin hummed pensively, his fingers grazing over the stones in search for small ones to join Jongdae in his useless occupation. "So... what did you want to talk about?"
"Huh? I don't know. Nothing special." Jongdae replied casually, drinking in the warm rays of sunlight. "Oh..."
Silence engulfed them, only interrupted by faint echoes from the cave and the occasional stone bouncing off the solid rock below. "Though if you want to tell me what's gnawing at you, I'd be glad to listen." Jongdae offered offhandedly, and Jongin's arm froze mid swing, clutching a greenish stone. "I'm not... I mean. How did you know?" he asked with wide, flustered eyes. Jongdae playfully nudged his side. "I see everything," he stated dramatically, "you can tell mommy, don't worry about it." "Did you just feminize yourself...?"
"You want to call me daddy?" Jongdae asked with a raised eyebrow and Jongin made a grimace. "Uh, no. That's weird."
"I know right? So what's bothering you?" Jongdae quipped, quick to get back on track. Jongin's fingers nervously traced over the smooth surface of the stone. "It's about... Kyungsoo."
Jongdae hummed and leaned back on his hands to gaze at the sky, patiently waiting for Jongin to continue. "Promise you won't... do anything? Like, talking to Kyungsoo about it or anything? Please don't." Jongin asked in a way that sounded much like a kid being afraid to get scolded. "Yeah. Sure. If that's what you want." Jongdae replied easily and a bit of tension left the shifter. "I'm afraid I might have done something terribly wrong." he stated slowly, still tentative. "Why would you think so?"
"I'm- I did." Jongin mumbled lowly, cutting himself off half-way. The words kept catching in his throat and Jongdae didn't blame him. Surely Jongin had never had a lot of people to confide in. With the open and affectionate attitude he usually showed, Jongdae tended to forget how little he knew about the shifter but in moments like these, it became apparent. "Take your time. Calm down. I'm sure I won't judge you."
Jongin inhaled deeply until he'd gathered the courage. "I'm afraid I might be using Kyungsoo's... affection for me against him. In a way that's really bad." Jongdae scrunched his brows together in confusion. "How exactly?"
"Yesterday, when this incident happened," he began and Jongdae kept his face perfectly straight
even though the bloody memory made his stomach churn, "I was really worried about him. But I also felt... guilty. Because it was me who brought along Kyungsoo. And since he is... since he has these problems, I feel like he's less responsible. Like I should have held him back. Stopped him. Told him beforehand not to do this. But-

"You couldn't have been prepared for this. No one was. You're not responsible for everything Kyungsoo does. He's an individual." Jongdae calmly intervened and the shifter groaned in response. "I know! I've been telling myself that. Not enough to actually make me believe it, but I'm trying. The thing is," he pressed on, keen to get it off his chest, "I've also been kinda... angry. At him but mostly at myself and... I made him promise not to do it again."

"You... made him promise?" Jongdae asked carefully, picking up on the emphasis Jongin used, unsure of where this was going.

The shifter looked behind them to make sure no one was watching them a last time. "I slept with him." he then exhaled in one breath, the tips of his ears turning red already.

Jongdae's mouth formed a silent 'o' as he took in the new information, willing the dusty pink off his cheeks to look unfazed. Now that the spell was broken, the information flooded out with no stopping.

"It's manipulative, right? I'm using sex to make Kyungsoo do something when I know already that he wouldn't deny me anything. I'm manipulating him. He would never do such a thing to me. It almost feels like rape, but it really wasn't, I swear! But still. It's so... wrong..." he trailed off into a whisper with watery eyes.

Perplexed, Jongdae's gaze wandered over the stones as he tried to process this. It wasn't a matter to take lightly -and most certainly not one he'd have expected- and so he chose his words carefully. "You didn't do anything without his... consent?" he asked slowly, probing, and Jongin rapidly shook his head.

"No. Really, I didn't. He seemed like he was... enjoying himself." he ended awkwardly, clearly uncomfortable sharing these details and Jongdae surely was the last person to ask him for more explicit information.

"That's good. It was not non-consensual. You can wipe that concern off your mind."

He nodded, and the way he looked at him with wide eyes made it painfully obvious how desperate Jongin was for advice or even just anyone to help him sort out the mess that was his thoughts. "The issue about manipulation... it's... tricky. I get the problem. And it is a problem, you're right on that," Jongdae began, watching the guilt wash over his face and hurriedly changing directions, "but you're also aware. You know you shouldn't be doing this. And this was a pretty extreme situation."

"I won't tell you that you did the right thing. But neither could I tell you what would have been. We both know that Kyungsoo is very, very dependent on you. It's understandable that this arrangement makes every issue extremely delicate to handle. Again, you shouldn't focus too much on the sex part of the story, since you could have probably just as well made him promise any other way..."

Jongin bit his lips, anxiously waiting for his conclusion. "I think... maybe sometimes, there is no 'right thing to do'. Or maybe there is, but we can't think of it. Kyungsoo might see the world differently. But actually killing someone out of fascination..."

Jongdae shook his head, trying to wrap his mind about this. "You could go as far as you can and tell yourself that only our own norms tell us that killing is wrong. But... damn, this is really difficult. It's difficult because we don't know Kyungsoo too well. But from what I've seen so far, he's lacking an emotional connection to anyone or anything with you being the only exception. If there's no connection, he won't feel any remorse or empathy for destroying it, simple as that," Jongdae went on, clenching his left hand which served as a painful proof of his theory, "and if that's how it's supposed to be, there would be no chance to change that and to be honest, I see how you're doubting you'd even have the right to try. But, and that's crucial if you ask me..."

He saw Jongin's eyes light up in expectation and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Kyungsoo is changing. He's willing to form emotional attachments. They don't come easy to him,
he may be a little slow. But he's getting there. And one day, if he's made it far enough, he'll be grateful you stopped him from doing things like this. I'm sure."
"You think so?"
Jongdae shot him a lopsided smile, loosening the tense atmosphere.
"Have some faith in him. And in yourself, too."
The shifter lowered his gaze to the green stone still resting in his hands and slowly reached out to throw it at last. He reconsidered last second, though, and let his hand sink. Jongdae smiled.
"No more evasion, no more running away."
"Alright. I won't do it again if there's any way to avoid it." he said clearly, obviously speaking as much to himself than to Jongdae.
"And I'll... talk to Kyungsoo about that. Apologize properly."
"That's a nice idea," Jongdae agreed, getting to his feet and dusting off his clothes, "I'm sure he'll appreciate it. Your uneasiness is rubbing off on him. Help him out a little, the poor thing's no mind reader."
"Not like you are?" Jongin asked with a shy smile, and Jongdae brushed him off, laughing.
"Me? I'm no mind reader, I just like meddling." he joked with a cheesy wink.
"I'll go back first and send you Kyungsoo, so you two can have your talk." Jongdae proposed, stretching his arms one last time before heading back when Jongin's hand found his pant leg.
"Thank you." he earnestly said, looking up at Jongdae with something he's mostly seen in Minseok's eyes up to that day - genuine trust.
"It's mom to you." Jongdae only said lightly and finally Jongin smiled as well.
"Fine. Thank you, mom."

"Please- please let me go, I don't know anything-"
Chanyeol didn't speak up about him sending over Kyungsoo.
In fact, Chanyeol didn't say anything at all, and while it had been an unusual, albeit peaceful, type of silence in the morning, this was just unnerving.
"I don't, I really don't, please."
The whimper were growing in pitch and desperation and by now, even Luhan had left the room, unwilling to watch this any longer.
The blonde guy - who went by Tao - was close to actually crying.
"I won't take your lies." Minseok gave back strictly, completely unfazed by the wrecked male. Even the dim flames licking at the stone seemed gloomy, cowering below Minseok's command and flinching away from Tao's sobs, a mirror to Chanyeol's soul. Jongdae couldn't do anything to alleviate the pressure besides drawing him in close.
"I'm not lying, just let me go, I won't attack you, promise-"
"Oh, I know you're lying. You are going to attack me. At least when you find out what I've found out."
Minseok pulled something from his pocket, holding up what looked like a slim necklace blinking in the light with a small pendant dangling from it. The effect was immediate, and the assassin gasped desperately.
"Mine. It's mine, give it back to me-"
The choked speech pattern, the heat waves meeting shivers... Jongdae didn't have to get closer look to know his pupils would be blown, too.
"I'll give it to you. If you give me the information I want."
"I can't. I don't know anything. I need this thing, you don't understand-"
Minseok swung the pendant from right to left before skillfully snatching it mid-air.
"Oh, I understand pretty damn well," he began with a lower, softer sound, "this... is what keeps you running. An emergency dose, I assume. What I know for sure is that you're gonna sing very soon because you want this, and you're pathetic enough to beg for it."
Whatever curse the captive had on his lips was washed away by whimper and choked off by ragged
breathing.

Even if he'd receive the pill, there was no reason for Tao to assume he'd get out of this alive. There was no reason to tell them anything. And yet Jongdae knew he would do exactly that and anxiously waited for Tao's breaking point, for his own sake. He wanted to put a halt to his suffering. And to Chanyeol's, too. The brunet was positively shaking, something he only noticed because they were pressed together so closely. He was staring ahead blankly, a closed-off expression he'd never seen on him before. Jongdae nuzzled his nose against the side of his face, grazing his ear and throat, even leaving slow and lasting kisses occasionally, but as soon as an especially loud and tortured sob echoed off the cave's walls, Chanyeol would tense from head to toe, defensively trying to repress the shivers.

It took long. Really long. Jongdae expected the rush of withdrawal symptoms to ebb down with time, just like they'd done with Minseok, but instead they only grew worse. The pained whimpers went to full out wailing and screaming and he knew that Tao's arms had to be extremely bloody by now, chafing against the rock behind him. Curt refusals turned to pleas, pleas to anger and back to pleas again. He kept retching but there was nothing in his stomach in the first place, and at some point he just begged Minseok to shoot him. It was nothing short of miserable, and if it had gone gone on any longer, Jongdae might have started crying himself, asking Minseok to stop. But as much as he knew it was futile, he also knew Minseok wasn't as perfectly unfazed as he made himself out to be. It was probably around late afternoon, maybe even early evening, when Tao finally cracked.

"It was just a mission! I'm doing what I'm told to- I tried to kill the phoenix but I failed, and my owner punished me for weeks- No one sent me, I just wanted to make up for my failure- please, please-" he choked out, his voice raw from exertion.
"Who is your owner?"
"I'm not allowed to call him by his name- I don't know, Kay, people call him Kay! I don't know his real name."
"You're from this camp?" Minseok cut in and Tao nodded, his face puffy from crying too much.
"Yes, yes! I've been raised there, raised by my owner. He takes care of me, he's responsible for me and I've never disappointed him before."
"How many owners are there? How many are like you?"
Tao wheezed for air as his body struggled to keep up with the pain. Jongdae feared he might lose his consciousness at any time.
"I don't know, the number of owners changes... I think there are maybe- maybe forty people who absolved the training, like me?"
"Alright. Where exactly is this place? Give me the code."
"I shouldn't-"
"The code." Minseok commanded briskly and the blonde flinched as if he'd been slapped.
"Six, c, zero. It's 66CC00, green-"

Minseok relaxed barely noticeably, going into details now that the most pressing questions were answered.
"Are all of you trained assassins?"
"No. We do everything we are told to, but I'm good at this, really good- I'm my owner's favorite-" "You're a dog." Minseok spat out coldly and looked down at the shivering mess. "Nothing but a pathetic dog, conditioned to please. Begging to get another treat." Jongdae mumbled his name in warning but his friend paid him no attention.
He felt like Tao would break down completely but instead he looked at him defensively, almost defiantly.
"So what? I don't care what you say. If my owner treats me well, I can be his dog! It has nothing to do with you!" he yelled with his last strength and the room grew silent except for his labored breathing. Minseok leaned in close, just close enough to be out of reach and his voice dropped in volume but didn't lose vigor.
"You disgust me." he stated slowly.
"Because you're weak. Fucking weak."
He produced the pill from the pendant, ignoring Tao's expectant gasps, and made sure he got a good look at it, before popping it into his own mouth.

Tao screamed. Screamed so loud Jongdae couldn't keep his body from shaking. The blond thrashed and yelled but Minseok ignored it all, turning on his heels to leave the room, gesturing towards Chanyeol to do the same. Said one jumped to his feet immediately, one hand gripping Jongdae's upper arm hard enough to bruise. The fire vanished and they stumbled outside, down the cavern that was dimly illuminated by moonlight, the angry screams following them.

I hate you, he said.

I hate you, over and over again. Angry, desperate, sobbing.

"Min..." Jongdae began lowly and when Minseok stopped all of a sudden, he almost ran into him. Without words, without even making any eye contact at all, he blindly shoved his hand against Jongdae's chest, who was conscious enough to catch the pill. He didn't say a word as he distanced himself into the cave with swift steps. Jongdae didn't attempt to follow him, looking down at the pill in his hands. When Minseok was seriously mad, he needed time to himself. His free hand unconsciously found Chanyeol's, which was grabbing him so tightly it was trembling. Minseok had only faked the move. Now it was up to him, he had passed the decision over to Jongdae. Should he give him his drug or not?

He didn't know what it was. Tao was in so much pain and so desperate. But it would only postpone the pain for a little.

But what if he wasn't like Minseok? What if the pain would grow and grow and kill him? What if he bit his own tongue?

But if he would decide to give him the pill... in his current state there was no way to do it without getting hurt. And if Tao would recover, he'd probably become an even bigger threat, determined to kill them all, even if just to clear the evidence-

Jongdae didn't know what to do. The seconds passed by and he stared at the incriminating, dark pill, heard the eternal wails weighing him down and he really, really didn't know. Whatever he did, he could be responsible for a life. The weight of his decision was heavy enough to make his stomach ache.

"Please don't."

He wouldn't have heard the whisper over the screams if it wasn't for Chanyeol's close proximity, his lips almost brushing over the shell of his ear.

"Please don't go to him."

He looked over his shoulder at the barely lit silhouette of Chanyeol. He couldn't see his face and for once wasn't able to imagine what his expression was like. What did Chanyeol look like when he was so frightened he refused all reason, so shaken that he actually asked for comfort? Jongdae looked at the black silhouette and racked his brain for any occasion where Chanyeol had genuinely asked for something, just to come up blank. He would always give, give, give. There were no demands with him, no inconveniences, nothing. Now that he was genuinely asking him something for the first time, Jongdae knew he wouldn't be able to deny him.

With a small, soundless sigh he finally slipped the pill into his pocket, nodding weakly, and Chanyeol was quick to pull him away; away from the screams, though Jongdae doubted they'd be able to truly escape them.

There was no denying that Jongdae was happy to accept anything taking this decision from him, but at the same time he kept thinking that even if this was the wrong course of action, he didn't feel bad for choosing Chanyeol. This wasn't about a struggling murderer, not about an unstable boy, not even about his distressed best friend. This was about Chanyeol. Maybe he wasn't even the one in the biggest need of help right then, but he was the one Jongdae wanted to help most. He wanted to support and anchor him, to be there and comfort him until he'd be able to rest and the strong Chanyeol was back. The one who'd give out easy smiles, but also longing looks reserved for him only. Who was willing to help anyone but prioritized Jongdae above them all.

Who would always be nearby, always ready to catch him should he ever stumble.

Jongdae squeezed his hand as they walked deeper into the cave with their sleeping bag to get as far
away from the screams as possible.
He could just as well be the one catching him and it was time to prove that.

Chanyeol couldn't sleep. That wasn't surprising. In fact, he'd even told Jongdae beforehand when they were tightly huddled together under their blanket.
'The others will watch over him, he won't get free' Jongdae had assured him but of course that changed nothing. Still, even though he'd warned him, Jongdae was caught by surprise whenever he awoke to the sound of Chanyeol's silent, controlled breathing.
While Jongdae was undeniably tired, the whole day had been pretty unsettling and even though the gravel beneath them was better than solid rock, it was still far from comfortable so he wasn't surprised to find himself waking up yet again with Chanyeol's face buried in his chest. He absently stroked through his curls just like before, hoping to coax the taller one into a light sleep. The grip around his waist tightened, just to loosen up again. As if he was happy to confirm Jongdae's presence before trying to relax. Being so emotionally drained obviously tired him out as well, and Jongdae wondered whether it would be alright to try and distract him with kisses. Would that be inappropriate? Jongdae was pretty sure it'd be something he himself would welcome, but he had no idea whether Chanyeol would be up for this or not. Only one way to find out, he thought in fake-bravado.
"Can I kiss you?" he whispered into Chanyeol's hair. The fingers on his back stilled their faint motions.
He didn't even withdraw from Jongdae's chest and his voice came out muffled.
"Yeah. Sure..."
It came out slowly, hesitant almost.
Catching himself, Chanyeol drew away, and by the faint warmth and absence of curls, Jongdae assumed he had tilted his head to offer himself.
"You don't have to ask." he mumbled, and while it was pitch black, Jongdae was certain there was a weak smile gracing his lips. Or maybe there wasn't. Maybe Chanyeol dropped the pretence when no one was there to witness it. It tugged at his own heart, how Chanyeol felt obligated to him. As if it was his duty to be open and available for Jongdae at all times, just because he'd confessed to him. That was not how he wanted it to be.
With a deep exhale, Jongdae fumbled in the darkness, his fingers finding the back of Chanyeol's head and gently pushing him back against his chest, placing a firm kiss on his forehead on the way.
"Do you mind telling me what happened? Just... it's up to you." Jongdae mumbled tentatively and got no physical reaction in response, as if Chanyeol had been expecting him to ask this question. He shifted a bit, making himself a little more comfortable and tilting his head so he could get enough air.
Then he started talking, his low voice attempting to fill the hollowness of darkness.
"I can tell you, it's alright. It was the day when I decided I couldn't do this anymore. Back then. I was on Black-1, right on the battlefield, in the middle of all the shots and the chaos-"
"Why?"
"I don't know. I mean, they've told me how I could use my power to help while testing my reactions. But by now I'm pretty sure they wanted to see whether my powers would increase over the stress and panic. Actually... I've never mentioned that but-"
He didn't fidget but simply stopped talking midway. Jongdae waited patiently.
"Today, I think they might have staged the whole assassination attempt themselves. No big deal, a phoenix won't die, right?"
His naturally deep voice cracked towards the end and in a sudden movement he tugged at Jongdae's hand and pulled it from his waist up to the side of his neck. Without hesitation, he gave in and firmly palmed the slightly sweaty skin.
Chanyeol still wouldn't let go of his hand as if he was afraid Jongdae might withdraw any second.
"There's not a lot to tell. One moment I was taking cover behind a barricade, the next second
someone shot me. Right here." he mumbled, pressing Jongdae's hand tightly. "It started bleeding like crazy before I knew it, and I went into shock. I caught a glimpse of the assassin before tumbling down into a ditch. Sprained an ankle on the way. I guess that's where he assumed I was done for, when he saw me falling."

"But you healed yourself." Jongdae half-asked, trying his best to appear steady and calming, and not to think about the open wound that had once been gaping right where his hand currently lay. Chanyeol exhaled shakily. "That sounds easy. I'm not blaming you. It should have been easy. But that moment, I panicked. And that's really the worst that can happen. This healing thing... it's works like the pull, in a way. A little like shifting. You need to focus, you need to want it, to be completely certain. One tiny doubt will make it all crumble. And in that moment... there was so much blood and I couldn't think anything but 'This is where my carotid is. I am going to die. I'm going to die in this miserable place, just like that'. I freaked out - and lost more and more blood. Without thinking, I took off my gloves and began to dig into the wound, searching for the bullet. Cause, you know. It couldn't stay there."

Jongdae hissed, barely holding back an empathetic groan and misinterpreting his reaction, Chanyeol desperately tried to explain himself. "I know, it's pretty disgusting. And not very smart. I'm not proud of it... but back then, I was in a state of shock, just like yesterday when Kyungsoo twisted your wrist. Without thinking, I took it out and frantically tried to cover the wound with my hand and get to the healing part. I made it, obviously. Still, I can tell you... I've never been that close to death. That day, I almost didn't make it." he mumbled, burying his head further into Jongdae's chest, muffling his voice. "I was so damn scared."

Jongdae drew him closer, his slightly throbbing left hand not straying from his neck. He was torn. Torn between feeling nauseous at the mere bloody image and angry at whoever had sent Chanyeol there. To his surprise, his anger towards Tao wasn't that intense - rather than feeling resentment, he was mainly glad the assassin had failed his job. Still, just knowing that there were people deciding to toy with Chanyeol like that, to send a young guy into a war zone without proper training or supervision, being fully aware of the mental scarring and maybe even encouraging it... it disgusted him. Not to mention that it was stupid. Trying to trigger someone whose power was based on mental stability could go so horribly wrong. And if it had done so, if Chanyeol would have broken under the pressure, had gotten out of control like Kyungsoo... then they would've probably locked him up. Forever trapped behind white doors. One opportunity wasted, one project failed, time to move on. It was this thought that made his blood boil. How dare they play around with him like that? He stared into the darkness, listened to badly concealed faint sobs, heard Chanyeol's last words echo through his head. I was so damn scared.

Who gave them the right?

"You made it." Jongdae finally mumbled, one hand traveling from his lower back up to his neck and back in warm, soothing strokes. "You've been amazing. And you still are."

Chanyeol didn't protest but he knew it was because his voice would crack miserably. Instead, his arm snaked around Jongdae's waist, squeezing tightly. "You've been really brave." Jongdae whispered softly. "I won't let Tao hurt you again. None of us will. They'll keep him away."

He was met with silence and after awhile, Jongdae's hand sneaked below his shirt, dragging his palm over bare skin in slow but firm movements. "Do you know White Heart?" he finally asked into the silence. Chanyeol hummed hoarsely in affirmation. "That band you love to stare at whenever it's on the screens?" he asked weakly, trying his best to sound like his throat and eyes weren't burning. "You're such a creep." Jongdae gave back, chuckling soundlessly. "Sorry."
"They're my favorite band."
He cleared his throat subtly and shortly after, he began to sing. Quietly, barely above a hum. Tentative at first, but when Chanyeol didn't show signs of disapproval, Jongdae became more confident and let his voice flow, peacefully embracing the notes of a calm ballad.
"I want to see the world beyond that leads into a dream... I wonder if you'll be laughing at me."
Slowly, the tension left Chanyeol, melting away in favor of dedicating his attention to the tender voice just above his ear.
"But the truth is, I found the real treasure already."
Fingers loosened gradually, his erratic breathing slowed down bit by bit.
"We join our hands to connect
In this small world, where we support each other..."
The body embracing him in the pitch black darkness became heavy and pliant as Jongdae's voice quietly echoed through the cave, losing itself in the distance.

"Excuse me, Sir, may I know what you're doing down there?"
Junmyeon flinched before remembering that he had every right to do whatever and calmly closed the file, putting it in its rightful place before getting back to his feet.
"Kim Junmyeon. Nice to meet you."
"Dr. Kang. You wished to see me?"
The man was curt and far less welcoming than most people were, but then again, most people didn't find Junmyeon buried to his nose in their documents. He assured him that he hadn't messed up their system and followed him into his office.

"I'm afraid those are classified, Sir."
"Classified? Why?" Junmyeon retorted, not showing how crestfallen he felt. The doctor only smiled tersely.
"To ensure the shifter's safety. As you may have seen, most shifters commit a multitude of crimes and to ensure no one is after them for personal reasons, I'm afraid I can't tell you this."
This didn't make an awful lot of sense. Something was off. Junmyeon shot him a skeptical look.
"I'm not actually after the shifter himself though. I'm merely seeking an insight on the whole matter because of his company. I'd like to confirm their identity."
He was positive that the guy was already upset enough at Junmyeon for looking into the sightings, but those alone weren't nearly enough. He'd wanted accurate, new information, but it seemed like they weren't willing to let him in on this. Junmyeon vaguely wondered whether he'd have to consult Ryeowook first, explain the whole thing so he'd force the whole ordeal into the public. But he was still lacking a solid reason. He reluctantly admitted defeat and bid the doctor farewell, wandering down the hallways when he remembered the odd ID. He'd already failed to get anywhere, he could just as well sate his curiosity on the strange number. The hallways were rather deserted as it was around noon on Sunday and most people had gone for dinner, if they even worked at all. Lady Luck was on his side though, because Junmyeon actually stumbled upon the carefree scientist from before. The blond was dawdling down the hallways with a bag under his arm, still in no hurry at all.
He patiently listened to Junmyeon explaining the number and scratched his head in deep thought, asking him various questions he couldn't quite answer, seeing as he didn't have a photographic memory. But ultimately, the guy sent him to department E, stating that with such a small number of letters and regarding the overall combination, he should try going there. With short instructions Junmyeon had scribbled on his arm in order to not mess up, he found himself walking down a lot of
hallways. He'd already feared he'd gotten lost multiple times, but eventually he found the green-tiled, narrow corridor this Kim Jonghyun had mentioned. It looked more like a hospital than the other hallways had before and Junmyeon was about to stop and read the signs next to the different doors, when someone exited an office to his right and someone very familiar passed by him.

"Oh. I didn't expect to meet you here, what a surprise."

It was Choi Siwon, representative of the red Layer.

Junmyeon blinked in surprise and something illegible flashed over Siwon's expression before it settled on a polite smile.

"What a coincidence indeed. I'd love to catch up with you, but unfortunately, I'm in a hurry. I wish you a nice day."

And with these words, he was already swiftly walking away. Junmyeon stared after him. Choi Siwon was a very uptight man who wasn't fond of small talk, but this was a little harsh, even for him. Why didn't he even ask what brought Junmyeon to this place? Maybe he didn't want to answer for himself. With knitted brows, Junmyeon knocked at the office Siwon had come from and was met with one of the head scientists of department E. It was one of the branches dealing with anomalies - anomalies like the ones Oh Sehun had belonged to.

"I'm very sorry, but this department is completely classified. If you wish to get an insight on anything, you have to get permission from the higher ups. We can't make any exceptions, no matter what your rank says."

Junmyeon stared. He hadn't asked for much; simply whether they had any active research participants like Oh Sehun once had been. Sure, he couldn't expect to get everything served on a silver platter, this was a delicate issue after all, but not even the number of participants? That wasn't right. When he asked who even sent him there, Junmyeon acted innocent, not naming the scientist who'd helped him. He tried his best to persuade him, to explain the situation, but to no avail. The longer he stayed, the more unfriendly the scientist became, and Junmyeon ultimately got up, his own smile turning rather forced.

"Alright. I understand."

He'd already had one hand on the door handle, when his racing thoughts found another loophole.

"So, would you be so kind as to remind me on which Layer Oh Sehun currently is?" he asked with a sweet, fake smile. The doctor hesitated but there was no point in holding back on this - especially not since the code was publicly known and Junmyeon could get it anywhere.

"Lime green. 99-FF-66. Why would you-"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that." Junmyeon cut him off with the same, sickeningly sweet smile as he cheerfully left the room, just to annoy him. The smile was replaced by a look of grim determination as he walked down the hallways. Both the departments D and E were acting fishy. D was probably not giving out information due to them being afraid someone else might snatch 'their' shifters away or uncover any illegal methods of tracking. But what about E? What did they hide, what on Earth did Choi Siwon have access to that he didn't?

The ID suggested that whoever was with the shifter was a participant of the programs run in department E. Probably someone who's out of their control, since they'd surely have already snatched that shifter otherwise. Someone who's possibly dangerous. Fine. If they didn't want to cooperate with him, Junmyeon would tug at another loose end. He'd go and meet up with Oh Sehun himself and listen to his side of the story.
"Hey."
Minseok nudged the figure on the ground with his foot. Tao didn't even flinch anymore, though his eyes did flit up to meet Minseok's. He was nothing but a puddle of misery, half-sprawled on the ground with his cheek mashed against stone. Jongdae knew that every single muscle in his body must be aching from the uncomfortable position. There was no more rage, no more yelling. The blond guy lying at their feet was just a shell of a human, vaguely trembling, too exhausted to even do as much as close his mouth.
He made no sound besides breathing shallowly, and Jongdae felt broken just looking at him. Still, he was alive. In hindsight it was silly to think he might die - after all, he'd told them of punishments stretching over weeks. One single day shouldn't kill him.
"We're going to hand you over to the yellow kingdom." Minseok announced calmly, every trace of emotion wiped off his face. All Tao managed to do in response was a tiny, pathetic whimper and Jongdae felt goosebumps running down his arms. How often had Tao been punished like this? He barely dared to think about it, but if someone were to do this to him, to render him completely helpless, to make him feel this miserable... maybe he would have done the same, trying to become better and better in order to avoid the punishment. Becoming the favorite pet.
"Luhan said you look like you were been born there, anyway. They won't kill you. We'll leave in a few hours." Minseok ended, already turning on his heels to leave Jongdae alone with him. Well, not completely alone. There was still Chanyeol providing the light for them, standing a few steps away in the entrance, arms crossed and an unreadable expression on his face. Jongdae turned to look at him to make sure he was still alright. The emotional breakdown from the night before hadn't left any traces. If anything, Chanyeol appeared more rested and even trusted Jongdae to approach Tao, though he surely wasn't too happy about it. Not that the young man at his feet was any threat as of now. Jongdae crouched down next to him, placing a water bottle beside his head.
"You should drink." he suggested quietly, trying not to sound too gentle. This was the guy who tried to murder Chanyeol, as unbelievable as it might seem judging by his current state. The blond only blinked slowly and the faint noises he made were incomprehensible. He made an effort to sit up or at least lie to his back, Jongdae saw it in the way his muscles were twitching. He sighed and reached out to heave the assassin onto his back by his shoulders. The fire around them flickered, but Chanyeol stayed put. Tao showed no resistance at all, clumsily placing his head on a nearby stone so it would be slightly elevated. With the way his hands were still tied behind his back and to another stone, his whole posture looked twisted and uncomfortable, though he didn't appear to even realize it. Maybe he felt too numb. Jongdae uncapped the bottle, and while he placed it on his chapped lips with one hand, he used the other to steady the back of Tao's head and protect it from the hard ground.
Everything about the way he pliantly let himself be moved around to how easily he accepted the water made Jongdae feel like he'd gone through this before. There was a strange, routinely feel to it. "Have you done this be this before?" he asked evenly, giving Tao a break between the weak sips so he could reply. He got nothing but a croaky 'Yes', the reply oddly coherent. Obedient and conditioned down to the bone. Minseok's words from the night before echoed through his head. _Disgusting._
And maybe it was wrong, maybe it was just a terrible flaw of Jongdae's, but his inner voice insisted on not hating Tao. Told him it wasn't entirely his fault. He still couldn't be trusted, not even a tiny bit, but even that wasn't his fault. The whole sight just saddened Jongdae, and when the bottle was empty, he gently maneuvered his head back to the ground and left his fingers to card through the
blond strands, lightly scratching the scalp. The reaction was unexpected as Tao immediately raised his head a bit, his lips parting a bit wider as he looked at him with delirious eyes. Jongdae didn't understand at first, but when he did, he almost squeaked, gently pushing Tao's head back down. "No!" he uttered hastily, fighting the embarrassment off his face.

Straightening the posture, relaxing his throat, looking at him - he was expecting having to blow him. In this condition. Now Jongdae felt nothing but nauseous at the imagery and absently petted his hair a little more, telling him to rest.

His legs were still wobbly on the way out and Chanyeol's arm around his shoulders felt so comforting, he wished he could get lost in the feeling and disregard reality. Deny that there were people like Tao, forcefully stripped of all their dignity and forced to accept and even want it.

The mood was strained and a little somber when they all gathered their supplies together around an hour later. Minseok was still brooding in a way only Jongdae noticed, Jongin and Kyungsoo were naturally quiet but kept it down even more in regards to the overall atmosphere. Thinking about it, it mostly came down to Chanyeol being quiet and gloomy like a flame burning lowly. Not to mention that Luhan was terribly tense and nervous. They'd decided this morning on not infiltrating Tao's home right away and to pay a visit to Luhan's home instead. Now that they had the code and living proof of the places existence in the form of Tao, Luhan had proposed they ask for backup. They'd discussed the risks for quite a long time before coming to a decision together. The whole plan relied on Luhan and his credibility. They had no choice but to trust him on that. By returning to the clock tower and finding the right story, they'd be able to shift to the yellow Layer and into the tea room, as Luhan had called it. He'd also thought of a good time when no one was around to make his people feel threatened or attacked.

By the time they went to get Tao, he was slightly more conscious due to the half of the pill Jongdae had dissolved in the water. He was still too weak to make any quick movements but awake enough to glare at Minseok, who looked unfazed as he pulled the blond to his feet. His limp only worsened, and Jongdae really hoped they could get proper treatment for his ankle soon. For now, his other side was steadied by Jongin, who would take him along. Jongdae wasn't too worried for either of them with the way Kyungsoo's eyes bored holes into the back of Tao's head as he walked behind them, but he still felt uneasy. Maybe Luhan was rubbing off on him. How would they be received? It was common knowledge that the people from the yellow Kingdom preferred to shoot first, ask questions later. They all gathered in the clock tower, ready to leave with the last bit of substances injected so they'd make it by themselves. Jongdae wasn't even sure he needed anything after spending quite a few days there, but he decided to play it safe and obediently took the injection. Luhan went first, followed by Jongin and Tao. There were no complications and in the blink of an eye, the dusty clock tower vanished and he stumbled into the plush carpet a feet below him.

A gush of fresh air and sunlight hit him, even though they were clearly in an enclosed room. Jongdae barely had time to take in his surroundings when Luhan dusted himself off and made a last attempt at righting his hair before he took firm strides across the room, heading towards the exit.

"I will lock this door. Please stay put, okay?" he asked, the door handle already in his hand.

Jongdae gave him a thumbs up which was accepted with a weak smile. Luhan proceeded to swiftly leave the room and close the heavy, wooden door behind him. He accepted Chanyeol's outstretched hand and got up to his feet. A few weak grunts of protest told him that Minseok was tying Tao to the massive wooden table in the center of the room. The tea room. It was breathtaking. Jongdae was fairly sure he'd never seen anything like it before, not even on a screen. All the vibrant colors, golden embroideries, intricately carved wood and plush cushions... he didn't even know where to look first when Chanyeol's voice ripped him out of his thoughts with a low but astounded 'wow'. It was the first thing Chanyeol had said all day. He followed him to the full window front, fully understanding where he came from. The view was magnificent. He couldn't even begin to guess how high the palace was but from this room they could see the whole kingdom below until it all vanished into dusty mountains in the far distance. Foreign-looking huts and buildings were scattered over the lands, trees and plants he'd never seen before
lined the ways where tiny dots pilgrimaged to the oddly curved fields snaking themselves up the hills.
"Those are rice fields." Chanyeol explained before he had a chance to ask. Jongdae did know rice, it was just that it wasn't grown on the Layer he lived on and therefore very rare.
"It's really impressive." he mumbled absentely and Chanyeol chuckled lowly.
He felt it more than heard it, by the way their sides were pressed together, regardless of the vast space.
"The rice fields?" he asked teasingly. Jongdae only nudged his side with a roll of his eyes. "Everything."
He got a breathy 'Yeah' in return and knew he was smiling, without looking. It made him feel warm, to know that Chanyeol was slowly getting back to his usual self. He was about to point out an especially interesting building when the doors were slammed open all of a sudden.
"Hands up!"
He jumped and before he knew it, Chanyeol already had one arm draped in front of him protectively.
A group of soldiers had burst inside, lances and unknown firearms raised. Next to them, he saw Kyungsoo pushing Jongin behind him, his muscles tensing-
"No! Kyungsoo, stay calm." he called out and though it was short and distracted, Kyungsoo did shoot him a glance and made no move to jump forwards.
"We will ask you one last time to put your hands up." one of the guards announced in a thick accent and surprisingly, Minseok was the first one to comply as he got to his feet slowly from where he'd crouched beside Tao with his arms visibly raised. He trusted Luhan and Jongdae trusted Minseok. So he followed suit, prying himself out of Chanyeol's grasp, though it made him feel painfully vulnerable. The other three also complied while Tao was frozen in place, his semi-focused eyes glued to their weapons.
"Good. Do you have any weapons on you?" the leader asked, and again, it was Minseok who spoke up.
"No. They're all with Luhan. Feel free to frisk us."
The guard smiled grimly.
"Oh, we will. We'll see whether you're telling the truth. Take them. You," he began, addressing every single one of them, "are under custody until we know how to proceed."
"Is Luhan alright?" Jongdae asked while they let themselves be manhandled by the guards. His response was just a cool look. It reminded him of the first time Luhan had looked at him.
"That's not yours to worry about. You should rather worry about speaking truthfully or you'll end up in our cellar, right next to this miserable companion of yours."
Jongdae tried his best to emit a calm aura and not let Tao's weak protests get to him. But the way the blond shot him a fleeting look as they dragged him away made his heart ache nonetheless.

To his utmost relief, they weren't separated. Two rather spacious and luxurious rooms had been prepared and if it wasn't for the doors being locked, it wouldn't feel like a prison at all. Maybe the knowledge of Jongin being a shifter had something to do with it; maybe they were really just visitors and the yellow kingdom had a funny way of showing it. Since they'd all played it nice, Minseok managed to calmly convince them not to separate Jongin and Kyungsoo. Now they occupied one room while the other three shared the second.
Jongdae really wished they could see Luhan and have him explain exactly what was going on. So far, they hadn't met anyone speaking their language, disregarding the choppy sentences of the guard earlier. As it was, they were seated around the low table, exchanging speculations.
"This Layer is ruled by a strict monarchy," Chanyeol stated, half sprawled over the table, "so I bet they need some time for Luhan to talk to the boss or something."
Minseok threw him a judging look at his choice of words but Jongdae smiled a little. It was curious how relaxed Chanyeol appeared to be, despite the situation. Just taking Tao out of his sight had obviously had a tremendous effect.
"We can't do anything but hope they'll believe him. We're screwed if they don't." Minseok stated,
and while he didn't mention anything out loud for fear of being eavesdropped, he made a gesture of injecting something with a raised eyebrow. Yes, they'd run out of substances. As far as Jongdae knew, they only had a bit of red left. It was an odd feeling of helplessness. All the time they'd had access to basically every place in the world - they had Luhan's eyes, Jongin's abilities to confirm and the substances to back them up. Right now Luhan was gone, Jongin relatively unavailable and the substances used up.

And then there was the question of where they'd want to go, anyway.

A few hours later, Luhan did show up in the company of another guard watching his every move. But the words he directed at them were measured, curt and bared neither emotions nor real information at all. Seeing him back in the pompous dresses with his straight posture and blank face made the distance almost painful. This is Luhan, Jongdae had to remind himself. *He's always been like this, this is what he was raised to be.*

Still, he believed in him, and when he saw the translator’s pale finger subtly pointing at them before showing a thumbs up, all without betraying himself even a tiny bit, Jongdae felt reassured.

*You did well. You're going to be alright.*

Either way, Luhan was on their side and that was all that mattered.

Where the first day had passed in antsy anticipation, the third was spent in impatience. The room was really nice, they were well-fed, and Jongin had reassured them that the probability of being found in this place was ridiculously low when he'd sneaked inside their room the day before. Still, being cooped up like this without knowing what was going on was agonizing, to say the least. No matter how talkative and noisy both him and Chanyeol were, soon the most exciting thing became the footsteps outside, building up hope just to destroy it when they distanced themselves right after.

Another thing that was keeping Jongdae on edge was the weird atmosphere between him and Chanyeol. They had agreed to sort of try a relationship, but it was far from being something official, and they were in the constant company of Minseok. It was both relief and torture. Relief, because he felt no pressure in acting like anything but a friend, since even if Minseok did have a suspicion (which was highly likely), there was no need to rub it in his face if he had no way to avoid them. Torture, because with the lack of life-threatening situations, Jongdae had much more time to think about Chanyeol. Or his lips, specifically. It was silly, how much he looked forward to the night, where he could carefully sneak kisses under the blanket of darkness when they were lying together. Sneakily, feathery, soundlessly. Twisting his insides, heating his cheeks. Maybe even that was bittersweet torture, since everything inside him screamed for him to take it further, just a tiny bit. To let out a shuddery breath, to move around, rustling the blanket. He knew Chanyeol was feeling the same, knew it in the way he would tense up during the day, whenever Jongdae got remotely close. They were both alternatively seeking proximity and shying away; it was stressful in a way, but also excited Jongdae. Or rather, the idea of cuddly and touchy Chanyeol holding back because he was actually impatient and genuinely eager to touch him, was making him all tingly.

Maybe he should man up and just tell Minseok about them. It was surprising that Chanyeol was playing along like this without complaining. Then again, it wouldn't change a whole lot with how they were currently cooped up together, Jongdae reasoned. Just a little more. As soon as they were out of this, he'd tell him. And the others, too.

On the fourth day, Minseok politely requested to see Tao and after a period of consideration, was allowed to - under the condition that they'd try to make him eat. Together with Jongdae and two guards taking utmost care that they would neither see too much nor step out of line, they were guided through the maze-like palace. To his relief, they hadn't actually thrown him into a cellar, though his room was far from being as comfy as theirs. He was still tied to the wall, though the chains allowed him to move his limbs and lie down on the simple futon he was sitting on. They were not long enough to jump Minseok and attack him and judging by the glare sent his way, the blond was very much tempted to do so.

They stopped at the other end of the windowless room, the guards backing away to give them some
space. Tao was sitting with his back to the wall, one leg stretched out, the other angled up protectively. He shared a long gaze with Minseok, until the latter finally spoke up.
"Not telling me to leave?" he asked in a subtly provocative manner, and Tao's nose twitched barely noticeably, though the scorn in his voice definitely wasn't.
"You wouldn't leave, anyway." he retorted in an almost bitter tone.
"Sucks to be helpless, doesn't it?"
The blond snarled at the superior tone.
"Is it fun to break people?" he asked with hate lacing his voice and despair highlighting it.
Minseok didn't miss a beat.
"Is it fun to be breakable?"
The following silence was heavy, and Jongdae decided to jump in before his friend could upset him even more.
"Did they fix your foot?" he asked carefully and crouched down to look at the fresh bandages on his outstretched foot.
With a faint sigh, Minseok settled down beside him in a cross-legged position.
"Obviously." Tao mumbled without making eye contact. Full of hostility, yet shying away from open confrontation, Jongdae noted. On the other hand there was Minseok, who almost demanded to be his enemy. Seeing Tao made him feel so many things. Anger and mistrust, because he'd tried to hurt Chanyeol and would not hesitate to do it again. But also regret and shame because they'd tortured information out of him. Jongdae's head was a mess, and he had no idea how to fix it, so he started with the most urgent matter at hand.
"You look better, too." he stated softly, and the blond only snorted.
"I'm not."
"You're talking and all. That's progress." Jongdae insisted but Tao cut in like a sulky child, unwilling to hear him out.
"There's no progress! It's not gonna change. It'll come back, later. And then it'll be worse-"
"It's not gonna be worse." Minseok intervened firmly, and they both stilled.
"It's gonna be the same. At most. It's gonna be just like last time, a freaking nightmare."
Despite all his resentment, Tao was listening, misery clearly swimming in his watery eyes. He looked like he was about to cry.
"No, it'll be worse!"
"Cut the crap, any worse and you'd be fucking dead!" Minseok snapped back, and they both flinched at the harsh tone. Jongdae lightly placed his palm over the bandages, but Tao twitched so hard, he thought better of it and withdrew it quickly.
For a while, Minseok attempted to regain his cool while Tao stared at him with wide eyes.
"I don't wanna die." he finally whispered, looking more scared, vulnerable and real than when he was panting on the ground.
Jongdae nodded.
"Of course you don't. That's why you gotta eat. And drink." he threw in gently, trying to calm the mood.
Minseok hummed in agreement, and by now, his voice didn't sound all that hostile anymore.
"If you're well-fed and not dehydrated... it's gonna be less painful next time. And even less the time after that." he stated almost softly as he got back to his feet. Jongdae followed reluctantly while Tao had already reverted to his snappy self again.
"How would you even know? I don't trust you. I hate you."
"That's fine. Hate me, like me, why would I even care? I'm not your bad cop though."
Jongdae was already standing in the doorway when Minseok leaned down to face Tao.
The tension was so thick, it felt suffocating. His voice dropped in volume as they stared into each other's eyes.
"I'm not. And you know why?" he asked, deceivingly calm, and Jongdae was just waiting for Tao to jump him any second now.
"Because to every bad cop, there's a good cop. And Jongdae here is not a good cop. He's no cop at
all. You dare take him lightly or think you can wrap him around your finger... and I'll end you. Simple as that." he spelled out clearly, before turning on his heels to let himself be guarded out without looking back.

It was still the fourth day when Luhan sneaked himself inside, an unsure smile tugging at his lips. Jongdae immediately jumped up from where he'd leaned into Chanyeol's side, all sleepiness forgotten. "Luhana! Are you alright?" he asked worriedly, but the blond shushed him. "Not so loud. I got the guards to cover for me, but I won't stay for too long."
The rest of the sentence was cut-off as Jongdae was already enveloping him in a bear hug. "What- can you let go?" he forced out, flailing his arms. Jongdae shook his head, a childish 'No!' on his lips. Minseok chuckled while Chanyeol quietly knocked against the wall, signaling Jongin to come over. "I missed your nagging! You're fine, aren't you?" Jongdae inquired, and the blond finally gave in to the embrace, weakly patting his back. "Of course I am. I know what I'm doing. Now if you would stop clinging like a koala so I can check up on Jongin, that would be nice."
Jongdae made a mock-offended noise, and the translator only stuck out his tongue with a cheeky grin. Damn Chanyeol for teaching him stuff like that.

"Things are a bit... complicated right now." Luhan opened seriously, both arms placed on the table. Everyone paid him their utmost attention, but Jongdae was pretty sure he was the only one feeling a tiny pang of satisfaction at his slightly slumped, casual posture. Only in front of them was he able to let himself go like this. "Why? What happened?" Jongin inquired worriedly, on hand on Kyungsoo's thigh in order not to alarm him. "See, while I was gone... our majesty passed away."
The reactions were mixed -though they'd always be, if Kyungsoo was present- and Chanyeol was the first one to voice out most of their thoughts. "Shit." Luhan shot him an unimpressed look. "What an incredibly eloquent way of summing up the situation."
Unperturbed, Chanyeol continued voicing his thoughts out loud. "Was it a natural cause? Did he choose a successor?"
"I doubt it was an assassination attempt. He was very old. We had an election scheduled to decide on a successor seeing as our majesty has various children and students. His death came out of nowhere though, and now everything's lost in commotion." Luhan explained in a neutral manner that told Jongdae he hadn't been too attached to their old ruler. "So you're saying people don't have time to deal with you as well?" Minseok asked, getting a miserable nod in return. "Exactly. They keep putting the matter off. Not to mention that there's still a punishment due for me."
"Are they going to hurt you?" Jongdae asked carefully, wary of the answer. While the Luhan they all knew would now tease him for thinking badly of his culture, this one only managed a forced smile. "Probably not. It all depends on who is going to be elected though. There are candidates placing their utmost trust in me... and those who've hated me for as long as I can remember. I could be forgiven, suspended, banished... everything's entirely possible at this point."
He made a fierce attempt to sound neutral, and even though the result was far from perfect, Jongdae mentally saluted the effort. "You'll stay with us if you get banished, right?" Jongin immediately asked, and Chanyeol nodded
with earnest determination. "Wherever we're gonna be then..." Minseok mumbled, his head thrown back and eyebrows knitted in a way that told Jongdae he was thinking hard. Luhan shot them another weak smile. "Let's not give up just yet. As far as I know, chances are high that Zhixiang and his sister Jolin will be chosen. They are regarded highly by both regular citizens and most of the elite. You could say we're fairly close. They always take me seriously." "So we can do nothing but wait, huh?" Jongdae asked, slightly gloomy at the prospect of spending more days in uncertainty. "Yes. I'll do everything I can, talk to all the people I know, but... sorry." Jongdae hurried to dismiss him with his hands raised in protest. "Oh, no. Waiting is fine. I can do that. Doing nothing is what I do best."

"By the way, did you have any more dreams? Has any more sleepwalking occurred?" Luhan inquired, and Jongdae shook his head. "No. Nothing. It's probably cause I-" "...sleep with my face buried in Chanyeol's chest." "Uh, hide myself under the blanket," Jongdae quickly redirected, fighting off the immediate signs of a lie being told, "you know, so I won't try to jump out of the window or anything."

Minseok gave him a judging look, while Chanyeol intensely studied the wooden table as if it had suddenly become interesting after four days of boredom. Luhan just looked puzzled. "I thought you're some sort of a seer? How would that help?"

Well, Jongdae thought, it was probably less of a vision-related reason than it was due to the fact that Chanyeol's arms encircled him so tightly, preventing him from moving around too much. "I... don't know," he started slowly, "still, it was probably just a glitch or something. Maybe my supposedly sensitive body went haywire again." he half-defended, half-speculated. The blond nodded slowly, doubt written all over his face, when two short raps at the door behind them had him jumping to his feet. "I have to leave. As I said, I'll do my best and let you guys know as soon as I've got news."

It wasn't like Jongdae had forgotten about his little sleeping issue, as he liked to call it. It was just that the whole thing was confusing, mildly scary and didn't really lead anywhere. So instead of stressing himself out about it, he simply dismissed it. It would be a lie to say that he didn't let his eyes wander out the window a suspicious number of times, checking the sky for storm clouds. He'd had his doubts before, but ever since that pursuer got struck by lightning, Jongdae was sure there had to be some sort of connection between the nightly dreams, his sleepwalking and the storm clouds. Or maybe he wanted it to be connected. Why? He wasn't that sure himself but in a way, he felt attached. Another thought that led nowhere. So he tried to dismiss it, snuggling into Chanyeol's side for comfort. The taller one didn't even ask and just naturally accepted him there.

The days passed by in a mix of relaxation and incredible boredom, sprinkled with the occasional visit they paid Tao. Seeing him go through the same withdrawal symptoms Minseok had gone through was depressing. The only thing positive about their whole situation was that the people appeared to get used to them. Whereas the maids used to stiffly place their food in the doorway, almost fleeing without making eye contact once, they had trouble tearing themselves away these days. They were shy, but oh-so-curious about the foreigners. Many of them had probably never seen anyone from another Layer before, and while evolution wasn't that quick to gift them all with Layer-distinct features, the closed off population of the yellow Layer did look different. For them, every single one of their guests were utterly fascinating. They were especially enthralled by Chanyeol's height and friendly attempts at non-verbal communication while they claimed Jongin and Minseok were very exotic-looking. It visibly ticked Kyungsoo off but the maids dismissed his behavior as being cute, not knowing a thing about him, while Minseok had fun being the flirty tease Jongdae knew he'd always been.
It had become sort of an unspoken agreement that Kyungsoo and Jongin lounged around in their room, seeing as one could hardly prevent a shifter from doing as he wishes in this country. It was almost comical how awestruck they all were at the sight of Jongin. Even the tough guards were treating him with utmost respect and even subservience. It made Jongdae feel like he was friends with the popular kids for once.

"You're one to talk!" Chanyeol gave back playfully once he'd voiced this thought out loud, "after all, the tiny one is crushing on you."

"Me? No, you gotta be mistaken. She's probably jealous about me standing so close to you." Jongdae dismissed with an easy smile, but the brunet only shook his head like a dog.

"No, she only has eyes for you, I'm positive. You're underestimating yourself."

"I'm surprised you even noticed?" Jongdae replied helplessly, still doubting his words.

"Oh, I do notice stuff like that." Chanyeol said teasingly, though there was a certain serious undertone as he placed an arm around his shoulder to draw him in close. Possessive. But low-key possessive, trying not to make a scene in public. Jongdae made a mental note to add it to the list of positive character traits. Not that he had one. His self-perception was good enough to tell him he'd make a fool out of himself if he listed all the things he found endearing about the tall oaf.

It was the ninth day when Luhan finally showed up with news, though it was highly debatable whether it was good.

"I know you won't like this, but your arrival and our whole issue has somehow become the center of the country's attention. It's the main topic in our election issues."

"Because we're foreigners?" Chanyeol asked, looking a little hurt already. Jongdae could tell that racism didn't bode well with him, and while some people started warming up to them, there were enough scornful looks thrown at them when people passed by their opened door.

Luhan grimaced as he fidgeted in his seat.

"Kind of. You see, in our country every citizen gets to vote, but most people live in their little towns and villages, living a mundane, simple life. A lot of them aren't educated enough to grasp complex political matters, and as long as everything stays basically the same, they're good. We've had ambitious politicians proposing more cooperations with other Layers but if the people are scared, nothing will come out of it. Our issue on the other hand," he began, one hand going through his hair as he sighed, "is something that caught everyone's attention. It's simple to understand - foreigners are seeking shelter and the citizens are scared and resentful towards them. On the other hand I, a rather trusted elite member, brought them. And together -both the foreigners and me- we want to fight a threat that brings both our homes into trouble. For them, it's basically people uniting against one enemy. You see why it's a big deal?"

"I guess so..." Jongdae mumbled tentatively, "we're not that many but it's some sort of a symbol of unity, right? A test on a small scale?"

Luhan nodded.

"Exactly. That's why people are treating this issue so very carefully." Now that he thought about it, the blond looked exceptionally tired, and Jongdae wished he could give him some of his own energy that was wasted away within these four walls.

"I'm sorry. While we're sitting around being idle, you're doing all the fighting. It's not very fair..." he mumbled dejectedly but to his surprise, Luhan dismissed him immediately.

"Oh no. You're doing great, all of you. Even Kyungsoo. Or rather, especially Kyungsoo." he ended with a pointed look at said one, whose ever-so-slightly scrunch eyebrows betrayed confusion.

"The more delicate the news, the quicker they're spreading. And so far people have heard nothing but good news about you. You're not protesting, not trying to burn down the palace, haven't hurt anyone... I've even heard you've been very open-minded and friendly. It's the best you could do, honestly. Exactly what we needed."

Jongdae was tempted to make a joke about how they didn't have the means to burn anything when he remembered Chanyeol. Never mind.

All of a sudden, Luhan turned dead serious again.
"Which is why I'm here. All the pressure from the public has sped up the debates, and I have received a proposition."
They all straightened up, while Kyungsoo's gaze wandered around the room distractedly.
"Our soldiers are going to go there and put a halt to these crimes. I can't say they're doing it entirely for me, but now that they've seen Tao, who is a child of this country, the stakes have risen for them. So just like I proposed, they'll take care of it. But in exchange... we are expected to accompany them. To prove we're telling the truth and are personally dedicated enough to fight for this cause. After all, they don't know that you only followed my lead and assume you're in for the good cause..."
Silence fell upon them as everyone tried to think about what that meant exactly.
Luhans smile was weak and apologetic.
"Of course I'd go for it, but I can understand if you decline. It's gonna be dangerous and I can't ask this of you. After all, it was originally just me wanting to know the whereabouts and kinda bribing you into agreeing." His voice had fallen into a whisper and it wasn't the first time he'd shown fear of being overheard.
Before Jongdae could even begin to formulate an answer, Minseok had spoken up in a clear, definite voice.
"I'm in."
"What, really? Don't you want to think it through? Discuss it with the others?" Luhan asked in surprise but Minseok only shook his head.
"No, I'm positive. The rest of you can stay behind, if you want, but I'm with Luhan. We can't stop here. Even if we're gonna end up getting chased by this kingdom as well, I'll make damn sure you have a home to return to. You don't deserve to get tangled in all our messes either. Besides, I obviously have some personal motivation to go there." Jongdae felt a warm surge of pride for his best friend. He had changed, the last statement being a tell-tale sign.
But beneath all the bitterness and the suffering, those were truly Minseok-like words.
"Ah, you make it sound like you're ready to part from all of us in a heartbeat! Some best friend you are!" Jongdae accused, purposefully whiny. Minseok only smiled cheekily.
"You better step up your game, Dae. Luhan's quite impressive, you know?"
He made a mock offended noise, clutching his chest.
"Kim Minseok, you are cruel, you know that? I definitely have to tag along and make sure you'll come back." Jongin threw in with a small voice that was drowned out by Chanyeol's determined "I'm with Jongdae!"
Luhans watched all of them with open disbelief, though he looked pretty touched as well.
"You guys can't be serious. You should really think it through carefully-"
"I'm sick of thinking and sitting around," Jongdae complained, throwing his head back with an annoyed groan, "let's get this over with!"
Minseok half-agreed, leaning over the table.
"Your men better prepare us well though. I bet it's not in their interest to kill their symbol of unity." Luhan looked like he wanted to protest, but everyone looked at him expectantly until he exhaled nervously.
"Okay... okay. I'll tell them. And let you know how we're gonna go about it."
"Are you nervous?"
An involuntary shiver ran down Jongdae's spine at the low words breathed into his ear. He didn't move around a lot in order not to wake Minseok.
"Yeah. A little." he whispered against warm collarbones. It was almost too easy, falling into this routine of cuddling each other to sleep.
"You?"
He felt Chanyeol's chest constrict from a soundless chuckle.
"Terrified."
Jongdae moved his hand up to the other's nape, trying to comfort him. Tomorrow they'd head out to infiltrate the camp.
With basic armor and even weapons to defend themselves, just in case.
"I'm just worried about you." Chanyeol mumbled, and his hand tightened instinctively.
He was reminded of the half-amusing- half-frustrating debate of Jongin and Kyungsoo earlier, where the shifter had tried to confirm if it was Kyungsoo's own wish to accompany him. The shorter one had stubbornly replied that he'd follow Jongin everywhere, which had driven the poor boy insane. If you want to stay, we will, he'd repeatedly told him, only to get a matter-of-fact reply that Kyungsoo really didn't care and seeing as Jongin had a preference, he'd roll with it.
Jongdae understood the shifter's troubles, since now that he thought about it, it wasn't that far-fetched of an issue anymore. What if Chanyeol only chose to endanger himself because of him?
"Do you want to stay behind?"
He hadn't dared to openly ask this question before, seeing as he was too afraid he might get brushed off easily in front of the others.
"No," Chanyeol stated simply, drawing him in a little more tightly by his waist, "let's see this through together."
"If you're only doing this for me, then-"
"No. I'm not." Chanyeol intervened firmly, then hesitated.
"Partially. Maybe... okay, it's because of you. It's because seeing you made me want to do something... useful. Something of significance," he explained slowly, his lips perpetually brushing against the shell of his ear.
"I don't want to hide anymore. Take some responsibility. You just bring out the best in me, I guess." It was Jongdae's time to suppress a chuckle.
"Funny. I feel like you keep bringing out the worst in me."
Jongdae had never considered himself to be selfish or aggressive, to be someone who relied heavily on others or whose actions were negatively influenced by his bias. Only around Chanyeol did he tend to feel like an ugly person, felt like all his flaws were exposed and amplified.
"That's alright. You don't have to be perfect all the time. No one is."
Jongdae was still mulling over those words when Chanyeol spoke up once more.
"Say, Jongdae..."
He didn't react audibly but chose to squeeze his nape a little. He could tell something was up. He hadn't known Chanyeol for long but so far he'd come to the conclusion that even though the taller one would speak up about everything eventually, he was the type to put off uncomfortable topics, letting them gnaw at him first. A little like Jongdae himself - only that he tended not to speak up about stuff regarding himself at all.
"Did you ever consider being... like me?" he mumbled slowly, prodding.
"What do you mean?"
"I was just thinking. About all these dreams and this incident where the guy got struck by lightning. It's odd, don't you think? He was far from being tall, we were in the middle of a city..."
Jongdae didn't reply, and Chanyeol interpreted it as a negative sign.
"There's also your affinity with the sky and those storm clouds. I... I'm sorry if this sounds stupid to you. It might be a coincidence, after all."
There was a long pause in which Jongdae considered this statement while Chanyeol tried to distract him with butterfly kisses around his temple and the side of his face, already apologetic for bringing it up in the first place.
"Did you ever consider being... like me?" he mumbled slowly, prodding.
"What do you mean?"
"I was just thinking. About all these dreams and this incident where the guy got struck by lightning. It's odd, don't you think? He was far from being tall, we were in the middle of a city..."
Jongdae didn't reply, and Chanyeol interpreted it as a negative sign.
"There's also your affinity with the sky and those storm clouds. I... I'm sorry if this sounds stupid to you. It might be a coincidence, after all."
There was a long pause in which Jongdae considered this statement while Chanyeol tried to distract him with butterfly kisses around his temple and the side of his face, already apologetic for bringing it up in the first place.
It made sense, in a way. Chanyeol had just put the vague fear in his stomach into words. It made sense. Couldn't be a coincidence.
Jongdae willed himself not to move a muscle even though his insides cramped up.
"You think I'm like... you?" he whispered, vainly attempting to sound neutral.
Chanyeol buried his nose in his hair, mumbling quiet apologies.
"Sorry. I'm an idiot. Let's rest. Don't think too hard. I'm sorry..."
Jongdae felt the words rather than heard them, his thoughts already spreading into all directions, unlocked by Chanyeol's question. His tendency to watch the sky, all the stormy clouds he'd dreamed of... did he cause them? Did he somehow, through sheer will, pull them into the Layer he was on? If that was true, he was responsible for the death of a person. If that was true, he'd deliberately taken a life. With these heavy thoughts haunting him, Jongdae eventually drifted off into a light sleep as he pondered the first time Chanyeol had hurt someone with his power, wondering whether he'd done so on purpose.

Jongdae was still feeling gloomy the next day, and the way Minseok threw him side glances told him that he hadn't overheard their nightly conversation. He was glad. While Jongdae usually told his best friend everything, this was something he'd much rather come to terms with himself first. They were currently dressing into the armor provided by the guard force, and while the main guard was giving them instructions, Luhan had returned to his professional and distant behavior as he dutifully translated for them.

He looked comfortable in his tight-fitted uniform; he'd probably worn something like this before and it looked rather simple in comparison to his usual attire. Jongdae, on the other hand, felt restricted by the tight strings keeping protective pads around his upper body, legs, neck and arms. It was quite heavy, too, and Luhan had assured him that they were bulletproof. "We are not expected to take any form of action as we are civilians. Think of it as simply being eye-witnesses." Luhan translated while everyone was getting dressed, either helping each other out or getting assistance by maids. Chanyeol's uniform looked slightly mismatched as he was too tall for most spare uniforms. He's a phoenix, Jongdae reminded himself. As long as he'd take care of his vital organs, he'd be good. It was hard to imagine as he hadn't seen this particular talent of his play out before, but he had to trust him. Speaking of trust, Jongdae could basically feel the tense atmosphere prickling on his skin when Kyungsoo chose a light but obviously deadly dagger from the pile of weapons. Jongdae himself had no idea what kind of device would aid him in defending himself. After all, he'd never actually used a weapon and would probably be nothing but a danger to himself. Luhan took pity on him and handed him their second stun gun, reaching for a simple metal staff. Jongdae exhaled in relief. A stun gun was something he could handle. He and Jongin - who had gotten the other one by a stern Luhan insisting on him not dirtying his hands any further - took a few quick instructions by Chanyeol on how to use them in an emergency. They lined up to receive an injection to get access to this ominous place that was Tao's home. Luhan insisted on Jongdae only getting half the amount of the others, unknowingly stirring guilty memories of storm clouds in him. Storm clouds he wasn't responsible for. Right?

He shook his head to rid himself of the thoughts. This was not the time. The situation was dangerous enough as it was, without him drifting off. The leader barked something, and Luhan's calm voice easily carried over the rustling and clanking of people moving around in their complex attire. "Everyone, get ready."

Jongdae was positive that nothing he did now would actually prepare him. The stun gun was in reach, his side almost mashed into Chanyeol's. Was it selfish, seeking shelter and protection like this? Then again, they'd already established that Chanyeol brought out his hidden selfishness. The guards counted down in a language he didn't know but Luhan held up his fingers to go along with it. He tried to keep his focus and get a feel for the foreign structures. To his surprise, it was pretty easy by now. Even though there were eight other structures by now -if his body really did remember all of them- he had no doubt that these were the new ones. If anyone asked, he wouldn't be able to explain it.

Luhan showed a fist before quickly reaching for his staff as he vanished and the others followed suit, stepping over. They'd been warned about the slight height difference by Luhan, and Jongdae
managed to land on his feet for once. The air smelled slightly like smoke and something sickeningly sweet. Their surroundings looked less like a village and more like a slum, with crudely built huts and dirt everywhere.

"Hands up!"

If he wasn't so horribly nervous, Jongdae would have made a comment on how those appeared to be the only words these guard could say in their language.

As it was, he only gripped Chanyeol's upper arm tightly. Most of the soldiers spread out immediately, pointing their weapons at the owners. They were easy to recognize; better dressed, well-fed and neither as fit or weak as the children. Older, too. One of them even wore a suit and expensive-looking accessories. There were also many kids scampering around, jumping away from the guards with big, fearful eyes. The commotion was immediate but the guards were quick and effective, surrounding and entering the important-looking buildings. Jongdae vaguely heard them yelling and when they re-emerged, they lead an angry-looking young man ahead. He was barely dressed and Jongdae thought back to Tao, who had suffered from sexual abuse. It made him feel sick. It was obvious that Luhan hadn't exaggerated. While the owners were lined up, firearms pointed at them, Jongdae couldn't tear his gaze from the kids. Many of them were teenagers already, but the child-like, detached behavior didn't show it. Others were young, just like Yifan's students back at home. And all of them were either dirty or sported scratches and black bruises, their eyes glassy and pupils wide. Again, he thought of Tao. How clean and well-groomed he'd looked.

*The favorite pet.*

"We're gonna sedate you now." the guard announced, and Jongdae felt wary at all the kids surrounding them, staring at them. One guard shooed them away but like a swarm of insects, they didn't stray too far. It was almost like... they were waiting for something. Jongdae's eyes widened but before he could say anything, one girl slowly stepped forward, disregarding the gun pointed at her and only stopping when she stood in front of an owner, shielding him. Disheveled black hair, wiry stature and an intense look. She might be around fourteen.

"Move." the guard gruffly said.

"Good girl." the owner said.

With utmost serenity, the girl reached for the gun a guard was pointing at them with bare hands, and a shot pierced the air, followed by a strangled sound. None of the other guards left their positions as the girl sank to the floor, bright red splattered everywhere. Jongdae's fingers tightened even more, his gaze locked on the crumpled figure while his brain screamed at him to think, fast.

The main guard barked something in their own language but all Jongdae could see were more feet padding over the dirt, more tiny feet-

"Don't!" he yelled, pointing his gun at the closest kid, a tiny boy whose firm posture was betrayed by the terror in his eyes.

"If you don't stop, we'll sedate you and kill your owners!"

Everyone's attention was on him now and he vaguely felt Chanyeol's attempt to push himself in front of him but he stood his ground.

"If you want to protect them, do as we say.-"

A dull sound reverberated through the air, as if a giant bell was ringing in a frequency so low, he felt it vibrating deep down in his stomach. And with its sound waves, the world became blurry and Jongdae stumbled as the solid ground beneath him gave way for something that felt like sand.

Blindly holding on to Chanyeol, he could only watch as reality slipped through his fingers, as colors smudged into each other to create vibrant shades and patterns. Grey walls turned bright red, exotic trees appeared out of nowhere and the sky was nothing but a kaleidoscope of moving crystals.

Then the screaming started. One by one, the kids around him sank to the floor, clutching their head and Jongdae knew they were seeing it as well. He looked around and the world swayed like a mirage, making him feel sick. Luhan was shouting something, he saw it in the way his mouth was moving, but the only thing reaching him over the sound of the bell were the faint, high-pitched screams of the kids. People began to move around, panic took over.

Chanyeol pulled him away, other hands pushed him and then he was moving, stumbling across the
floor that didn't seem capable of deciding on one form. His surroundings made every movement huge and he felt dizzy, ultimately resting most of his weight on Chanyeol, who tugged him into a building. Jongdae sank to the floor, his back to a wall as he tried to get a hold of himself. Tried to regain control. His vision was occupied by a sea of peeling tapestry and bloody foam that touched his ankles. Bloody foam. Just like Kyungsoo had mentioned. It wasn't real. It wasn't real. Jongdae chanted it over and over in his head, but the more he focused on the foam, the more real it appeared to be, while the tapestry kept changing colors and patterns.

He tore his gaze away and looked up at Chanyeol who knelt next to him, looking through a window. With wobbly legs, he positioned himself next to him, looking through what was really just a hole in the wall. He saw the children still cowering on the floor or thrashing around and the guards wielding their weapons against the owners who'd gotten ahold of weapons themselves. The battlefield was messy, reality playing against all of them. Among the chaos, he finally managed to spot his friends. Minseok was darting around the area, trying to find shelter and fight off whoever dared to attack him. Kyungsoo, who appeared completely unfazed by everything and overpowered those around him due to his lack of confusion. A vague flicker told him that Jongin was wandering between the Layers and where was Luhan?

Jongdae unceremoniously put his lips to Chanyeol's ear.
"We gotta help them!"
"I'm trying! Stay put!" Chanyeol yelled back, one hand keeping him in place by his shoulder. The other was making grabbing and swiping motions at his side and Jongdae watched their closest enemies fall, one by one. He knew Chanyeol wasn't able to do much from a distance as he was much better at pulling the heat close to him, through his own body even. He fumbled for his stun gun and tried to aim, steadying himself on the windowsill. It was impossible to keep track of the big picture as parts of it seemed to change constantly, being blurred out by his single-track brain. Maybe this was how Kyungsoo saw the world, everyday. Jongdae's eyes flitted to the figure jumping between his enemies and felt empowered. Yes. If Kyungsoo could handle this, so could he. He just had to focus-

A dull sound ripped him out of his thoughts and he whirled around. Two people had crashed through the front door, one owner who wrestled down a yellow soldier.
"Out! Go!" Chanyeol barked, half-heaving him onto the window sill and before he knew it, he'd met the ground outside, his shelter gone. He scrambled to his feet and through the haze of colors, one person was quickly coming closer, tackling him down again. Jongdae yelped, the gun lost as his fingers scrabbled at the ones around his neck. From the corner of his teary vision he saw Minseok approaching, shoving his gun into the guy's hair and shooting without hesitation. He pressed his eyes close as the shot pierced the air, warm fluid splashing against his face. The momentum half-shoved the guy off him and he tried not to look as Minseok pulled him to his feet. This was surreal. All of it. It was wrong. The crystals the sky was made of, the tree roots digging through the ground, the people- no, Jongdae corrected himself, the people were real. He mustn't lose sight of what's real. He had to stay in control, like Kyungsoo.
"Watch out!"

Minseok shoved him away with a force that had Jongdae tumbling over the dead body on the ground and he fell yet again. His legs were just too weak, too wobbly, fear giving him random but misplaced bursts of energy. Minseok shot another guy down but there was one running towards them, a dull weapon raised as he screamed like a madman. Time seemed to slow down even more as he stared up at him, frozen in fear. He'd kill them. He'd kill Minseok. He only had one chance. Only one thing he could do. Stay in control.
"No!" he yelled, and he could see the light, see the tiny branches of the lightning bolt before they were visible. Because he knew what they would look like. His vision went white before the thunder violently whipped through the air as if the sky itself had cracked.

And then it was silent. As if the thunder had awoken him from a bad dream, demanding the world to bow to its grandeur. The numbing sounds were gone, the sky bled into a solid gray; the reality was back.
His ears didn't ring, like they'd normally do, being in such close proximity to lightning. But this wasn't normal lightning, either.

Something nudged his head.

"Now you'll stand up slowly." a voice announced unnecessarily loud, and Jongdae froze. Around him, no one was fighting anymore. There were crying kids, lots of crumpled bodies on the ground, Jongin and Kyungsoo holding on to each other, Minseok staring at him with alarmed eyes-

"Up with you."

Without thinking, Jongdae scrambled to his feet.

Someone harshly tugged at his arm, the gun still pointed to his temple. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Chanyeol shifting.

"A-ah. Stop right there, little phoenix."

He knew Chanyeol. Why?

"I'm not even here for you today. You have an even prettier gem with you, after all."

Jongdae felt numb, confused and scared, the negative of a lightning bolt still burnt into his vision.

"You. Over there, the shifter. I want you. Come over here."

With shaky steps, Jongin slowly approached them. Jongdae could see the fear in his eyes that flitted between the man, him and the gun.

"Nice. You are going to go with my friend over there-", he nodded towards another man who looked barely hurt and moved towards them on cue, "and if you don't, you can bid your friend farewell." the voice all but crooned.

His and Jongin's eyes met and he'd never felt so connected to him before. Both their minds were wiped blank by fear.

"You better decide quickly, I'm a busy man." the guy insisted, and a careful side glance told him that it was the well-dressed man from before. Jongin slowly but surely moved Kyungsoo's hands off him.

"Stay back. Please." he told him in a low but audible voice. When Jongin stepped away, his eyes repeatedly wandered over his shoulder and lingered on Kyungsoo to make sure he was following his command. Said one stretched out his hand but ultimately obeyed, staying put. The shifter took a few deliberate steps, stopping half a meter in front of the guy's handyman.

"If you hurt any of them... I'll run." he proposed, his brave front all too transparent.

The man chuckled.

"Don't worry your pretty little head. I'm not stupid. Go with him."

While Jongin followed those instructions, the guy stepped around until he could get a good look at Jongdae's face. The man wasn't too old, probably not even in his thirties, with dark eyes matching his black hair. A healthy skin tone, strong eyebrows, eye bags. Jongdae took in all the features just as the man did with him, though his eyes kept being drawn in by the stranger's mischievously twinkling eyes.

"Wouldn't want to destroy such a brand new plaything." he hummed, his eyes leaving Jongdae's face to look at his friends.

"You're lucky I only have one friend with me to play escort."

He straightened up and gave his underling a signal.

He left and Jongin left with him.

Kyungsoo screamed. In a flash, he jumped towards them only to collapse in the empty spot. The man disappeared, and within seconds there were arms keeping Jongdae up. Kyungsoo kept screaming, loud, garbled protests, calling out the shifter's name again and again, his fingers scrabbling at the dirty ground. Jongdae moved his lips but his voice failed him. He barely registered Kyungsoo moving when the world suddenly turned and he'd tackled him down, pinned to the ground with both hands around Jongdae's neck. His lips kept moving but nothing but croaky sounds left them.

"It's your fault!"

He saw wide, watery eyes that mirrored a battle of despair and insanity.

"Your fault-"

People were shouting, and Chanyeol tugged at Kyungsoo's hands. It smelled burnt and Kyungsoo yelled in pain and fury as he was ripped off him. Jongdae's vision was still blurry as he coughed and
retched, not even bothering to get to his feet anymore. His lips kept moving, forming the same words and over again.
"I'm sorry."
Kyungsoo stilled as the two words gained sound, a breathy whisper. Chanyeol struggled to keep him away from Jongdae.
"I'm sorry. Sorry."
Kyungsoo stared, shaking so hard that he could see it from his position on the ground. With something akin to a wail he ripped himself free and stumbled away from all of them, back to the place Jongin had disappeared in. The sounds he was making were guttural and desperate. Screaming, wailing, crying. Jongdae's head lolled to the side where he saw Kyungsoo fumbling for something. It was the green stone. Jongdae had seen it in his hand a few days ago. 'So he gave it to you. Do you like it?' he'd asked him and Kyungsoo had felt its smooth texture, considering his answer, like he always did.
'Yes. It's pretty. Cause it tells me what Jongin finds pretty' he'd replied.
Now he was holding on to it like to a lifeline, one hand clutching his head and Jongdae felt the tears running down his own cheeks.
"Sorry."

Hands were all over him, checking his vitals, moving in front of his eyes but Jongdae couldn't tear his gaze from Kyungsoo.
"Jongdae. Dae. Get a hold of yourself. Sit up."
He blinked. Minseok. Minseok was familiar. He liked getting instructions but currently he felt too exhausted to act on them. Strong arms pulled him into a sitting position, and with a soundless sigh, he leaned back into Chanyeol's chest. He didn't have to look or confirm in any way. He just knew it was him.
"You're with us? Good."
"Fine. I'm fine." he uttered, an ugly cough taking every shred of credibility from him.
"Chanyeol? Okay. Luhan?" Minseok went on, looking around until he found the blond who looked shaken but only appeared to have minor injuries. Minseok himself looked unscathed, his eyes scanning the area.
"We should get lost before those psycho kids come to and realize their owners are dead."
Right. Leaving sounded nice. Leaving this crazy place behind. Jongdae wanted that.
"Where to?" he rasped out, his throat still burning.
Minseok shot him a grim look.
"Wherever Jongin is."
He felt relief flood him. They'd want to get him back. Of course they would.
"I'll try to fetch the bundle of nerves over there-"
"Be careful." Chanyeol's voice sounded from behind Jongdae. It sounded strained, and he held Jongdae firmer than usual, fingertips pressing into his forearms almost painfully. Minseok had turned on his heels already when Jongdae called after him.
"His name."
Minseok looked at him questioningly, and Jongdae cleared his throat.
"You need to call him by his name. That's important."
With a nod, he walked over to the cowering boy and Jongdae watched them from the distance.
"We don't know where to search." he said quietly, to no one in particular. Still, Chanyeol picked up on it.
"I have an idea. I know where to start."
"You do? That's good." he mumbled absently, his eyes wandering from Minseok and Kyungsoo to Luhan. The blond stood with his back to them, facing the disastrous battlefield. Without the colorful hallucinations, there was nothing left but destroyed buildings, dead bodies and faint wails of injured or hysterical children. How many children had died?
He saw Luhan lower his head. Saw the tremble in his shoulders.
"Luhan?" he softly called out and the blond turned around. He made no movement to approach them.
"They're all dead." he stated quietly, his voice an octave higher than usual.
"Our people. All dead."
Jongdae wanted to go up to him and draw him in a hug but his legs wouldn't obey. Luhan's eyes dropped to the ground as he half-turned himself away.
"We can't go back now. They wouldn't believe this. Even if they would, it'd cause nothing but chaos. Maybe even a war."
His voice was taking on an odd, distanced quality.
"Alright. We're good to go. Any suggestions?" Minseok said, unaware of the change in atmosphere, a blank-looking Kyungsoo in tow. The latter wasn't meeting any of their eyes, preferring to stare at the stone in his hands, tears silently rolling down his cheeks.
"I promised you all a home but it lead nowhere. I brought nothing but danger to all of you for my own selfish reasons. Because I was too foolish to estimate the risk of what we'd be doing. All these people had to die for my mistake." Luhan went on, finally turning towards them.
"I can understand if you despise me now. You have every right to do so."
Jongdae looked at him with a wary feeling in the pit of his stomach.
"You may not want to hear it but... I wish you all the best. I really do."
"What are you saying?" Jongdae protested sluggishly, "you can't leave us now. Where are you gonna go?"
Luhan shrugged and it tugged at his heartstrings, how naturally the gesture came to him by now.
"I'll manage."
"First Jongin, now you? You can't leave-" Chanyeol repeated, sounding like a child with the way his pleads turned into accusations, "you gotta help us find Jongin! We need you!"
Minseok crossed his arms with a strictly neutral expression.
"It's your choice, really. But I'd prefer you stay with us. We all do, as far as I see it."
Luhan hesitated, searching their faces for any trace of rejection until he surprisingly turned to Kyungsoo.
"What about you, Kyungsoo?" he asked seriously and Jongdae tried to remember whether the blond had ever addressed him like this, eye to eye, calling him by his name. Kyungsoo looked up after a period of silence, his lips still trembling.
"You care about Jongin." he said and while it was meant to be a Kyungsoo-like, deadpan statement, it came out more like a question, showing how fragile he actually was. It changed something in Luhan's expression and he blinked, gaze hardening.
"Yes. Of course I do."
He took a deep breath, his straight posture telling of determination.
"You're right. We gotta get him back, quickly."
Jongdae exhaled in relief. The old Luhan was back. Or maybe a new one altogether.
"Chanyeol had an idea. Jongdae voiced out and everyone, even Kyungsoo, looked at the tall brunet who looked exhausted but every bit as determined as them.
"I know the guy who took him. Seungri, co-representative of the red Layer. And I know just the people who have information about him. We still have enough red, right? Let's pay a visit to everyone's favorite place."

Chapter End Notes

Somewhere around their incredibly boring, forced 'vacation', the main characters have quite the important talk you can read in Microcosm 0: Microcosm 0
The following hours were lost in a blur for Jongdae. They had quickly retreated to the clocktower, the only place that they had access to, guided by Luhan's navigation skills. Chanyeol had contacted Baekhyun, stating that they had close to zero chance of getting anywhere without him. They waited for him to arrive at the tower until the sun had dipped below the horizon. It felt like an eternity to Jongdae, as if time stood still. Everyone was attending to each other's wounds to the best of their abilities, but Jongdae only sat in a far-end corner of the room with his back against Chanyeol's chest and his fingers almost absently resting on the strong arms enveloping him. His eyes stayed downcast, watched the dusty floor as he listened to the dull thoughts crawling through his head. He felt numb. Or maybe he didn't feel as numb as he'd like to and as a form of self-defense, he'd persuaded himself until he succeeded.
He told himself to hold it together. There was no time for an emotional breakdown, not now. He shouldn't think about it. But it was so very difficult with the way Minseok looked at him without approaching, how Kyungsoo was openly ignoring him. Even Chanyeol was dead silent. A nice gesture, but Jongdae currently yearned to having the void in his head filled.
"Chanyeol." he said quietly, carefully, even. He could sense that Chanyeol was pretty unsettled himself and he didn't want to impose on him.
There were the subtle signs, the subtle silence telling him he was… angry?
Nevertheless, a questioning hum followed immediately, and Jongdae tilted his head back until it rested on the others shoulder.
"Tell me something?"
He wasn't usually the type to be this vague, but Chanyeol didn't seem to mind and rested his cheek against Jongdae's hair, thinking about what to say.
The angry atmosphere dissolved easily and that in itself had an immensely soothing effect already. "Hm... did I ever tell you how I met Baekhyun?"
Jongdae made a negating sound and Chanyeol began to narrate calmly.
"Alright. I told you I moved a lot when I was younger, right? So... when I was around 15, we moved to the blue Layer. I hadn't even finished unpacking when I got lost for the first time. I think it was the second day I spent there and the first time I went out on my own. As you may know, this city is huge and confusing and somehow I took a few wrong turns and ended up in a rather shady district. I found Baekhyun in some side street where a guy tried to kick him to death for trying to rob him."
"I intervened and kinda fought the guy off. He was pretty massive but also completely wasted, so we managed to run before he could call the cops on us."
"That was kind of you. Stupid, but kind." Jongdae mumbled, and he was pretty sure he'd have done something similar.
"You were friends from there on?"
Chanyeol chuckled.
"Well, you know Baekhyun. He thanked me by suddenly pointing a knife at my face, asking me whether I had any money on me."
"Oh."
"Yeah, oh." Chanyeol repeated, sounding rather amused in retrospect, "Of course I had none, I just meant to hand in some official forms. He even threatened to blackmail my parents. I really didn't
want him to get into trouble, but whatever I said just met a pretty solid wall of distrust. 'My parents would ruin you, they're pretty merciless', I’d say, and Baekhyun would reply with something along the lines of 'Oh, you just don't want them to pay'. 'Let me go and get some money, so I can treat you to dinner' - 'So you can call the cops, you mean'. It went on like that, back and forth."

His voice sounded rather mellow as he tried to further explain while running his fingers along Jongdae's shoulders.

"You probably think he was being extremely petty, doing that to someone who'd helped him. But if you would have seen him... he was so weak. On the verge of collapsing from malnutrition and exhaustion. He was shaking from head to toe. I was actually at a loss and just wrestled the knife out of his hands first before he could hurt any of us. And then the problem half-solved itself since Baekhyun began to change strategies, starting to beg me not to hurt him now that he'd lost his weapon. That way I kind of forced him into my apartment, all based on threats and me tugging him along."

"That's pretty... dangerous." Jongdae said slowly. His eyes had closed somewhere along the way as the story lulled his brain into leaving everything else behind.

"But on the other hand... he was too weak to hurt you, right?"

"Right," Chanyeol agreed, "and I know he wanted to be wary, to wait for the moment to strike, overpower me and turn the situation around. But after he had showered I found him passed out on my bed before he had even eaten anything. It got better from there on."

"Wait," Jongdae mumbled, his eyebrows furrowing as a thought hit him, "what about your parents?"

"They weren't home during the day. And at night, I hid him in my room. I think that was the moment Baekhyun really began to trust me - when I didn't sell him out to my parents. And that's where we became friends."

"Really..." Jongdae hummed almost sleepily, "what happened then?"

"Hm... I kinda nursed him back to health and by nursing I'm mostly talking about providing him shelter and food whenever I could. I did help him with a few crimes here and there but nothing horrible. You know, Baek actually has standards when he's not on the brink of starvation. I'm not gonna lie, I found it pretty exciting back then."

Jongdae made a disapproving 'tss', but didn't scold him. It wasn't a situation he could truly see himself in, so he had no idea how he would've handled it.

"It's not like Baek had much of a choice, anyway - his lack of tattoos already marked him as someone illegally roaming the Layer and he refused to return to his birthplace. Anyway. Our biggest -and probably most dangerous- scheme was one that brought us two empty trackers. You know, one of those which have no substance in it yet. We took our time and through a few interesting circumstances, we found this really good place. Baekhyun had a few of the substances on his hands and used them to tune the tracker. So besides all the stuff I have in my arm, I also have an illegal tracker somewhere around my right calf. It's basically like a permanent key to Baek's home."

"That's so nice..." Jongdae hummed with a faint and lazy coo.

"Yeah..."

"Why didn't you stay with him? Instead of living undercover on the orange Layer? Not that I'm complaining." Jongdae asked sleepily as the gentle ministrations of Chanyeol's fingers coaxed him into relaxing.

"Ah. I don't think that's my preferred lifestyle, you know? Besides, I'd exponentially raise the risks for Baekhyun, with people being already after me."

"True."

"True? Did you just agree with him?" someone suddenly called in from the staircase, and while Minseok and Luhan flinched, Jongdae only blinked tiredly over to where Baekhyun stood in the doorway with a carefree grin tugging at his lips.

"You shouldn't do that too often, it'll get to his head- oh my." he cut himself off with a low whistle as he got an actual look at them.

"You look like shit."

Jongdae, who had almost managed to forget about all the blood and grime on him, smiled tensely.
"We've seen better days."
Baekhyun half-agreed as he searched the room for-
"Where did you send your shifter off to this time?"

They could really consider themselves lucky for having Luhan with his quick thinking, Jongdae thought as he mindlessly followed the others, padding down the dusty stone steps. Down, down, down, towards the ground level Baekhyun lived on. Not only had the blond secretly taken along a backpack of supplies and money, just in case; he also had the presence of mind to hurry over to the place the children were wandering off to after the incident, rightfully assuming that the chemicals were stashed there. Baekhyun did come with enough substances to take along all of them, but substances were extremely rare and probably infinitely precious to someone like Baekhyun, so it was good that Luhan found a few vials.

Baekhyun's home apparently lay very low, since even after they had reached the ground and shifted, Jongdae fell about one meter and almost twisted his ankle.

That aside, Jongdae had been following along with no expectations but what he saw wasn't too bad. A lot of greenery, a few trees but no actual forest. Baekhyun lead the way and they didn't have to walk for too long before something akin to an abandoned village came into sight. Though 'village' might take it too far. There were really just a few houses and they all looked pretty run down and primitive. Baekhyun confidently strode towards one of them that looked like it had once been some sort of shop. He pushed open the door and made a mock-inviting gesture.

"Welcome to my modest accommodation."
They hesitantly stepped inside. The furniture still resembled a shop’s with a counter and lots of tables, most of which had been pushed against the walls. It was empty and quite frankly, looked like no living being had been there for a long time.

"I could have figured cleaning isn't your forte." Luhan stated, clearly unimpressed. Baekhyun only dismissed him.

"I don't clean the entrance area all that often. What am I gonna do if someone stumbles across this place? Let's just go upstairs."

Luhan begrudgingly took back his statement when they had climbed up the wooden stairs to the living area. A door kept all the dust and filth out of what was actually a rather big and almost cozy home. Almost, since Baekhyun possessed close to no furniture, stating that most things he found were rotten and he was lacking the motivation to timber his own. What he did have, was an almost immoral amount of clothing, all hanging from various clotheslines. He'd easily put any costume shop that Jongdae had ever visited to shame. Moreover, he had both a bathroom and kitchen, and though the water wasn't hot, it was at least running, thanks to some old pump system. Baekhyun gleefully babbled about how his favorite heater Chanyeol was back and how he'd missed hot baths and actual cooking.

"It's really nice here." Jongdae stated with a weak, but genuine smile.

"Pfft. It looks more like a clothing storage room than anything." Luhan protested with a raised eyebrow, his interest drawn in by a tacky, glittery net shirt. Baekhyun only shrugged.

"You definitely shouldn't see the actual storage rooms downstairs, then. Those are only the ones I need regularly. Anyway," he quipped, clapping his hands once, "I'd suggest you take a hot bath first, get rid of all the dirt. You can fight about the order, I'll go and make dinner or something. Or start looking for blankets and towels..." he mumbled, already halfway into his kitchen.

After a simple meal consisting mostly of rice soup with a few vegetables sprinkled in, they'd had a talk, discussing their next steps. The topic of the sudden mass hallucination hung heavily in the air, but seeing as no one had even the slightest clue as to what had happened, they had to set it aside for now. So far, there was not a lot to plan beforehand - Baekhyun would scope out the situation on the red Layer and then they'd go there together the next day. Jongdae clearly noticed the strain on his face when Chanyeol mentioned that they intended to see CL, the leader of an infamous street gang. From the news, Jongdae knew that the red Layer was mainly ruled by a diverse set of street gangs
that constantly split up, clashed and organized crimes, making this place so very dangerous for unprepared tourists. It would be a lie to say he wasn't scared of setting foot on this Layer, but Chanyeol had assured them this so-called CL knew a lot about the dirty deeds Jongin's kidnapper committed on a daily basis. As the co-representative of the red Layer, Lee Seungri was really influential, but also a figure of public interest. Call him naive, but it still slightly astounded Jongdae that word had never spread about him being involved with this slavery ring.

"He's just really good," Chanyeol had simply said, "he's also been to the labs where they tested me, more than once at that. He's pulling a lot of strings at the same time."

The idea was more than a little unsettling, and Jongdae wondered about the consequences of meddling with someone of this caliber. But there was no turning back. At least they had mutually come to the conclusion that Jongin certainly wouldn't have to fear for his life. A shifter was way too precious to be harmed. With these thoughts in mind, they all retreated to different rooms of the house. While Minseok stayed with Kyungsoo to ensure the latter wouldn't do anything stupid, Luhan padded after Baekhyun, insisting he check on his injuries before he left for the red Layer. The little thief had stubbornly stated that everything was fine and pretty much healed, but the moment he carelessly stretched his arms over his head, a glimpse of white bandages around his torso was enough for Luhan to prove his own stubbornness. Now the two were bickering around the house while Jongdae silently waited in the corner of the farthest and smallest room in the house for Chanyeol, absently gazing up at the lines of clothing. When the latter returned with an armful of blankets, Jongdae forced out another small smile.

"Hey." Chanyeol softly said, spreading out the blankets generously.

"Hey." Jongdae replied equally quietly. Before the taller one could actually lie down, Jongdae touched the side of his leg, asking him to check up on Kyungsoo. Though unwilling to leave Jongdae alone, Chanyeol finally complied with a sigh and left Jongdae to huddle under the blanket by himself first. He would have loved to do it himself, but it was obvious that Kyungsoo wouldn't want to see him.

'Your fault,' he had said.

'It's all your fault.'

His insides felt heavy and constricted. Everything he'd tried to keep away was now catching up with him.

There was so much pressure with no outlet and Jongdae curled together tightly. Pressed his face into the blanket. Tried to hold his breath. Pretended not to hear Chanyeol entering the room, ignored the soft tap against his shoulder before the blanket was lifted and Chanyeol slipped beneath it, his body facing him.

"He's all good." he said in a reassuring voice. Jongdae didn't dare looking up at him. The candles had been blown, meaning that he wouldn't be able to see him either way, but but Jongdae didn't care. It was frustrating. He had been looking forward to spending alone time with Chanyeol, but now he couldn't even bring himself to face him. A hand snaked around his waist and he felt Chanyeol resting his chin on top of his head. After a long period of silence, Jongdae relented and buried his hands in the fabric of Chanyeol's shirt instead. It was nice, grabbing it so tightly. But it wasn't enough.

'It's your fault.'

He wanted to say it out loud, but at the same he didn't. Couldn't. The branches of blinding white were still there, pulsing to the beat of his heart. He shifted until his lips hovered over Chanyeol's ear. It had to be said, he wanted him to know. But no matter how loud the words were echoing through his head, the moment he opened his lips, they wouldn't come out.

"Today..." he uttered, his voice shaky and unsteady, dying after just two syllables. His muscles trembled from the effort of pulling Chanyeol even closer. He let it happen with nothing but a startled exhale. Jongdae's sloppy movements caused his lips to fully press against his ear as he mouthed something so quiet, it couldn't even be considered a whisper.

"I killed someone today." he said.

Chanyeol's arm tightened and wholeheartedly accepted Jongdae burying his face somewhere against
his clavicle while all but clawing at him.
He didn't disagree or told him it was alright. Because it really wasn't. Just like that, the spell was broken and hot tears welled up. His head was a mess. He had willingly taken a person's life and nothing could reverse it. Nothing could redeem this. With nothing but his own will, he had summoned the lightning and in the blink of an eye, it had been over. He may be like Chanyeol, but the thing he was capable of was more impulsive, more vicious. It scared him.
It scared the hell out of him.
"You saved Minseok." Chanyeol mumbled into his hair.
The constant strokes of his hand were comforting, the close proximity was encasing him in a good way and yet Jongdae wouldn't stop shaking. Or crying.
"Without you, Minseok might be dead now. But he's not. He's alive. Just like Jongin."
"It's wrong." Jongdae whispered between cut-off inhales.
Chanyeol hummed.
"Yeah, probably."
Jongdae hiccuped quietly.
"But Minseok is alive now."
He wasn't sure how often Chanyeol had to murmur those words into his ear before he'd finally drifted off into gratifying darkness.

"So, are we good to go?"
Glances and nods were exchanged. Jongdae was still undoubtedly down, but after the emotional outburst from the night before, he was feeling at least a little better. His terrifying power had saved Minseok. And he had accepted the realization that if it could save Jongin, too, Jongdae shouldn't hesitate to use it again. Maybe it wasn't something to be proud of, and he'd need a little more time to fully come to terms with it, but he didn't have to look deep inside of him to see the truth.
"Good. All the tattoos still there?" Baekhyun continued and Jongdae's eyes flitted down to the black symbol on the outer side of his lower arm. Whenever he moved around, his sleeves would ride up the slightest and reveal bits of it. It was a simple combination of letters spelling 'TD'. Baekhyun had drawn the non-permanent tattoos this morning, telling them that it was the symbol of a new union roaming the city. The probability that people were familiar with all their members already was low enough.
"Just remember not to show it casually. You can even resist a bit if people want to see it, just on principle. First we gotta find an accommodation. We'll complete your disguise when we're there."

Baekhyun looked a little tired from his nightly explorations but despite their continuous reassurance that they could wait until he'd gotten some rest, he insisted on being up for it. It was evident that he, too, wanted to get Jongin back as soon as possible.
With all the supplies they could take with them, they headed off across some fields. More than once they passed by short metal rods stuck to the ground with nothing but colorful ribbons sticking out. The colors and positioning of them obviously followed a system that no one but Baekhyun was able to get behind. Jongdae was deeply impressed by the ease with which Baekhyun used both a tripmeter and a small compass to navigate. They had always relied on Luhan's eyes and other people's knowledge but Baekhyun had neither of those and still managed to move between the Layers with uncanny accuracy and fluency. His sense of orientation was beyond imagination for Jongdae, who could get lost on his way to the market and back.
After almost an hour of walking, Baekhyun suddenly stopped and knelt down to replace a makeshift branch in the ground with a prepared metal rod that had red ribbons tied to the end.
"You haven't been there before?" Minseok asked with a raised eyebrow."With your reputation?"
Baekhyun only shot him an easy smile from the ground.
"Reputation? Professionals don't have a reputation, you know? But nah. It's not my place to be. Though my little trip yesterday reassured me that I'm still more than qualified to be your man."
"Things have changed, right?" Chanyeol quipped up from beside Jongdae and he clearly saw a
shadow flickering over Baekhyun’s features. "Well. Sure. But we'll manage."
The discussion was obviously ending here, and while Jongdae kept wondering what exactly had happened to Baekhyun on his home ground to chase him away forever, everyone got ready. Kyungsoo was still avoiding to do as much as look his way, but Jongdae noticed the stone he was wearing around his neck nonetheless. Someone, and he assumed this someone to be Baekhyun after seeing this system of his, had skillfully woven a leather band around the stone in a complex net pattern, enabling him to wear it as a necklace.

Now that Jongdae knew he was able to use the same power as Chanyeol, he could no longer overlook the ease with which he adapted to new structures. The red substance had been injected less than half an hour ago and yet he could feel them clear as day. Moreover did he have close to zero problems telling all the structures apart. In a way he couldn’t explain, they all had a certain individual feel to them that he already associated with the colors. It was probably a very subjective perception, but the orange structures felt smooth and warm while the magenta ones were sharper and the blue ones prickled slightly. The red ones felt very thick and heavy. Easy to grasp.
The air shifted, and when Jongdae opened his eyes, he stood in a cool cellar. The others appeared around him, checked their luggage, and Baekhyun immediately headed for a window. With an approving nod, he gestured for them to follow, and they climbed out one by one. It seemed so easy - appearing somewhere and stealing a few small things just to disappear without leaving a trace. If you knew what you're doing, that is. All these thoughts were blown from Jongdae's mind when they stepped out of the side street and into a main road. He barely noticed Baekhyun ushering Minseok and Kyungsoo away and stuck to Chanyeol, who would lead him and Luhan separately, in order not to attract too much attention.

Though he had seen at least one or two photos depicting the red Layer without burning houses or police officers posing in them, he wasn’t prepared for the real thing. If he’d had to describe it in one sentence, he’d call it a beautifully decorated mess. The streets were narrow and the buildings looked like they were actively squashing each other in a battle for space. Most of them were old and in a poor state, with wooden planks making up for the lack of glass in most windows. Countless lines and cables were strung between lamp posts, windows and roofs, hovering above the heads of people like a spider web decorated with hundreds of different lamps. The city must look marvelous at night, Jongdae thought, and was involuntarily reminded of Baekhyun’s affinity for clotheslines. A tiny hint of his origin. While they strode down the streets, Jongdae tried to look nonchalant at the windows and doors passing by in a blur. Everything might be run-down and even dirty, but people had obviously tried to make up for it with lavish decorations. Restaurants with colorful wood carvings made way for shops with windows that almost burst with products. Signs in all sizes, stand-up displays, strung up fabric and more strings with lights and decoration dangling from them. Colors everywhere. It was overwhelming in every way.
"It really has changed." Chanyeol mumbled quietly. Jongdae only heard it because he was walking close enough for their shoulders to brush.
"It has?" he asked equally low, trying not to attract too much attention. Chanyeol hummed.
"The atmosphere. It's darker. More somber."
Jongdae could only tilt his head in an unspoken question, but Chanyeol obviously couldn't elaborate in public. He looked around, trying to spot what he was talking about. Noon had just passed and at first glance, there were just a lot of poor people pushing themselves through the streets. It took him a while to sharpen his senses and look past the high of colors and impressions. The people were... wary? Sure, they were talking and laughing. No one held a visible weapon. But most of them had a certain strain in common. Strained smiles, careful jokes. He also saw a few tattoos, once in awhile. Occasionally, he’d see people silently making way for others. He had no idea how to interpret those tattoos and simply pressed himself further into Chanyeol's side, hoping that they wouldn't run into anyone. When Chanyeol came to a halt it was so sudden that Luhan almost kept walking, running completely on autopilot. Jongdae tugged at the pullover he’d borrowed from Baekhyun until the
blond came to a halt. Their destination was an inconspicuous hotel painted in mostly red and black. Simple but bold letters spelled out "Red M.a.d.e." and without further ado, they entered. The air was thick, and the entrance area appeared crammed due to everything being held in a color scheme ranging from bordeaux to dark brown and black. While Chanyeol ordered a room for them, Jongdae noticed that the receptionist wore a tattoo identical to the symbol on the sign; the tiny double B that adorned the corner of their sign like a signature.

The rooms were quite expensive but neither Jongdae nor Luhan protested, and one flight in a rickety elevator later, they were on the fourth floor. He hadn't even noticed the building being this tall but he wasn't complaining. As with everything, the room was rather cramped, but surprisingly comfortable.

"You're sure this place is safe?" Luhan asked with an unconvinced face as soon as Baekhyun had entered their room.

"Gee, hello to you, too. I take it you don't want some of the snacks we bought." Baekhyun quipped back with an extra amount of drama.

"Snacks! I'll eat them all!" Chanyeol threw in with earnest enthusiasm, making grabby hands towards the steaming bags Minseok carried.

"Yeah, I'm sharing this concern." the latter responded unimpressed, holding the bag out of his reach. Chanyeol proceeded to pout and whine into Jongdae's shoulder and for the first time that day, Jongdae smiled without having to remind himself to do so. It just came naturally, spreading across his lips as he nudged Chanyeol's side until he'd leave him room to breathe.

"And to your information, this is one of the safest places we'll ever be able to find. Or afford." Baekhyun stated as he plopped down on Luhan's bed, who took it with a disgusted grimace and a shower of complaints.

"Cause this hotel is under the umbrella of Double-B, the last union that kinda has a say in this city." Baekhyun proclaimed around a mouthful of steaming, deep-fried balls that Jongdae couldn't describe at all but enjoyed very much nonetheless.

"Double-B?" he asked as soon as he'd devoured the first one, narrowly avoiding burning his tongue. Chanyeol chuckled and with a small pout, Jongdae snatched one of his in retaliation. Chanyeol gasped.

"Yeah. They've been on top of everything for the longest time. Before 2-1 came in, that is. Still, not even they would dare harass us here."

"Two to One? Double-B? Why those names?" Luhan asked with a frown as he kept kicking at Baekhyun who refused to move.

"Well, a union needs a name. Double-B originally stood for Bigbang. They've been around forever, so no one dares laugh at the name anymore. While 2-1 stands both for 'we score two against you' as well as 'two people against one', since the union is led by two women."

With a quiet grunt, Jongdae lost the battle against Chanyeol's stupidly long limbs and said one plopped one of Jongdae's snacks into his mouth. In retaliation, he swiped his thumb over the side of Chanyeol's lips, catching all the leftover sauce and popping it into his mouth in childish satisfaction.

Chanyeol looked startled and... slightly flustered? His actions only slowly caught up with him but the feeling was definitely contagious and Jongdae felt his own cheeks warming.

"Excuse me? Are you two even listening?"

"Huh?" they both asked cluelessly and Baekhyun groaned.

"Really now? You're awful. I don't deserve being around you."

Whether there was a hidden meaning or not, Jongdae felt embarrassed either way and kept to his own food from there on, studiously ignoring the glances Chanyeol threw him.

"Aww man, I was looking forward to the green fringe so much!" Baekhyun whined, letting the brush sink like a puppy hanging his ears low.

Jongdae shrugged apologetically.
"Sorry. It's not my fault that it won't work on me."

Baekhyun made more incoherent whiny noises and turned towards Luhan, who took a step back immediately and shot him a glare that looked more panicked than threatening.

"Don't you even think about it."

The air was already filled with the heavy smell of hair dye. To Jongdae, it smelled like a mix between plastic and paint, and he couldn't help wrinkling his nose.

"Aww, it would have been the shit." Baekhyun continued to mope as he cleaned out a brush. Jongdae was actually a little disappointed that the hair dye wouldn't work on his hair, though he'd certainly not been enthusiastic over the green fringe.

"Well... one brunet guy is not gonna stand out that much, right?"

"Nah. It's just you, so it's alright. We'll make up for it with the clothes." Baekhyun said with a dismissive wave of his hand, and Jongdae swore he heard him mutter something about makeup under his breath.

"Uh. Anyway, you still have everyone else to experime- to get artistic on." Jongdae hurriedly continued and it was enough to distract Baekhyun, who went back to his sunny being in a second.

"Riiight. So, Luhan..." he began and Jongdae wouldn't judge the blond if he bolted out the door right this instant at this tone, "have you picked a color yet?"

The translator fidgeted around with the color pots and grimaced.

"Do I have to?"

"Oh, no, of course not. I mean, I can choose for you. What do you think of a nice vibrant red? Though the green fringe offer still stands." Baekhyun offered generously and Luhan reconsidered real quick.

"I'll choose. Gimme some more time."

"I'm next, I'm next!" Chanyeol exclaimed and Jongdae quickly made way before the overly excited boy would just settle on his lap. With mild interest he leaned back and watched Baekhyun methodically applying the color. Every movement assured him that he indeed knew what he was doing (though he might be having a little too much fun). In order to blend in with the regular citizens, he'd stated it was utterly necessary to change at least their hair color. Even Minseok had agreed in a heartbeat, stating that it may disperse suspicions. And he knew his friend good enough to tell that he was secretly pleased with his electric blue hair. Jongdae had been skeptical at first, but with the way Baekhyun had mixed it with black strands it looked really good on him. He sighed. He wanted to have some fun, too, but the colors just wouldn't stick to his hair. It was a special trick of Baekhyun's that was so simple, it astounded Jongdae that it wasn't a common thing. He used this modern type of hair dye that vanished the moment you shifted somewhere. The reason lay in the way the tiny particles merely superficially coated the hair instead of sinking in. Having the conscience to keep them all together was incredibly hard.

Unlike the standard target group, which mainly consisted of female teenagers striving to sneak out and have some fun on an edgy Layer like the blue one, Baekhyun had obviously found a better use for it. With slight longing he watched the dark red paste he spread over Chanyeol's slightly damp hair. It was actually one of those rare moments where he got to take in his features without receiving attention in return. Normally Chanyeol would quickly notice Jongdae looking at him and shoot him a questioning glance that had him quickly averting his gaze or make an offhanded comment to escape the situation. Now that there was nothing to do and he could use the coloration progress as an excuse, he could let his eyes wander freely. It was obvious that Chanyeol was used to this procedure. His posture was upright and for once he sat very still, humming under his breath with his eyes closed. Actually this was probably the most relaxed he's ever seen him, not counting the times he was asleep. Then again, Jongdae had to remind himself that he still didn't know an awful lot about him. He's told him that he enjoyed making music or reading a good book every now and then or do sports but Jongdae obviously hadn't had the chance to see him do any of this. He'd like to, though. He'd actually like it, if whatever they had would last long enough for him to one day walk in on him reading a book and just curl up next to him and rest. Or maybe he'd play the guitar and hum a song,
just like he did now. He watched how his lips curled ever so slightly, as if the song he was humming had a special meaning to him.

It was nice, somehow. Calming. He usually felt a lot of excitement around Chanyeol like nervousness or anticipation; but this sight made him want to gently pull Chanyeol's head into his lap and pet his hair until they'd both doze off.

Baekhyun picked up on the melody Chanyeol was humming and without words, they fell into a tune that playfully broke the harmonies every now and then. And for just a few minutes, Jongdae felt peaceful and content.

"So, what do you say?" Chanyeol asked with eyes twinkling in expectation.

Jongdae stared. Chanyeol shook his head like a dog, though his hair was now perfectly blow-dried. It only messed up the ruby-colored strands that Baekhyun had meticulously straightened.

"It's good." he stated curtly and Chanyeol looked a little antsy, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"You don't seem to like it?"

What a question, Jongdae thought. 'Like' was maybe not the right way to put it. The bordeaux complemented his warm eyes and slightly tanned skin. Where the unruly curls had looked endearing and boyish, the straight but disheveled strands looked mature and... quite frankly, Jongdae found it extremely attractive. There was no way he could just say that though. Not when he was looking at him like an expectant puppy. He felt like a pervert, but his mind kept throwing in scenarios where he'd pull him away from the rest to steal a few kisses, unhelpfully throwing in how they didn't do enough of that in the first place. The prospect almost made him blush right on the spot. He was definitely lacking the courage to do that.

"I do like it!" he defended himself instead, "it makes you look... older. In a good way, that is. More mature. I was just surprised. Yeah."

"Oh. Alright, then." Chanyeol replied and the smile spreading over his face was so wide that he shook his head again to get a hold of himself and Jongdae wanted to melt from cuteness.

So much for looking mature.

He spent the next few minutes lounging around on one of the hotel beds on his stomach, observing Baekhyun and Luhan - an occupation that never quite lost its appeal, due to their continuous on-off relationship. Though Luhan would obviously deny that there was any 'on'. Or any relationship, for that matter. Currently the latter was surprisingly quiet as Baekhyun's gloved fingers skillfully went through the wet strands to keep them in place while he applied more color. Jongdae could see the muscles in his pale neck tense whenever Baekhyun's hand unconsciously lingered on his skin. It obviously chipped at his ego, being at the other's mercy and having no reason to complain.

Baekhyun's surprising streak of professionalism definitely caught him off guard and Jongdae couldn't be perfectly sure, but he guessed that Baekhyun did it on purpose. He would have commented on it if not for the fact that Chanyeol subtly playing footsies with him was so distracting.

Baekhyun's own, freshly dyed silver hair had barely dried when he left the hotel with Minseok to contact 2-1 and ask for a meet up. Jongdae had offered to tag along, but Baekhyun chose Minseok over all of them, patiently explaining his choice while rimming his eyes with dark kohl liner. It was mildly endearing how he'd taken to the habit of explaining himself very thoroughly in order to beat Luhan to his incessant questions and overall complaints.

"I won't take Luhan since he's gonna be the key to our negotiation later. Chanyeol's out 'cause he'll be the bait to make them want to see us in the first place. Kyungsoo here might actually startle them into shooting me, and Jongdae doesn't look very menacing," he'd said lightly. Jongdae didn't blame him - surely Minseok wouldn't hesitate a second to go to extreme measures if it came down to it. They knew that much already.

Dolled up to the point where even Jongdae would have to look twice before confirming either of their identities, they had left. With Minseok and even Baekhyun out of the picture, Kyungsoo's next
attachment figure would be Chanyeol, maybe even Luhan. Anyone but him, really. The thought stung but Jongdae graciously left Chanyeol to Kyungsoo, who indulged him a little with his power. Maybe he didn't say it out loud, but Chanyeol didn't seem all that appalled by the shorter one anymore. Maybe they'd shared a little talk during one of the times Jongdae had all but pushed him towards Kyungsoo. Maybe it was due to the fact that Kyungsoo had voluntarily backed off of Jongdae at some point. Whatever it was, it enabled them to have their own, awkward little exchange which mostly consisted of Chanyeol talking a lot and failing at gauging the others reactions while playing with the flame of a candle. Kyungsoo's dark eyes seemed to absorb the flame and just like Jongdae, his hair had remained its natural color, an inky black. Baekhyun had repeatedly sworn Kyungsoo hissed at him when he'd approached with a pot of mint green color. It was a nice sight. Not that Jongdae didn't want to be near Chanyeol, but he felt like Kyungsoo shouldn't be left alone to brood at this point. Before Jongdae could get gloomy all on his own, Luhan joined him on the balcony. He actually made for pleasant company and both exchanged information they had regarding this Layer, without delving too far into each other's personal space. They were both still a little too hurt to think about their homes and the current situation. He noticed Luhan repeatedly throwing glances at the glass surface of the balcony door to study his reflection, his fingers absently twirling around the colorful strands. After giving up completely, Baekhyun had taken the choice from him and created a little piece of art with expertly blended shades of dusty pink, strawberry blonde, some flax color and probably a lot more tones that had escaped Jongdae's attention. Luhan had stated it to be 'better than he'd expected' and by the way his fingers sought the hair again and again, Jongdae could safely say that he loved it.

"So... any more weird dreams?" Luhan finally asked the question that had been on his mind for a long time already. Jongdae couldn't say that his perpetual concern annoyed him; rather than that he was glad to have someone to talk to. It was nothing they did on purpose, but with all the life-threatening stuff going on, most of them disregarded Jongdae's odd, nightly incidents. He shook his head.

"Not really. There were a few, vague dreams during our stay at your home but... I simply ignored them."

It was nothing but the truth. Whenever his dreams became weird, he'd try to locate Chanyeol. If there was one thing he'd learned, it was that he had always been able to see him. No matter what other crazy stuff he'd dream about, Chanyeol would be there, sleeping tightly. So if he did see him, he'd just curl around him and defiantly close his eyes until it was over.

"Really? You must have a pretty good grasp over yourself, then." Luhan provided, and Jongdae looked at him questioningly.

"It's something we... the people on my home Layer say. You have to know yourself inside out to be able to control your dreams."

"Huh..." Jongdae only mumbled, his thoughts drifting back to the happenings at the camp.

"You think it's all connected? This strange dreams and the hallucinations everyone saw?" he asked, and while one part of him already knew that he couldn't be responsible for it, that it was utter nonsense, he still yearned to hear it from someone else. Luhan looked conflicted though.

"I don't know. If you ask me, I'd think all of it is related, in a way." Luhan muttered, obviously frustrated over the inexplicability of it all. Jongdae sighed barely audibly, and Luhan ultimately caught on to his worry.

"I'm not saying you willingly cause all of this! At least this huge hallucination we all suffered from - I'm absolutely positive you couldn't even do this even if you tried. Plus, think about it: you were just as disoriented and terrified as the rest of us, right?"

Jongdae nodded slowly, but his insides still cramped up as he was reminded of the lightning bolt he'd caused. Maybe he'd been a little too terrified. As if the translator had read his thoughts, he leaned in a bit and searched his eyes with his own.

"Thanks for saving Minseok," he said in a low but clear voice, "it's a pretty dangerous power you've discovered there..."
Jongdae flinched with guilt but Luhan only shook his head, adamant on continuing. "but if you've got the mental skill to call it, I'm sure you can control it. We all think that. We have faith in you."

Before he could even ask who he was speaking for and when they'd had talked about him behind his back, Baekhyun entered the room unnecessarily noisily; only to regret it when Kyungsoo almost jumped him before identifying him just in time.

"Aaand we're set for the day after tomorrow!" Baekhyun announced, looking extremely pleased with himself.

"That's pretty late." Luhan gave back, always quick to shut down Baekhyun's enthusiasm. Said one only threw him an unimpressed look while Minseok took over.

"It's a good result. They initially tried to drive us away by telling us the boss was out of town." With a sigh, Minseok sat down on the mattress next to Jongdae, who noted with relief that he was unscathed.

"I've got a pretty bad feeling about this though." Minseok said as he leaned back on his palms. He did look a little exhausted, and Jongdae wondered how much physical inconvenience the aftermath of his involuntary drug experience he was still battling with. Baekhyun agreed with a grave expression.

"We ought to. They don't play around."

There was something in the way he said it, something that made Jongdae think there were rather personal matters involved. Maybe he'd had his fair share of experience with these people. He hadn't decided whether or not to point this out when Baekhyun made another one of his 180 degree turns, clapped his hands once and looked around.

"So, who's up for some fun? I think we should go out tonight!"

No one looked particularly thrilled. Jongdae just avoided Baekhyun's eyes. How could he go out and enjoy himself when Jongin was somewhere, probably suffering? Not to mention his dreams and the lightning and the hallucinations-

"Come on, guys! Sitting here and brooding is not gonna change anything!" Baekhyun added with his hands thrown up, and Luhan seemed about ready to choke him for being insensitive.

"Isn't it dangerous, Baek? To be seen in public?" Chanyeol asked, obviously trying to appeal to Baekhyun's tiny sense of reason. Unfortunately, Baekhyun only rolled his eyes and childishly echoed his words in a mocking tone.

"I've been a wanted man for longer than any of the present people in this room," he began but cut himself off with a look at a motionless Kyungsoo, "except maybe for you, I don't exactly know, but my point is: I know this place like the back of my hand and I have not come up with such perfect disguises for you to stay cooped up all day long. Let me tell you: it'll be fine." he ended with the type of exasperation kids would use when convincing their parents. When he still didn't receive an enthusiastic response, he changed strategies and pouted. The effect was immediate and Jongdae almost felt like he'd personally kicked the puppy that inspired Baekhyun for this look.

"Oh, come on. I haven't been here in seven years. Shouldn't I get some quality time on my home ground?"

Jongdae sighed and knew they had lost. Chanyeol gave in immediately as well.

"Of course. I'm sorry, Baek. I'll go with you."

"Yeah. You can show us around a bit." Jongdae added in a placating manner and even Luhan seemed torn.

"Isn't this place dangerous? Like, too dangerous to even fit into this ranking you use?"

Baekhyun dismissed him with a wave of his hand, the kicked puppy look already forgotten.

"Oh please. You just stick to me and you'll be good."

To the other's surprise, Minseok shrugged and readily agreed to accompany them. Maybe he wanted to make sure they didn't end up in a gang fight, maybe he was simply curious. It was hard to tell with him.

"That leaves one person."

They all shared a quick glance before looking at Kyungsoo, who appeared slightly confused by the
It was pouring outside. A calming white noise washed over everything. Rain always made him feel dull and lazy. He stretched his long limbs out on the makeshift sofa, looking out of the window. Water ran down the glass in rivulets, obscuring his vision. It was hard to tell with the gray sky, but a glance to the simple clock at the wall told him it was early evening. Most people in the village lived a simple, primitive life. He was fairly sure that there were at most two other clocks like his, with a wind up mechanism. Surely, most people had finished their work and returned from the fields and windmills to have a hearty dinner with their loved ones. A faint knock resounded. He didn't even bother turning towards the door.

"Sehun?" someone called out over the rush of rain.
"Yes?"

The door creaked open and Sehun lazily blinked up at one of their very few guards. A chubby young boy called Seunghyun, his friendly expression tinged with worry.

"Someone came for you."

Sehun sat up in an instant, looking alarmed, but the boy shook his head.

"It's not that bad. Just one guy, no weapons. He hasn't threatened anyone."

His bony shoulders slumped, but he didn't dare relax too much.

He got up with a sigh, one pale hand ruffling his midnight black hair as he slipped into his shoes, muttering colorful curses aimed at the weather and the guy he hadn't even seen yet under his breath. With a curt nod, he accepted the umbrella and left the cozy house. With sloshy steps he staggered through the mud, hoping dearly that he could finish this with one hand and keep holding up the umbrella with the other one.

The number of people coming for Sehun had decreased dramatically. This might be related to the fact that Sehun showed no mercy towards people crossing the border or threatening people from the village. The mayor had often told Sehun over a glass of alcohol that he was both the best and worst thing to ever happen to them. But in the end he didn't mind, and so Sehun didn't mind either. Without the incredibly effective windmills, the village might be in severe trouble. Sehun guided the wind for them. They provided him with a home. In turn, their lives were less safe with all the people being after him. But Sehun chased those away, too. It was a mutual relationship and though there had been complications in the past, a lot of people liked to refer to him as their lucky charm.

Only that he didn't feel very much of a lucky charm in situations like this, when he had to fend off attackers. He really hoped he wouldn't have to kill today. It wasn't something Seunghyun should have to see.

As it turned out, it really was only one person waiting in front of the gates. Not directly in front of them; rather than that, he stood about ten steps away, an orderly step behind the ring of stones the villagers and Sehun had laid out ages ago. A smart decision - if he'd stepped over them, Sehun wouldn't have batted an eyelash before killing him. It wouldn't have been the first time.

But no, the man just stood there, in the pouring rain, without even wearing as much as a jacket. He was soaked, from head to toe, woolen pullover clinging to his skin and hair dripping. Sehun opened the gate, but didn't take a single step outside.

"What do you want?" he called out over the rain.

The man was older than him, though not by too much. Overall, he really didn't seem like the type who usually came after him. Not especially huge in built, no visible weapons, no recorder. No officer, no reporter, no one familiar from his past, probably no assassin. How very unusual.
The man wiped his eyes with one hand, presumably to get rid of the water collecting in his eyelashes, before curling both hands around his mouth.

"Are you Oh Sehun?"

Sehun shot him a half-hearted glare. He really didn't step out into this awful weather for this type of nonsense.

"I asked you what you want!"

The man didn't seem taken aback.

"I would like to talk to you!"

"I don't give interviews!" Sehun called back in annoyance, "Just go home!"

"I'm not a reporter! I just want to know the truth!"

U-huh. Sure. Sehun's fingers felt frozen and numb, just like him. He really hated rain. It made controlling the air around him unnecessarily hard.

"Go. Home."

"Please, I'm really no reporter! I'm alone and have no weapons with me!"

To the guys misfortune, the air in his body was a different story altogether and with a quick movement, Sehun raised his free hand, curled it around an invisible neck. The man's words were cut off immediately as he scrambled to massage his throat, tried to ease the restriction.

"I'm not gonna say it a third time!" Sehun barked between gritted teeth. To his surprise and further annoyance, the guy kept talking and though it came out choked and raspy, Sehun could still hear him.

"Hear me out- I'm a representative and I've stumbled across the people you were working for-" he wheezed out and Sehun loosened the pressure just a tiny bit, since he could see his lips turning blue all the way from where he stood.

"It's all legal and official but I know something's wrong with them- I wanna change something, I wanna know what's going on and put an end to it- I just wanna know what I'm looking for, I won't involve you in anything, promise!"

Sehun glared at him, the pressure neither increasing nor decreasing. The man opened his eyes to firmly meet his gaze. Besides the obvious pain, there was something so strangely open about his expression that he was tempted to believe him. But Oh Sehun didn't stay alive by giving into temptations.

The man slowly removed his hands from his throat and to the seam of his pullover.

"I'll prove you that I have neither weapons, nor anything else to threaten you - I'm completely at your mercy!"

With jerky movements due to the pressure on his throat, the brunet actually pulled the pullover over his head, exposing his milky skin to the pouring rain. Alright, so he wasn't exactly scrawny, Sehun corrected himself absently while most of his thoughts circled around the question what could possibly be wrong with this guy's head. *He was crazy.*

The man showed him a tiny brooch on said pullover before letting it fall to the ground with a soggy sound and stepping out of his shoes.

*Completely nuts.*

Toed off his socks, orderly placed all his garments right next to him.

*Really, there was no way he'd-*

Reached down to unbutton his pants.

"Okay, fine, stop it!" Sehun called out, finally taking the pressure off his throat and with a surprised huff, the guy stumbled and ended up in the dirt.

"So we'll talk?" he coughed out hopefully, a bright, gleeful smile spreading across his features.

Sehun regarded the muddy, shivering figure with a look of utter disbelief.

"Just come over here. Seunghyun, take his clothes."

Chapter End Notes
If you'd like to get a glimpse of Junmyeon's and Sehun's encounter, please refer to my Microcosm V:

Microcosm V

♡
Chapter 15

All the lights did indeed look magnificent at night. There were many more people around, too, and Jongdae grasped Chanyeol's hand tightly while he occasionally looked over his shoulder to confirm that Minseok was still with them. Baekhyun had separated their group and delegated them to either himself or Chanyeol, seeing as the two knew their way around this Layer. Since Chanyeol wasn't that well-versed in this area, he had to look after Jongdae and Minseok - the more 'docile people with common sense', as Baekhyun had put it. Luhan was not impressed. Kyungsoo was unhappy in general.

Either way, they were squishing themselves down the streets together, and while Jongdae felt a little wary, nothing horrible had happened yet. Despite the news constantly telling him what an awful place this was, he hadn't seen anyone getting openly mugged or beaten up yet. People were bustling around, all eager to buy things on the night market or get from one place to the next. The city seemed much more alive and carefree at night than during the day. Still, after years of negative news about tourists being murdered and gang fights causing huge collateral damage, he stuck to Chanyeol's side. Said one appeared to be relaxed but it wasn't his best acting up to date. His wide orbs flitted around the area a little too frantically, and Jongdae knew he was nervous.

Not that Baekhyun hadn't done a great job at disguising them. As an outsider, he would've never been able to recognize them as foreigners. Minseok thought otherwise, calling Jongdae's excitement over some promotional posters highly suspicious. Jongdae didn't even bat an eyelash at his complaints, too enthralled by the posters advertising his favorite band's upcoming open air tour on the blue Layer. He spent a good ten minutes whining to everyone who cared to hear about the fact that he'd probably never get to see them perform live at this point. A slightly overwhelmed Chanyeol suggested some snacks to soothe his broken heart, and they decided to split up for the time being. Baekhyun fawned over some hot, melon-flavored bread while Chanyeol and his two proteges didn't feel that experimental and went for some fried potatoes on a stick. Jongdae knew potatoes all-too well, and even though they were cooked differently, he was looking forward to a piece of home, the pain of his hurt fanboy heart forgotten for now.

The food stall was in a less overrun area, and finally there was enough space to breathe and move without brushing against other people. While the food was being prepared, Jongdae shifted on the balls of his feet, thinking back to the things Luhan had said earlier.

"We have faith in you."
"Say, Chanyeol..." he began slowly, and the taller one immediately regarded him with a friendly 'hm?' that betrayed nothing.
He threw a look over at Minseok, who was inspecting the food of a neighboring stall, before continuing.
"Did you know the others were talking about this... thunder?" he asked carefully, searching his eyes - that avoided his for a split second.
Jongdae instantly felt a pang of disappointment.
"You knew." he stated, mild accuse layering his voice. Mild, because Jongdae refused to show it was more than that. Chanyeol wet his lips and tried to meet his eyes.
"Yeah. Sorta. It's nothing to worry about, we were just-"
"We."
"deciding not to address this matter for now."
It was Jongdae's turn to avert his gaze, to let it roam over rows of snacks and try to keep his voice even and nonchalant.
"Oh. You've decided that. Without me, you've decided not to talk about this thing regarding me."
He chuckled, but it came out wrong.
"That's why no one asked me about it. I was starting to wonder."
"Jongdae."
He was determined to block him, to back off a little, but Chanyeol wouldn't have it, calling out to
him with earnest but not making a move to touch him.
"Hey. Let me explain."
Jongdae didn't look at him. But he didn't leave, either.
"You were in a state of shock, and no one could bear confronting you directly like that. We wanted
to give you some time. No one thinks any less of you because you can do that. Just, instead of
overwhelming you, we wanted to wait until you got better." he said calmly, and while it did make
sense, it still hurt.
"You keep saying 'we'." Jongdae stated blankly.
He wasn't sure what he was even trying to say, but his use of plural made him feel even more
betrayed.
It said 'I was in on it while snuggling with you afterwards'.
Chanyeol fidgeted.
"Look, it's not... we just tried to meet you halfway-"
"By pulling away." Jongdae cut him off, before breaking into a sigh, shielding his eyes with his
hand.
"I'm sorry. Just... it hurts. You could've told me. Hey Jongdae, we did indeed notice you did
something kinda weird back there, but don't worry your pretty head about it, we'll get back to that
when things have calmed down. Is that so hard to say?"
Chanyeol hesitated, looking extremely apologetic.
"The part with the pretty head would have been easy?" Chanyeol asked timidly with eyes shining
hopefully. Wondering whether it was alright to be playful, wondering whether Jongdae would
forgive him. And as Jongdae looked at the way he'd drawn his shoulders up in a ridiculous attempt to
look smaller, he already knew he would forgive him. Staying mad at Chanyeol was very difficult;
especially since he usually meant no harm.
"Still. Don't do that again... just talk to me next time. You talk so much anyway, don't hold back on
stuff that's important. Or on anything, really."
I'm ready to give you everything, Jongdae thought, so don't hold back. I'd feel stupid.
Chanyeol nodded quickly, infinitely glad that Jongdae had forgiven him. In an attempt to reconcile,
he cuddled himself into Jongdae's side like a clingy cat.
"You're too big for this, jeez. Back off." he jokingly said, and with an indignant noise, Chanyeol
pressed even closer. Jongdae smiled in fond exasperation.
"I'm sorry, Dae."
He looked around at Minseok, who had stepped towards them at some point, three sticks of steaming
potatoes in his hands. He looked apologetic too, though not to the extent of Chanyeol. It was more of
the 'I'm actually sorry, but I know you'll forgive me' kind of sorry; the one only best friends knew.
"U-huh, you say that now. After talking behind my back like that. You really are cheating on me
with Luhan, aren't you?" Jongdae dramatically said. It was a different kind of 'I forgive you', but a
legitimate one nonetheless.
Minseok rolled his eyes with a smile, bumping their shoulders together.
"Dude, you save my life like, every second day by now. I think it'll be hard for Luhan to outdo that."
Jongdae replied with a huffy "I should hope so", before reaching for his potato stick.
Minseok shot him a smile, Chanyeol nibbled at Jongdae's snack and everything was alright.
That is, until Minseok leaned in to stage whisper in faked concern.
"I just wanted to step down from being a third wheel and let your boyfriend comfort you. Was he not
good enough?"
Jongdae almost choked on the steaming potato.

"You're so red, Jongdae. Burnt your tongue?" Baekhyun asked - genuinely innocent for once - and
Jongdae smiled tensely.
"A little." he croaked out, ignoring the pleased little smile on Minseok's face. Baekhyun just shrugged it off and lead the way, ignoring any complaints from Luhan. Jongdae watched Kyungsoo silently eating some sweet bread, and it sparked a lot of thoughts in him. The first one being that he should've checked out the bread himself (courtesy of his mother raising a true baker, though he didn't like to admit it), the second whether Jongin had ever been to this place before. The third thought stubbornly told him that Kyungsoo wouldn't have played any games and confronted him with anything right off the bat. Jongdae missed whatever they’d been sharing. They had left the market behind in favor of leisurely walking down a few side streets, and he was beginning to wonder where Baekhyun was even intending to go, when they took a turn and saw lights and people.

A group of musicians were entertaining the crowd around them. Instead of stiffly standing, everyone had gathered around, sitting on the ground to eat, drink and chat. Jongdae had rarely ever felt as foreign as he did now (maybe during his first visit on the blue Layer), but Baekhyun confidently strode towards them and so they had no choice but to follow awkwardly.

He unceremoniously greeted them as if they were people he met everyday and sank to the ground, getting comfortable. Chanyeol nonchalantly followed and the rest did so, too. Luhan wrinkled his nose at sitting on the dirty ground, but one pointed look from Baekhyun had him complying. Whatever bickering they had going on between them, this was Baekhyun's home ground and Luhan followed his lead unconditionally.

"Time to relax a bit, no one here's gonna eat you." Baekhyun announced not too loudly as he spread out the food and drinks he'd bought at some earlier point.

"You know them?" Jongdae asked equally quietly, and Baekhyun laughed loud enough to make his ears ring.

"Not at all! But who cares?" he asked with shining eyes, and the happiness reflected in them was almost overwhelming. Jongdae leaned into Chanyeol while observing Baekhyun as he merrily chatted with the natives around them like he truly belonged here. There were people of all ages, from young kids jumping around to old ladies sipping hot tea. Jongdae knew that most people he'd grown up with would have looked down on these people. Gypsies, his mother would call them. People who don't know anything about hard work. Don't pay attention to them. But here he was and no one stopped him from associating with the crowd of loud people around him wearing partly ragged and partly modern clothing, old-fashioned accessories and tiny ropes and pearls braided into their hair. There were no visible rules applying to their appearances and yet Jongdae felt out of place. Unlike them, he was lacking this particular sense of freedom - to wear whatever he felt looked pretty, no matter the combination or how fashionable people around him deemed it to be. To feel at home in his own skin. Though he could definitely get used to it in time, he was sure of that.

One guy was playing the drums while a woman danced, and a choir of people around them chanted along, whenever they felt like it. The rhythm was quick-paced, and the woman's feet were perfectly in tune with it, her ponytail of braids flipping with every step.

"Do you have a sitar around?" Baekhyun asked excitedly and some middle-aged man nodded, calling out until someone handed them a foreign-looking instrument. It looked like a guitar with odd proportions and while Jongdae was preparing himself to see Baekhyun play, he most certainly didn't expect the bubbly guy to push the instrument into Chanyeol's hands.

"Channie, Channie!" he began to chant, clapping his hands, and if Jongdae didn't know any better, he would have thought the hyperactive boy was tipsy. Looking slightly flustered, Chanyeol shook his head but got into position nonetheless as he scooted away from Jongdae a bit to place the instrument in his lap.

"Ah, I don't know. I'm no good with this one-"

But Baekhyun refused to listen until Chanyeol's fingers struck a cord, probing and hesitant. Jongdae's initial fear of people being annoyed at their attitude vanished. Not only because Chanyeol's playing wasn't embarrassing at all, but because the way his fingers pulled at the strings as he slowly got the hang of the instrument was utterly fascinating. Jongdae had never heard a sound like this and
together with the drum providing a steady beat, the sound was exotic. Definitely more free and wild than the music Jongdae had been aspiring to sing to on the blue Layer. It was really nice and he was indeed itching to sing along - if only he had the slightest idea what kinds of vocals were suited for this.

When Chanyeol had a stable little melody going on, Baekhyun jumped in and hummed along. The invisible spell had been broken the moment Baekhyun opened his mouth, and while they had been some kind of addition to the group before, they were now part of it. Before Jongdae knew it, he wasn't awkwardly sitting between Chanyeol and Luhan anymore, but next to an old lady, while Chanyeol had taken his place next to the guy with the drums, his fingers still flying over the strings. "He doesn't know how to play the sitar." the old lady stated with a look at the gleeful redhead. Jongdae was about to shrug when she smiled, reaching for her cup of tea. "But he knows how to make music. It's a nice change, once in awhile."

Jongdae hummed in agreement and watched the concentrated look on Chanyeol's face as he tried to keep up with both the drums and Baekhyun. "You should sing louder, you know?" With surprise, Jongdae regarded her with a tilted head. "You keep mumbling under your breath, that's not a healthy way to express yourself." she insisted with a wise smile and Jongdae blinked. He hadn't even realized he'd been doing that. "Maybe later..." he said evasively, feeling very intimidated by the whole situation. One look to the side showed Minseok amiably talking to a man about his age and Luhan observing the situation with mistrust and curiosity battling each other in an obvious way. He noticed that the translator had one hand absently resting on Kyungsoo's thigh to make sure he was still there. The latter looked a little startled at everything that was going on, and a little tempted to let go of the dark cloud hovering around him. But the hand he'd tightly curled around his penchant told Jongdae where his heart really was.

Before he could dwell too much on that, the sitar stopped, and one look told him that Chanyeol had switched for the drums. The change was instantaneous. This was an instrument he knew by heart. Everyone could tell by the practiced ease he handled it with, and Jongdae could tell by the way his face lit up, the wrinkle between his brows gone. The shining eyes found his' and Chanyeol mouthed at him to join them. He had no time to come up with an awkward excuse as Baekhyun already bounced into his vision, tugging at Jongdae's arms. "I've heard you can sing? Let's give Yeol a pretty duet!"

"I don't know Baek..." Jongdae half-whined as he was pulled to his feet. "Not listening!"

He helplessly waved the old lady goodbye, and she graciously let him go, a look of melancholy on her face. "Baek... what a familiar name." she hummed to herself before coaxing Luhan into sharing a cup of tea.

"You were amazing, Jongdae!"

"Oh, hush." Jongdae just retorted with a flustered slap at Chanyeol's shoulder. The taller one only laughed and disappeared into the shower, not without leaving a stray peck on his forehead. Jongdae smiled, and there was no one around to tease him for it. It was late and since the hotel offered no rooms for three persons, he had a room to himself with Chanyeol. He sat down by the window, unwilling to approach the bed before he was properly showered. He looked out of the window and into the night. The silence was heavy after all that noise from before. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the way Chanyeol smiled while bobbing his head along to the rhythm, sweat plastering red bangs to his skin. But he could also see Kyungsoo, who had sat beside Luhan the whole evening, looking down. It made him wonder what Jongin was feeling right now. Where he was, what he was doing, whether he'd escaped. Though the latter, hopeful thought had been carefully put out by Chanyeol, who stated that Seungri was capable enough to keep him. Jongin had once mentioned he
liked to dance. Surely he would have loved to be there.  
"Jongdae? The shower is yours."
He looked up at Chanyeol, who was toweling his hair, just to pointedly look away.  
The hotel's bathrobe hadn't been tied and showed off everything his boxers didn't hide.  
"Yeah. Right." he mumbled and made his way to the bathroom on wobbly legs. Right, Jongdae thought as the hot spray of water made him silently moan and bless every developed Layer. It was just the two of them tonight. Did that mean... would they...? He could barely finish the thought, and yet he felt a lot of conflicted feelings already lining up to hand in their concerns. Mostly nervousness, as he'd obviously never engaged in anything that involved more than his own hand, leading to the inevitable fear of messing up. They couldn't go all the way anyway, Jongdae chided his own brain, since they had no condoms or even lube. He caught his brain already considering whether they could use a lotion instead, so he could at least give him a somewhat pleasant hand job, when the image of Kyungsoo came back to him. It didn't seem right for him to do this type of thing while Jongin had just gone missing the day before. The tingling feeling of anticipation protested weakly. Jongdae wanted to groan in frustration, but didn't want to give Chanyeol weird ideas about what he was doing in the shower. So complicated. Maybe the time just wasn't right if there was so much to consider; if there were so many reasons not to do anything. Besides, this was Chanyeol. He wouldn't expect him to present himself on all fours right away or know how to give head. No... he wouldn't. Jongdae was pretty certain of that, so it remained a mystery as to why his brain kept panicking. He surely wouldn't be disappointed. Studiously repeating this thought in his mind, Jongdae hesitantly entered their room, his body safely wrapped up in the fluffy bathing robe.  
Chanyeol was lying on their bed with his stomach up, his own robe still there and still opened, as Jongdae noticed with a gulp. He looked up at him with a soft expression.  
"Hey."  
Jongdae only hummed, but the light smile definitely put him more at ease. He sat down on the side of the mattress while Chanyeol simultaneously sat up.  
"Uhm." he began hesitantly, his fingers buried in the plush blanket and his brown orbs unable to decide whether to face Jongdae or not.  
"Yes?" Jongdae replied awkwardly and maybe a little breathy.  
Chanyeol inhaled deeply before looking at him with earnest.  
"There's something I had in mind. If you're alright with it..."  
Jongdae was sure his heart stopped right there.  
"Okay?" he gave back questioningly, every fiber in him tensing. Would he propose they just sleep or...?
His chain of thoughts came to an abrupt halt when Chanyeol pushed him down on his back, crawling over him. The sudden impact pressed all the air out of his lungs.  
"Oops. Sorry." he chuckled nervously, looking down at Jongdae through his wet bangs and oh god, this was happening. He looked about to say something else but reconsidered and slowly leaned down to place a soft, lingering kiss to his cheek. He proceeded to his other cheek and Jongdae exhaled through his nose, letting the affection wash over him. His lips wandered from his cheek to his ear and the cool strands of Chanyeol's slightly wet hair tickled his skin.  
"If you don't like any of this, just tell me, okay?"
Jongdae suppressed a shudder at the deep voice so intimately close to his ear, his own voice nothing but a whisper.  
"Okay."
Chanyeol smiled a little - he felt it against his skin - and then he was placing more of those soft, gentle kisses down the bridge of his nose, around the sides of his face and up his hairline. He took his time, steadying his body on his lower arms, and Jongdae's eyes fluttered shut with a sigh. Whenever his lips would wander close to his mouth, Jongdae tried to catch them, but to no avail. When he felt like every inch of his face was tingling from the memory of soft lips on them, Chanyeol mouthed along the memory of soft lips on them, Chanyeol mouthed along his jaw and throat. Without thinking, Jongdae lifted his head to bare his skin and a grateful kiss found the underside of his jaw. He felt extremely silly for being so aroused already, but
he couldn't help it, shifting a little as tentative hands found Chanyeol's waist to steady himself.
Chanyeol didn't show an immediate response as he was still busy with kissing around his clavicle.
He wasn't lightly peppering him with kisses, it was more like he was randomly choosing patches of
Jongdae's skin he appreciated especially, proving it with a lasting, firm, press of his lips, and
sometimes Jongdae even imagined feeling his tongue, hot and wet as it caressed the skin.
Jongdae squirmed when he reached a sensitive point near his shoulder and felt hyper aware of the
fabric rubbing over his skin as Chanyeol's nose dipped below it in order to reach more of him. His
fingers twitched into Chanyeol's robe, and through the haze he remembered that he was expected to
respond properly. He couldn't let Chanyeol do all the work, and it would be a lie to say he wasn't
curious. But the moment his fingers were splayed across a smooth stomach, Chanyeol made a tiny
sound and used one hand to resituate them back to his waist. Jongdae was about to protest when he
remembered Chanyeol's words. He didn't want him to stop, so he decided to sit back and do this the
way Chanyeol wanted, to see exactly what he'd 'had in mind'. He received a grateful look and
fleeting peck on his lips in return. It was too short for him to get into it, but there was no time to
mourn as one big hand firmly traced his upper body, wandering across his chest and below the robe.
It was warm and pleasant after the burning sensation of kisses. Jongdae sighed into the touch, and his
breath hitched audibly when Chanyeol pressed their lower bodies together.
"Sorry... my arms are shaking..." Chanyeol murmured, and Jongdae wordlessly looked at him, trying
to keep his breath in check. He might have given off an unaffected vibe, but now that he faced
Jongdae, the pink color dusting his cheeks was clearly visible in the dim light of the room. He was
hard, too. At least as turned on as Jongdae, whose hands were bunched up tightly in Chanyeol's robe
in an effort not to move his hips. Sensing the tension, Chanyeol changed his strategy and slowly sat
up until he was seated across Jongdae's thighs, and the loss of warmth almost made him mewl. In a
need to hold on to something, his hands found the blanket beneath him. He felt so... needy.
"Just relax." Chanyeol said quietly, and Jongdae would have laughed if he wasn't so wound up
already. How could he even think of relaxing when Chanyeol's body was pinning him to the bed,
when he was almost towering over him like this? Wetting his lips, Chanyeol reached out to undo the
knot of Jongdae's robe. He could see him swallowing hard as he succeeded, and Jongdae was fully
on display. He pressed his eyes shut, very conscious of the obvious sight of his arousal. Two warm
hands were splayed across his upper body, wandering down his sides and suddenly, the warmth was
very close as Chanyeol whispered words against his lips.
"It's okay. I won't go there."
His hands were wandering down Jongdae's arms, keeping the exposed skin warm as he continued to
kiss a hot trail down to his navel. Jongdae's breathing came out heavily, and he bit his lip whenever
Chanyeol accidentally brushed his erection. He felt much more relaxed after hearing this, but it only
opened his mind to fully accept the pleasure. A startled whimper escaped him when one hand
sneaked below his thigh to lift it, and his eyes snapped open. With burning cheeks he watched
Chanyeol nuzzle along the hairy shin of his leg that was placed on his shoulder. The sight made him
self-conscious, and he began to squirm a little, though there was no way to hide anything. Sensing
this, Chanyeol met his eyes and locked their gazes as he dragged one palm firmly along his leg. All
the way from the soft inside of his thigh, over his slightly bony knee and down to his ankles, leaving
more kisses on the skin. He watched him close his eyes, as if he was actually really enjoying this.
"Perfect." he whispered, and Jongdae placed the back of his own hand on his burning cheeks,
covering the way he had to lick at his dry lips.
Chanyeol's hand grazed his wrist but made no move to tug at it as he leaned in closely, causing
Jongdae's leg to hike up even further, which had his breath hitching.
"I want you to know..." he began, brushing his lips against the palm Jongdae was covering his
mouth with, before softly placing his leg back on the bed and giving the other the same treatment.
Jongdae let it happen and closed his eyes, feeling warm lips and roaming hands, the fingers kneading
into his skin, feeling up his muscles which responded all-too eagerly.
"I like all of this. Everything." he heard him murmur against his leg, leaving a kiss on his instep and
Jongdae looked at him with dazed eyes.
He placed his leg back on the bed and continued with his arms, his lips wandering down until they reached his fingers. It wasn't naughty, the way his lips met his knuckles and fingers. It wasn't innocent, either. It was deep, and spoke of emotions heavy enough to weigh him down and pin him into place. By the time Chanyeol had reached his other hand, leisurely kissing and flicking his tongue at the palm covering his lips, Jongdae finally retreated his hand and placed it by his side. Their noses were almost touching, but Chanyeol inched back, insisting on eye contact. His own pupils were slightly blown, his face flushed and lips slightly parted.

"You think too little of yourself." he breathed out, one hand dragging through Jongdae's hair and he leaned into it, felt the inexplicable need to bare his throat. Something inside him wanted the other to stay in control, to encase him like this and keep him on edge, but at the same time he felt impatient. With nimble fingers he reached around to press against Chanyeol's lower back, pulled him down with all the strength he could muster. With a startled sound that broke into a surprised moan, Chanyeol lost his balance and their bodies aligned. It was heavy, comforting and finally putting a bit of pressure where he wanted it most. Jongdae let out a mix between a sigh and a moan, and to his own embarrassment, he wasn't even sure whether it was the friction or the mere fact that Chanyeol was this aroused. He heard his heavy breathing somewhere above his ear as he had his nose buried in the warm skin between Chanyeol's neck and shoulder. Beneath the strong scent of the hotel's shampoo and showering gel, he could faintly make out the more heady scent that he'd come to associate with him and that could cloud his mind so easily. His hands wandered even lower, cupping the curves of his behind lightly, but upon feeling Chanyeol all but quivering, he increased the pressure, kneading the flesh through the robe.

"Jongdae-"

The way he uttered his name, low and raw, did things to him and he grew bolder, one hand diving beneath the robe to feel heated skin and scrape his nails over the fabric of his underwear. The blanket rustled where Chanyeol fist ed the sheets but Jongdae felt his immediate reaction, felt the tension rippling through the body pressed against his. Felt him twitching. Jongdae couldn't help grinding his own hips up in response, yelping quietly when Chanyeol reciprocated it immediately, and a tidbit rougher than he'd expected. It was good though, very good even, and Jongdae did it again. Rolled his hips as wide as possible, reveling in the spike of pleasure running through him. Desperately tried to coax Chanyeol into doing something. *Anything.*

Finally, he felt Chanyeol's fingers skating down his side and lingering near the place they were pressed together.

"Can I...?"

The deep timbre made Jongdae want to flat-out moan his affirmation, but he tried to keep his desperation at bay, whispering a yearning 'yes' instead. A bit of rustling followed as Chanyeol slid off him just enough for his hand to finally cup the erection straining his underwear. This time, Jongdae did moan, shamelessly pushing into the touch, his hands aimlessly scrabbling up to find hold on his back. Chanyeol groaned quietly, as if the touch affected him just as much. He propped himself up, finally showing his face again, as his eyes kept flicking down to see his own hand feeling Jongdae up. His fingers were probing but strong, and he dipped one finger against the wet patch of fabric just to see Jongdae twitch, before settling for a light grip that had him squirm.

"Take it off already..." Jongdae murmured, openly yearning, and Chanyeol seemed mildly surprised at the proposition but followed anyway, almost carefully freeing him of his already stained briefs. Before he could resume his position however, Jongdae was already tugging at his robe.

"This, too." He wanted to feel him, skin on skin, as close as possible. The oddly serious and intense look in Chanyeol's brown orbs made the heat even more unbearable, and his own eyes drank in the sight of milky skin the sun didn't get to touch and wandered lower to where he slipped out of his loose shorts. He didn't mean to stare and the moment Chanyeol's fingers curled around bare flesh, Jongdae was too overwhelmed to even consider doing so anymore, as his head fell back into the cushions, from a wave of both relief and anticipation. The fabric was damp from his wet hair and warm, warm like Chanyeol's fingers stroking him slowly from top to base.
He watched Chanyeol watching him, the glazed orbs reflecting something akin to wonder. "How far... can I go?" he asked quietly, their eyes meeting while an especially languid movement had Jongdae squirm.

And as they held gazes, Jongdae could quite frankly not think of anything he didn't want. "However far you want to." Jongdae whispered back, his own fingers ghosting down Chanyeol's thigh, the challenge and plead both mirrored in his eyes.

He could see Chanyeol still hesitating and it made him self-conscious. Maybe he was being too presumptuous, maybe this was going too fast for him. "Don't force yourself..." Jongdae muttered and what was intended to sound reassuring, came out rather small. Chanyeol laughed a short, breathless laugh as he leaned down in one swift motion and placed a kiss on the tip of his length, tongue first. Jongdae groaned quietly as his lips wrapped around the head, tongue swirling around it once before withdrawing and nuzzling his cheek against it, smearing precum across his skin. His eyes were inevitably drawn from the glossy streak back to Chanyeol's dark, dark eyes looking up at him. "Maybe I want a lot." he hummed, and the breath fanning over his wet foreskin made him shudder.

"Show me." Jongdae suggested. _Come on, please. Please_, he chanted in his head over and over again. Something definitely shifted within Chanyeol, and all of a sudden he was all over him, one leg wedged between his thighs and arms caging him in as he dove in for a kiss. It was exactly the kind of kiss Jongdae had been looking forward to during their stay at Luhan's home. No holding back, small noises spilling and mixing between lips and tongue. Chanyeol moved his leg, grinding against him freely as he mouthed his way up to nip and tug at his ear. He wasn't particularly sensitive around the ears, but the premise of Chanyeol using his teeth left Jongdae shuddering, and with one hand buried below his hairline, he pulled him in further, showed him that he enjoyed it.

"I don't have any condoms-" he choked out between more nips and nails scraping over his scalp. "I do." Chanyeol mumbled, one hand already teasing the skin beyond his navel.

Oh. Okay. A flicker of insecurity came back to life and Jongdae just kept quiet, hoping Chanyeol would just proceed without asking questions. A silly illusion that crumbled instantly when Chanyeol's fingers halted on the inside of his thigh, and he shot him an inquiring look through his wet bangs. "Go on. It's okay." Jongdae murmured and Chanyeol licked his lips, leaving his free hand to rest on Jongdae's nape in a soothing way.

"Yeah, but... how do you like it?"

The question Jongdae had dreaded. He had no idea. For a second, he looked at him helplessly, before shooting him a weak grin. "Are you a virgin?"

The question actually startled Chanyeol a little, who lightly shook his head. "No, that is. I've never... not with a man, at least." The way his confidence seemed to chip as he stumbled over his words reassured Jongdae, who covered his nerves with another quick smile before pulling at Chanyeol's hand and bringing it to his lips, hoping that actions could speak for him. Unfortunately, his courage left him halfway, and instead of lasciviously lapping at his fingers, Jongdae only managed a kittenish lick across the top of his index finger. He saw Chanyeol's lids flutter as he pieced two and two together. "Are you sure?" Chanyeol finally muttered, his fingers unconsciously resting at the corner of his lips. They begged Jongdae to put his lips around them.

"Either way is fine by me," Chanyeol assured him. "Don't get used to it, then." Jongdae retorted breathily, his eyes still drawn in by the long fingers resting against his skin. Noticing this, Chanyeol gently pried his hand out of Jongdae's, just to drag the tips of his index and middle finger over his bottom lip. From right to left and back again, finally coming to a halt in the middle. He increased the pressure until Jongdae's lips parted hesitantly. "You like this." Chanyeol mumbled slowly, tentatively, a tinge of fascination lacing his voice as he regarded Jongdae, who felt slightly intimidated and exposed under his heavy gaze, but lapped at his digits nonetheless. Being at his mercy brought a certain thrill, a sensation that made him moan lowly...
when Chanyeol pressed his fingers against his tongue with a little more force. There was no time to feel embarrassed as Chanyeol pulled away his fingers, promptly moving them down. Down, down, experimentally gliding around his rim, and Jongdae shivered from the wet sensation. He wrapped one leg around Chanyeol's waist to help his access. Not knowing where to look, Jongdae settled on the rapidly blinking brown eyes and the way Chanyeol bit his bottom lip in concentration. When the tip of one finger breached him, just to the first knuckle, Jongdae sucked in a breath, his muscles tensing. He could feel Chanyeol's whole hand twitch in response.

"S-sorry-" he murmured, not daring to make another move until Jongdae blindly placed a hand against his nape, trying to calm him.

"Don't give up on me just yet." he whispered under his breath with a smile and encouraged by this, he felt Chanyeol advance excruciatingly slowly. It felt weird and unpleasant, but Jongdae willed his body to relax and accept the pain. He'd always been aware of how long Chanyeol's fingers were, but to feel how far inside him they could reach was an entirely different matter. When he had one finger pushed in to the hilt, he retracted very slowly to repeat the procedure, daring to actually move his finger, feeling around the walls, and Jongdae couldn't help tensing and relaxing in turn. Before adding a second finger, Chanyeol reached under the bed with his free hand, pulling out a small bottle. Right. Lube. Even though Chanyeol had tried his best to warm it, the next touch was still much cooler with the gel coating his fingers. But it was also so much smoother. In fact, the cooling sensation almost completely eased the pain of the additional finger. Jongdae made a mix between a mewl and sigh, being genuinely grateful that Chanyeol had thought ahead. With nothing but spit, this would probably become an even more painful experience. He really had to hand it to him - his movements were slow and patient, but at the same time he didn't stall again, didn't give him time to reconsider and panic. He increased the pressure and pace just slowly enough that the process became gradual, and Jongdae's eyes fluttered shut as he tried to concentrate on just breathing. He was still twitching and tensing around three fingers, and it really was nothing but painful.

"Sorry, I've never done this before, so..." Jongdae mumbled, blinking away the burning sting in his eyes, and he meant it. If only he'd experimented on himself before, maybe this would go faster.

"Neither have I. It's okay. I'm trying to be careful." Chanyeol breathed out and beneath his glazed eyes he could see his determination to do it right. The movements of his finger stilled for a second when he leaned in to whisper against his lips.

"You can try on me next time."

Jongdae felt his erection twitch at the thought and while he was only half-hard by now, he was well on his way back when Chanyeol pressed close, whispering how he wanted to lick him all over but it would have to wait for now. In response, Jongdae impatiently pressed their lips together and the intrusion left, leaving his muscles to further contract around nothing, feeling unnaturally loose. He took it upon his own, shaky fingers to lube Chanyeol up over the condom, his grip light but curious, and Chanyeol's hands were balled into fists by his side.

"You're teasing." he choked out, and Jongdae innocently blinked up at him.

"Sorry?" he asked quietly and with a low groan, Chanyeol pushed him back on his back. Jongdae willingly lifted both legs and tried to keep eye contact while bracing himself for a repeat of the same pain, as something warm and more blunt pressed against him.

Something that was much more than the three fingers from before. He quietly hissed in pain. Just when the stretch became unbearable, Chanyeol wrapped his hand around Jongdae's erection and unlike him, his grip was firm from the start, coaxing a surprised little moan out of Jongdae. Quite frankly, he'd never had another person's hand on his dick, either. He'd always thought it would feel good, better than his own at least, but this exceeded his expectations by far. The movements were unpredictable, and just because it was Chanyeol and not anyone else, they spiked a pleasure that was almost surreal. He didn't shy away from letting him know, quietly keening and arching into his strokes, his heels unconsciously digging into his back, urging him on to push further into him. The pleasure clashed with the continuous pain and it was so much, Jongdae wanted to cry from being overwhelmed. He was glad Chanyeol hadn't touched him like this before - he probably would have come already and wince from overstimulation at this point. And suddenly, just like that, the
pain didn't increase any further and Chanyeol's fingers stilled, too. He vaguely felt Chanyeol's hips against the back of his thighs and dazedly blinked up at him. His chest rose and fell steadily, his dark orbs were fixed on Jongdae. It caused all sorts of thoughts to resurface and in a fit of embarrassment, Jongdae clenched around him, feeling vulnerable and slightly helpless. The action had Chanyeol's hand flying to his waist, keeping him steady. He was so hot, he positively throbbed inside him, and Jongdae mewed lowly.

"You're so incredible." Chanyeol exhaled and leaned down to press a kiss to the side of his neck. The change in angle caused a choked, quite pathetic sound to escape him and Jongdae placed the back of his hand over his lips once more, to muffle any future sounds. The hot body covering his moved, and Chanyeol pulled out ever so slightly, groaning against his skin as he pushed back in. His movements were small but they felt much bigger, and for some reason Jongdae preferred the stronger burn over his fingers. It was probably due to how riled up Chanyeol got, more small groans spilling off his lips as he rocked their bodies.

"You're so lucky," he began between his slow but deep thrusts, "that the others are next door."

Jongdae only breathed harshly, one hand scrabbling to get a hold on something and ending up clawing into Chanyeol's upper arm. Like his face, his skin was glistening with a thin sheet of sweat, and it should be disgusting, except it wasn't. Being such an intense source of pleasure for Chanyeol was so empowering, he actually began to forget about the burn.

"Cause otherwise I wouldn't let you cover your mouth like that." he mumbled against Jongdae's wrist, and the dominant streak alone was enough for him to remove his hand and catch Chanyeol's lips in a kiss. Everything was spinning slightly, the kiss was sloppy with Chanyeol's low groans thrumming deeply through him, and his movements became bigger, when it suddenly happened. A zing of pleasure, shooting down his entire body like a shock and washing over all the pain. Before he could help it, a loud and unrestrained moan left him. Chanyeol drew away just enough to shoot him a cocky grin, before the look of concentration returned. Jongdae wanted to tell him 'There. There again', was completely ready to beg him, and when he missed the spot so narrowly, he whined in frustration and moved his hips against Chanyeol's grip, which loosened instantly, easily allowing Jongdae to guide him.

Instead, Chanyeol reached down to stroke Jongdae with earnest, and the sounds were filthy, but Jongdae relished in them nonetheless. Right at this moment they were so, so close to each other. Every twitch, every movement of his muscles was translated to Chanyeol and sent back to him. Every tiny motion had them riling each other up more.

"I'd love to go slow-" Chanyeol uttered, cutting himself off with a faint gasp when Jongdae clenched tightly around him,

"but I don't think I can. It's so good. You're so good-"

His fingers did something he couldn't quite comprehend, but it had Jongdae jolting and Chanyeol hitting that spot inside him again. Sweet release hit him with a completely foreign intensity, and his lips parted in a soundless cry. Chanyeol's fingers kept stroking him roughly, his lips eagerly nipping at Jongdae's, who couldn't do anything but writhe beneath him. Only when his own hands weakly grasped at Chanyeol's due to sensitivity, did he stop. Jongdae looked at him with a mix of daze and disbelief that this had happened so suddenly. Of course Chanyeol was still hard, and a rush of panic reached him through the haze. Too early. He'd finished too early. When Chanyeol gave him a sealing kiss and pulled out, Jongdae blinked rapidly, weakly tugging at his arms.

"You can keep going-" he rasped brokenly but Chanyeol shook his head, pulling off the condom.

"I don't wanna hurt you. It's your first time and you're so sensitive now." He looked like he was about to finish by himself, and Jongdae sat up as fast as he could, ignoring the way everything spun around him, to place one hand over Chanyeol's.

"Then can I help you?" he asked almost desperately and Chanyeol seemed torn.

"Like you helped me. Please. I'll... try my best." Jongdae muttered, his fingers already worming their way around Chanyeol's, and the moment he got his fingers on heated flesh, Chanyeol's resolve crumbled. With a deep inhale, he withdrew his own hands to settle them on Jongdae's shoulder. Jongdae tried to combine the way he liked to touch himself with the movements Chanyeol had used
earlier, exploring every ridge and vein with his own fingers, until Chanyeol wordlessly placed a hand over his, guiding his movements into a rougher pace, his face buried in Jongdae's neck.

"Jongdae..." he mumbled into his salty skin, a tinge of yearning and desperation. Just his name, over and over again. Jongdae mouthed along the side of his face, most of his concentration on the movements of his hand.

"I can't wait." Jongdae breathed into Chanyeol's ear.
"Can't wait for you to take me so slow I'll wanna cry."

He was positively shaking now, and Jongdae buried his free hand in Chanyeol's hair, pressing him close.
"Or maybe rough enough to actually make me cry."

It sounded mildly embarrassing to his own ears, saying it out loud like that. But it helped push Chanyeol over the edge, and Jongdae let him buck his hips until the pleasure had ebbed down. While Chanyeol came down from his high, breathing harshly, Jongdae looked down to see that Chanyeol had had the presence of mind to catch most of his cum. Without thinking a lot into it, he dragged his soiled fingers through it and brought them to his lips. Salty. Just like he'd expected.

"God, Jongdae." Chanyeol groaned hoarsely and he hummed in response, absently smacking his lips.
"Can you not? I was being so considerate towards you, and here you are, actively trying to kill me before I even caught my breath."

Oh. Jongdae let his fingers sink sheepishly, making a mental note to remember this for the future. Chanyeol carelessly wiped his fingers on a discarded robe, and Jongdae followed suit. With a content sigh, they sank into the clean side of the mattress, facing each other and wiggling into a comfortable position. Jongdae closed his eyes, and though he felt thoroughly sated, there was something that had been nagging at him for the past minutes, and he knew he should speak it out loud instead of taking the worries to sleep.

"I'm... sorry. I didn't last long." he finally murmured, not daring to look him in the eye. Chanyeol only chuckled soundlessly, drawing him closer and it was too warm, too sticky but also just what he needed.

"What exactly did you expect for your first time?" he hummed with a faint smile. His eyes were closed already, but the hand wandering over Jongdae’s back in gentle circles certainly prove he was still awake.

"Besides, I didn't last that long, either. Perfect in its imperfection, huh?"
"Kinda." Jongdae replied, feeling a little better about it already.

He felt like he could go to sleep now that he didn't feel like he'd somehow failed, when Chanyeol spoke up as well.

"I really didn't intend for us to..." he hesitantly began, trailing off, but Jongdae got it. He just got it and placed a quick peck on his cheek.
"I know."

The hand on his back was still wandering restlessly, and Jongdae opened his eyes to meet Chanyeol's insecure ones with a lazy grin.

"You just accidentally teased me into having sex with you."

Chanyeol looked mildly scandalized, even though Jongdae was obviously joking.
"That's not true! I really just... anyway, you're one to talk! You're, like, the biggest tease ever."
"Not intentionally."

"Not yet."

It implied a repeat of all this, just like Jongdae's own words had, a few minutes earlier, when he'd coaxed Chanyeol to his climax. Next time, he'd said. The words had been said in the heat of the moment, but that made them no less genuine.

He licked his lips with a cheeky grin.
"Yeah. Not yet."

Rough, slow. Sweet, spicy. Giving, taking.

Jongdae dozed off to the soothing thought that with Chanyeol, he'd love to try it all.
When they bustled around the hotel room an hour before their meeting time, the pain in Jongdae's lower back had completely dissolved. It hadn't been an excruciating pain anyways - after all, Chanyeol had taken great care of him, and they hadn't exactly been going at it for long. The mere thought turned Jongdae into an embarrassed mess on the inside. Still, Chanyeol hadn't failed to assure him that it was alright, that it had been amazing and really, Jongdae knew he shouldn't be so hung up on this. Shouldn't think about how amazing it had indeed been, shouldn't feel this flustered around Chanyeol. He was pretty sure no one had heard them (or at least they made a good job of covering it up), but that hardly stopped the insecurity from tingling in his stomach whenever his and Chanyeol's eyes met. Maybe he had to reconsider all the advice he'd given Yifan years ago and side with Minseok in hindsight - now that he'd experienced it first hand, he had to agree. Sex did change something. He wasn't sure whether it was a good or bad change, but upon listening closely to his inner turmoil, he came to the conclusion that it was just unfamiliar. Submitting all of yourself to someone. The intimacy and the resulting commitment were entirely new to him. It was probably a virginal thing that would fade in time- though Jongdae doubted he’d ever give himself over easily. But while he was antsy about it all, the way Chanyeol's face lit up whenever he turned towards him had a very soothing effect. There were no negative repercussions, and he didn't even show the tiniest sign of regret. If anything, it was quite the opposite - the moments Chanyeol quietly sought his proximity had only increased in number and occasionally, he'd lay an arm around Jongdae's shoulders when the opportunity presented itself. He didn't make a show of it; it was quiet and almost stealthy, as if he feared Jongdae might draw away any moment. And while Jongdae still hadn't openly spoken up about their relationship, he certainly didn't draw away or play it off casually in front of the others. Still, it was more out of convenience than actual fear at this point. Not that he was actually fearing his friends' judgment; it had always been the insecurity that it might turn out to be a fleeting thing between him and Chanyeol. This fear was slowly dissolving with every passing hour. He trusted him.

"Alright, are we all set? Everyone still remembers our method of operation?" Baekhyun asked while trying to rub his eyes without smearing the intense makeup. He didn't seem to be any less nervous than them, and Jongdae wondered how awful these people were, if they managed to make even Baekhyun lose his cocky grin.

"That one method that consisted of us shutting up and not really doing anything?" Luhan retorted, but it lacked his usual sass. Baekhyun had stated that they had neither the means nor time to snatch 2-1’s information without them noticing, so they had no choice but to openly confront them and try to trade the information for something else. They'd already scoped out the surroundings a little the day before, and Luhan seemed confident in a few of the Layers he could see, but there was no guarantee the exchange would happen without complications. Without Jongin, not even their escape route was a given; the only thing they could do was getting to a height level convenient enough to return to Baekhyun's home Layer. Jongdae tugged at the chic clothing Baekhyun had lent him, squirming a bit to reposition the armor he wore beneath it. It was uncomfortable, but neither of them would turn down a bulletproof vest for comfort, not even Chanyeol.

He looked around, his gaze wandering from the slightly strained look on Minseok’s face to the blank-looking Kyungsuk, whose gaze distractedly flitted through the room. Last but not least, he craned his neck a little to look up at Chanyeol, who was positioned beside him with one arm reaching around to rest on his upper arm. Chanyeol was quick to notice his gaze and shot him a quick, encouraging smile in return, squeezing his arm.
"It'll be alright," he stated quietly, "I know those people and they're dangerous. But we have Baekhyun. We'll be out in no time, and then we'll be on our way to get Jongin back."

Jongdae could only nod, envying him for the certainty reflected in his eyes. And by the looks of it, Baekhyun felt the same, as he put on a brave grin to try and live up to Chanyeol's expectations.

"Alright then. Off we go."

The headquarters didn't look like the criminal fort Jongdae had imagined. There were no cameras or security measures, though Baekhyun had assured them that those were just well-hidden. As things were, the building only stood out because of the generous area surrounding it - a stark contrast to the rest of the cramped city they'd seen so far. All in all, it appeared to be a slightly run-down main branch of an inconspicuous company. They strode down the path leading to the entrance with Baekhyun and Chanyeol leading the way. They'd discussed beforehand that Minseok would keep an eye on Kyungsoo, so Jongdae walked alongside a nervous Luhan instead, and tried his best to be on alert. Still, there was nothing that seemed out of place and no people in sight, besides the two guards near the entrance. Baekhyun moved with confidence, his purposefully tousled hair flipping softly with every step. Even though Jongdae knew it was an act, he couldn't help but feel impressed at the casual way he held himself. He was completely sure that no one would recognize this dolled up guy as the innocent brunet he'd met on the cyan Layer, posing as a student. He even wore shoes with generous heels and hidden insoles, adding a few centimeters to his height.

They came to a halt, and though neither of the guards held a visible weapon, Jongdae heavily doubted they were unarmed. Both were clad in black from head to toe, the only exception being their face masks, which were decorated individually. The female one, who wore a multitude of silver spikes on her mask, spoke up sharply.

"Do you have an appointment?"

He could only see the back of Baekhyun's head, but knew he was shooting them his disarming smile nonetheless.

"Coincidentally yes, we do. We're here to see CL. Elster's the name, and the phoenix is part of my company here."

"We gotta confirm that." the woman strictly said, and he saw Baekhyun shrug.

"Sure. Take your time. We might be a little early, anyway."

The other guard disappeared for a few minutes that were spent in awkward silence, while Baekhyun leisurely inspected a little mark at the cuffs of his leather jacket.

When the man returned, he only silently waved them through and a third, quiet guard lead them into the building. Jongdae wanted nothing more than to hold Chanyeol's hand, but he kept his head held high as he followed the others down a wide corridor with doors on both sides. He knew one of the guards was following them, but resisted the urge to turn around in order to appear more confident. They took a few turns, and from the corner of his eye he saw doors that were open or ajar, caught glimpses he could barely interpret. Some seemed harmless, like office rooms, others had people counting and packing stuff in plastic bags that were probably highly illegal. It was an alarmingly open display of illegal activities, but then again they were also somehow involved with a corrupt politician, so Jongdae assumed that they were kind of untouchable.

The corridor led them into a spacious hall. It could have once been a small warehouse; a few containers were still stacked up against the walls. Just below the ceiling, a row of narrow windows let in some light, while the milky glass prevented anyone from looking outside. The only people in the room were the handful of middle-aged men sitting around a low table in a corner, and a few younger people - mostly women - sitting in arm chairs and couches around the throne. Well, it wasn't exactly a throne and more of a fancy office chair, but the way it was positioned in the center of the room, on an elevated platform, cleared every doubt about what the person inhabiting it thought of herself. It was a young woman, probably barely over her thirties, who was leisurely turned sideways, chatting with one of the women on the couch beside her. She didn't turn towards them immediately,
and when she finally did, she feigned surprise. "Oh, there you are. Mysterious Mr. Elster with the infamous phoenix and his friends... such rare company," she drawled out with a smile not quite reaching her eyes as she rested her chin in one hand. She may not be from Luhan's Layer, but the way she tilted her head and looked down at them was a clear message either way. Jongdae - who was now standing beside Baekhyun and therefore in the front - kept his face straight, though the woman intimidated him. The slim-fitted dress she wore was cut so high, he could see the entirety of her generous thighs that were casually crossed, showing off a golden tan. A voluptuous, dirty blond mane framed her body down to her waist, and the intense makeup highlighting her steely gaze gave her a somewhat foxy look.

"I know, right?" Baekhyun hummed, his thumbs casually resting in the pockets of his tight-fitted pants.

"I'm surprised myself, that our paths cross like this."

"Are you?" the woman replied coolly, not even moving a muscle. "You have a very cute nickname though. Elster. Another word for magpie, though magpie sounds a lot more charming, don't you think? You mind me calling you that?" she said almost sweetly and Jongdae's eyes flitted between her and Baekhyun, processing the innuendo.

I know you're here under a fake identity.

Baekhyun didn't even flinch, his smile ever present. It wasn't a polite, demure smile either. More of the sassy grin he also wore when playing around with Luhan.

"Anything that suits your fancy. I'm assuming I can call you Chaerin, then?"

Jongdae could feel the shift in the atmosphere and tensed. He knew Baekhyun felt it, too, but he didn't back out. Chaerin's smile seemed lethal.

"That depends on what exactly you've come here for. And on whose behalf."

"Ah, I don't like playing messenger, I'm just here for myself and the few friends I brought along."

Baekhyun replied in a casual manner.

"One of which is the phoenix." the woman said sharply and as if on cue, the air between them began to flicker, radiating off waves of heat. Jongdae pointedly didn't look at Chanyeol and since none of them did, the woman was left with proof of his existence, but no clue to his identity. With a low whistle, she leaned back in the chair, her intense gaze roaming over all of them, until settling back on Baekhyun.

"Interesting. Do I get another demonstration? How about lighting my friend's cigarette?"

Jongdae's eyes instinctively flew to said cigarette, and locked on it. She was obviously playing games, trying to rattle them until they exposed Chanyeol's identity. He studiously kept his gaze on the end of the cigarette until he could see it glow, smoke rising from it. Chaerin was still smiling, but he could see a bit of her cockiness disappear. Flickering air could be faked, but this clearly told her they were telling the truth. And the infamous phoenix was enough of a silent threat to take them seriously. The way her eyes took in all of their features so intensely told Jongdae that they'd never be able to live a calm life after this anymore. They'd take pictures and hunt down every single one of them, in the hopes of getting their hands on Chanyeol. It was a price all of them were willing to pay.

"Quite the company you have there, little magpie." she stated neutrally, and for some reason, Jongdae felt a cold shudder run down his arms. He couldn't quite place it, but his senses told him this woman was calculating, ruthless and indeed very dangerous.

"Why thank you. Where did your company run off to?"

This seemed to hit a nerve. Baekhyun had told them this organization was run by two women, but the single chair indicated that she didn't usually occupy this room.

"Has been gone for years, sweetie. Your information is quite outdated."

Baekhyun shrugged and Jongdae had the vague feeling it had been nothing but an intended jab.

"If you don't mind, may we discuss the issue that brings me here?" Baekhyun asked overly polite, and the woman gave him a gracious wave, an invitation to continue. Which Baekhyun did.

"So me and my friends happened to have an unfortunate encounter with a mercenary camp." he started conversationally, shifting his weight on his feet.

"I'll spare you the details, but at the end of the day we lost one of our comrades to a man you may be
familiar with. Lee Seungri's the name."
Jongdae really had to hand it to her, she played it off extremely well. Not the tiniest twitch of a
muscle, not even a movement in her pupils. Nothing but mild interest. He made a memo not to trust
his lying detection senses. This woman was one hell of a liar.
"I'm sorry for your loss then."
"Thank you for your sympathy, but he's not actually lost yet. That is, not if we could get some
background on this Lee Seungri so we can retrieve him."
Again, Baekhyun's facade remained flawless. He smiled.
"Exactly."
"If that's some juicy information. Even if I had it, what could you possibly offer me in exchange?
Your phoenix?"
They all tensed up a little and while Baekhyun still looked cheery, there was a certain hard glint to
his eyes.
"Now that would be counterproductive - giving away one person to retrieve another one. We're keen
on completion. No, we offer you the same: information. We offer you information about the
Layering of this place."
Chaerin leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed. She looked intrigued and Jongdae felt even more
nervous. It was obvious that the Layering of a place was information of unimaginable worth.
Especially to an organization of criminals. Even if there was no other Layer overlapping with their
height level, it would only mean that they truly had a save haven.
"And where would you get that information from?" she probed with a skeptical look.
Luhan chose that moment to step forward.
"That would be my job. I'm a seer. I'll tell you." he stated, his voice unwavering, expression hard and
determined. The look she regarded him with spoke of nothing but greed and Jongdae had to fight the
urge to shield him.
"Prove it."
They'd expected as much and Luhan simply nodded and vanished on the spot.
"Show him an amount of fingers," Baekhyun ordered lightly, "he'll see from wherever he is."
Chaerin decided to play along, holding up four fingers for a mere second, before waiting. Luhan
appeared shortly after, holding up four fingers of his own.
She gave a short, breathy laugh and thrummed her finger against the armrest.
"So you are going to list for me all of the Layers that are on the same height level as this building in
exchange for me giving you information about Seungri?"
"About the possible locations of our friend. I don't care all that much about Seungri in general.
Though I know you'd like to see him ruined, I'm afraid we're not gonna do this job for you."
Baekhyun retorted, and she didn't even bother denying that statement. Baekhyun had told them that
Chaerin and Seungri had a thing going on. A thing mostly based on sex and mutual threats. A
dangerous game between the highest politician and the leader of the residential crime scene.
Obviously both would love to see the other take a bullet to the head if the opportunity ever presented
itself.
After a few seconds of consideration, she gave in and waved at one of her friends.
"Oh, well. Let's see what we got. Bring our nerd boy in, will you Minji?"
Wordlessly, the woman she had chatted with before got up and left the room. Chaerin shot them a
wide smile that made her look even more cat-like.
"Aren't you a fierce, little family. Are you sure you're not on the lookout for a part time job? I see a
lot of potential in you."
Surprisingly, she nodded over at Minseok, who had been perfectly quiet up to that moment.
"I think I like you best. I bet you have the cutest smile. Come on, let me see."
Minseok blankly stared at her. It was a look filled with cool disdain, one that Jongdae had rarely seen.
on him so far. "What a rude fellow. I'm asking you so nicely." the woman continued and an angry twitch flashed over her expression. Jongdae flashed Minseok a worried look just in time to see his lips curl into a tight smile, his voice not entirely unkind. "Fuck off."

Silence fell upon them, and Jongdae held his breath. It was obvious that Minseok wasn't exactly keen on drug dealers at the moment, but they were still treading on thin ice. Luckily, nothing but a breathy laugh escaped Chaerin and she looked over at one of her female friends. "See, Bommie? I have an eye for the best."

"You have an eye for the ones requiring the most work." a red-haired girl replied, not bothering to look up from her nails. Chaerin shrugged with a smirk. "Most of the time, the investment is worth it."

One of the doors to the side of the hall opened and a boy about their age entered with a laptop under his arm, escorted by a bored-looking Minji, who just strode ahead and back into her seat. The lanky boy had chestnut brown curls, wore thickly framed glasses and a small smile of distinct hopelessness. Baekhyun's breath hitched barely audibly and Jongdae looked over at him. His expression was unchanged at first sight, but Jongdae was close enough to see his slightly parted lips and widened eyes, could see the tension freezing him in place and the way his fingers turned white from how tight they dug into his pockets. He looked back at the nondescript guy who obediently took a place on an unoccupied couch to Chaerin's left, propping up his laptop on a small table. "I want you to print out our available background on Seungri's hideouts." she ordered casually and the boy's eyes flitted over to them, only to freeze. His reaction was far more obvious and Jongdae was certain now. They knew each other.

A second passed and Chaerin looked at him with barely concealed impatience. "What are you waiting for?" she demanded in annoyance and the boy blinked, tearing his gaze away from them. "The, uh. The details. I mean. Which hideouts exactly?" he stammered and if he wouldn't have looked that miserable all along, Chaerin might have picked up on it. As it were, she only sighed. "The whorehouses or the labs?"

"Giving selective information, are we?" Baekhyun asked with a sharp edge to his voice. Chaerin didn't bother correcting him. "I assume that's what you're about to do, too. Though I'm pretty confident you'll find what you need in this."
A low hiss made her look up at Minji, who frowned at the paper in the ashtray which had actually caught on fire. A clear warning from Chanyeol.
"Rude. You should watch your flames, little birdie. I see you could use some taming."
For some reason, her gaze fixed on a point to Jongdae's right and he assumed she was looking at Kyungsoo. Maybe she suspected him the most. While Chaerin flipped through the last page, Jongdae nervously regarded Baekhyun. He was supposed to speak up and make a proposal before Chaerin could. But it seemed like he'd forgotten his lines, still paralyzed by that computer expert who tensely sat there with his head hung low.
"So-" she spoke up and without thinking, Jongdae cut her off.
"So you're giving us those, and we'll list the Layers out loud?"
The blonde laughed and with a visible twitch, it called Baekhyun back to the present.
"Here I thought you were mute, but it turns out you're a little dreamer. If I listened to dreamers, I wouldn't sit here right now."
"Don't mind him." Baekhyun said curtly, nudging Jongdae with a playful smile, a silent thank you reflected in his eyes.
"How about we give you one Layer first and you confirm the info, a little taste so to say. Then we'll get ours and we'll name you the rest before we merrily head our way."
Chaerin thought about it, her eyes narrowed. She would have shown resistance against the first proposal either way, just as Baekhyun had predicted. And now she'd try to improve the conditions.
"Two Layers."
"One important one." Baekhyun replied without missing a beat.
But she wouldn't play around too much, as the stakes were already pretty high.
"Fine. I'm waiting." she relented, leaning back in her chair with an expectant face.
Baekhyun gave a nod towards Minseok, who pulled out a gun, pointing it at Luhan's head.
"If you try something funny, I'll shoot him." he stated evenly and Chaerin smiled, looking like she was about to coo at what she was certain was a bluff. Her expression changed when Luhan grabbed for the gun himself and in a flash, the atmosphere changed and the girls close to her were ready to attack, hands around weapons Jongdae hadn't seen before. He himself was startled - they hadn't planned it like that.
Luhan only looked mighty unimpressed as he nudged the gun into his own, colorful hair.
"I'll take that task myself. If we don't get our info, I'll shoot myself in the head and you'll never get the rest."
Jongdae wanted to think it was a bluff, he really did. But his intuition screamed at him that it wasn't. Even Kyungsoo stared at him something akin to surprise - maybe all of them realized only now just how invested Luhan was. Chaerin looked a little strained as she first motioned for the weapons around her to be lowered and then waved the go-ahead at Luhan. His eyes quickly roamed the hall and he took slow, measured steps towards the door the boy had entered from. Jongdae felt everyone holding their breath.
"Most of this room..." he began, stopping a few meters from the door as he made a confining gesture with his free hand, "except for this area. Magenta."
Chaerin whistled lowly, looking like a cat who got the cream.
"Accessible?"
For a second, Luhan looked confused over what she was referring to, before he got it. She wanted to know whether it was safe to cross over. Logically speaking, they could have forced people into sampling around the area and find out herself which Layers were accessible; if someone didn't care whether people would find their death falling hundreds of meters, that is. But that was all naught if they ended up in the company of people or in front of cameras to record them. Luhan looked around the room carefully, even pushed himself to a wall to see as far as he could. There was only one substance pulsing through his veins and it certainly wasn't magenta-colored.
"Yes. It's a storage room. I can't spot any cameras."
Chaerin nodded towards Minji.
"Confirm it, will you?"
Said one reluctantly did so, unwilling to let go of the black rifle she'd pulled seemingly out of nowhere. After pointing out a spot where no containers stood on the other end and neutrally informing her that the height difference measured about ten centimeter downwards, she closed her eyes and vanished. The following seconds were the heaviest so far. If she wouldn't return, Chaerin would interpret it as them being frauds. The latter seemed nonchalant, tapping away at the hand rest of her chair, seemingly to a rhythm, her lips mouthing along numbers. He didn't dare fully turning towards the others and couldn't interpret Baekhyun next to him, so he settled on trying to read her lips. When she'd reached thirty and he already saw the displeased smile forming on her face, Minji reappeared right next to her, falling about a foot's length with grace. She didn't even flinch as it happened and merely looked up at the woman.

"So?"
She received a mere nod in response.
"Everything true?"
"Yes."
The blonde nodded to herself in satisfaction.
"Now if that isn't good news. I take it you want your end of the deal now?"
She waved the sheets at the nerdy boy without sparing him as much as a glance. With shaky steps, the boy went all the way over to them and while most attendees seemed mildly amused by his open fear, Jongdae just hoped Baekhyun wouldn't give away whatever was weighing him down. They were so close. If that information was what they needed, anyway.

Baekhyun didn't disappoint as he took the papers with a flirty grin though Jongdae saw him subtly steadying his own hand so it would stop shaking. The boy hurried away with a lowered head and with a last, amused laugh at what a coward he was, Chaerin dismissed him. He didn't look back once as he scrambled away with his laptop.

Baekhyun read the papers carefully. There were just three of them, each listing a code, coordinates measured from the main shifting point and a bunch of written text Jongdae couldn't read from where he stood. Baekhyun's eyes widened and he placed a tentative hand on his shoulder. He was vaguely trembling. It only lasted for a moment and when Baekhyun raised his head again, he was nodding over at Luhan and winked at Chaerin.

"Wonderful. I knew it was a good choice to come here. Give her the others."
Luhan proceeded to describe exactly how the plum and cyan Layer was situated and with a few set phrases being exchanged, they were led out. With a thumping heart, they walked over the estate. The plan was to look nonchalant and not cause a scene before stepping over to Baekhyun's home Layer for the time being. They were being followed discreetly and Baekhyun made sure to lead them down the main road. Said one looked straight ahead, ignoring Jongdae's attempts at creating eye contact. Only when they were out of hearing range, did he speak up.

"She better enjoy the freedom while it lasts."
He'd never before had heard him use this tone. Monotone. Low. Dangerous.
"Cause I will come back. And I'll kill her."
"What?" Luhan asked worriedly, subtly picking up his pace until he walked at Baekhyun's other side.
"Baek, what's wrong?" Chanyeol joined in from behind, his voice quiet but dripping with worry and unsettlement. Baekhyun didn't even fake a laugh or get all sarcastic. No, he looked completely blank and with all the emotions usually playing over his expression, the sudden absence made a stark difference. Only his piercing, steely gaze and the trembling fists indicated just how close to snapping he was.

"My family. The street gang that dispersed when 2-1 took over. They have my brother. They have Kyung." he said in a clear, but quiet voice. Chanyeol sucked in a sharp breath.
"He left me a message. Told me he had no choice. That they have Minhyuk, too. And they killed Yukwon, Jucy and Taeyeon." Jongdae hadn't ever heard any of these names but Baekhyun had called them his family and the image of the frightened computer specialist popped up in his head. He almost dropped their facade to
draw Baekhyun in a hug then and there, but he knew Baekhyun would push him away. In fact, he
would be a little too scared to even approach him now and even Chanyeol shared the feeling.
"I will come back when this is over. And then I'll fucking pick them apart. The whole organization."
"But what about all those people that may be forced to work for them, like your brother?" Luhan
threw in and Jongdae saluted his courage to speak up against Baekhyun at this point. He turned
towards the translator and the corner of his mouth twitched into a joyless grin.
"Don't worry. I'll start at the top. Give the others plenty of time to reconsider their loyalty."
"I'm in," Chanyeol said immediately.
"We'll get them out of there."
"Me too," Luhan spoke up surprisingly determined, "you could use a seer."
Baekhyun blankly looked ahead, his posture far more relaxed now which, for some reason, Jongdae
found rather unsettling than comforting.
"I'd appreciate that. But it won't be pretty."
With this, he vanished mid-step and the others hurried to follow. The run-down city district melted
into a vast meadow and Baekhyun just kept walking while Jongdae stilled, wanting to give him a
head start and some privacy.
He threw his head back and looked up at the sky. And while he knew that not even the sky remained
the same, this one miraculously looked just like the one on the red Layer, an odd mirror of what he
was feeling. Or maybe it was the other way around and he was the mirror, drinking in the sight of the
vast, white sky.
So bright. So empty.

Jongin's world was all white.
The walls, the floor, the people occasionally approaching him. Colorless. Empty. Just like Jongin
himself. All of his senses were dull. His hearing, his vision, his thoughts, everything was dull and
lazy. A vague prickling sensation quietly pierced the dull coat weighing him down. It turned the
heavy layer of snow into a sizzling white noise.
There was nothing to do, no place to be, no aims or ambitions.
So he just lay there motionlessly, eyes traveling over the many, tiny square windows around him.
They were metallized, in white of course.

There was nothing to do, and Jongin couldn't think of a time when it had been any different. It had
always been like this, ever since his mother had sent him away for good. He didn't want anything in
particular and no one wanted him. That is, they did want him. But not him, just...
His head ached, and the thought seemed to softly glide away, drowning in the white noise.
He didn't even try to move. Where would he even go?
Still, the white noise somehow irked him, prevented him from dozing off. It wasn't smooth and didn't
gently suffocate him. It was a restless flutter, silently resting inside his stomach, head, throat.
When his head slowly lolled to the side, there was something mirrored in the tiny window. Someone.
Dark eyes. Not white, dark. Almost black. Sometimes, this happened. Sometimes, his half-lidded
eyes would see faces in the mirrors. All of them would be gone in a lazy blink of an eye but Jongin
thought they just went to settle inside him, more dark points making the white noise even granier,
scratchier. More unsettling.
Jongin closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Somewhere between the 16th and 17th chapter, Microcosm IV is set - featuring Baekhyun:

**Microcosm IV**

❤️
"Shh, calm down. That's the most important thing. You need to be calm."
Jongdae closed his eyes, leaned back into the comfortable warmth of Chanyeol's chest and concentrated on nothing but breathing steadily. The sky was painted in bright, dusty colors but the sun hadn't risen yet. They were seated on the roof of Baekhyun's home, both huddled together below a blanket and looking down across fields, forests and tiny sprinkles of the markings Baekhyun had set up to navigate. Chanyeol's arms were loosely draped over Jongdae's stomach, chin resting on his shoulder.
"The only thing that's getting in your way is insecurity. You're keeping yourself on a leash of fear and doubts."
"Maybe I need that leash." Jongdae muttered and a dismissive sound was the answer, followed by Chanyeol lightly butting his head against his cheek.
"That's not a good way of thinking. What if you blindly rely on your leash and when it snaps one day, you don't know what's gonna happen?"
Jongdae sighed. He was right. What if his emotions got the better of him?
"Instead you should learn how to walk without a leash. If you can control it, you don't have to fear anything."
"But I need to stop fearing it before I can control it..." Jongdae retorted gloomily and ruffled his hair with a sigh.
"Yeah, it's a little... difficult to get behind. At the end of the day it all comes down to your confidence. In a way, that's what makes this 'pull' so powerful - no one can take it from you or restrict you, because it's a matter of attitude."
The way Chanyeol put it made sense. It also sounded like he himself had spent a lot of thought on this. Back then, when all this was new to him. When he was the one feeling like a monster.
With a deep exhale, Jongdae closed his eyes. Tried to even his breathing. To get his thoughts sorted out.
_I have no idea what's actually going on._
_A lot of strange stuff is happening everyday._
_But I know I was the one causing the thunder._
_I know it._
He didn't repeat it, didn't try to convince himself. He shouldn't have to try.
_It's all inside my head_, he thought.
He recalled the pleasantly salty smell of rain, basked in the safety of warm arms and fixed his gaze on the closest metal rod, one with a blue ribbon fluttering in the wind. It was similar to shifting for the first time. The longer he thought about it, the more difficult it got; he had to just do it. There was no need for build up, no need for stormclouds and rain. Just...
A bolt of lightning crashed down with uncanny precision, hitting the rod and burning the blue ribbon with a loud crackling sound. Chanyeol flinched at the sudden sound before excitedly wiggling around, playing with Jongdae's fingers.
"Woah, see? You can totally do it! Without clouds, too, and you hit that rod on the spot!"
"It shouldn't be surprising. I thought it was all in my head, so precision should be a given, right?"
Jongdae retorted, bad at accepting praise.
Chanyeol only chuckled and pecked his cheek. With a serene smile, Jongdae closed his eyes again, relaxing for a bit before continuing his practice.
Dull sounds of thunder rumbled through the air almost soothingly.

Chaerin had given them three locations. One seemed to just be random coordinates in a post-war zone, one was a barely populated Layer outside the ranking and the third... was the main archive in Cyan.
Baekhyun suggested going for Cyan first, reasoning with the sheer size of the location. Minseok voted against him for that exact reason. Baekhyun retorted that if Jongin wasn't there, the information about his actual whereabouts surely were. Minseok argued that the place was the most difficult to penetrate, and the other swiftly countered that if they started with the other two locations, security on Cyan might be strengthened even more by the time they got there. It went back and forth, and Jongdae really didn't know whom to side with. It all made sense, in a way. Luhan suggested splitting up, but Baekhyun argued that they needed all of their skills combined to get anywhere. There simply was no reasoning with Baekhyun and they clearly needed him, so it was decided - the cyan archive was first. The little thief spent the day scoping out the place with Luhan while the others attempted to rest and come up with a plan. Chanyeol kept typing away on his pager, Minseok was putting the pieces together and Jongdae tried to keep up with them. Kyungsoo was around as well, blankly staring down at the paper with a mild frown. Clearly, he was becoming impatient. Or maybe he was confused like Jongdae was. He couldn't quite place it, but something about the plan seemed flawed. Still, if Baekhyun insisted on it and Minseok agreed, he'd go along with it.

It was late, and the sky was beginning to darken when Jongdae crouched down behind a few old containers, squished between Minseok and Luhan. They were rather close to the facility, close enough to see the patterns on the curtains hiding who-knows-what from them - maybe even Jongin. Still, they were out of the camera's range, Luhan had made sure of that. Jongdae still had a lingering bad feeling about all of this. The target was isolated from the main complex they had been to, and the simple building block looming at the outskirts of town looked rather ordinary. It reminded him of a simple hospital or office building with the neat rows of windows. The plan was to have Baekhyun and Chanyeol sneak into the building - Baekhyun, since he was obviously good at sneaking in general, and Chanyeol to back him up should things go wrong. They'd deactivate the security and give the rest a signal. Jongdae was worried ever since he'd told Chanyeol goodbye a few hours earlier. The fluttery feeling Chanyeol had caused by whispering his goodbyes into Jongdae's ear - followed by a subtle nip on his earlobe - was still there, but faint and simmering. Worry outweighed it.

"What's taking them so long?" Luhan murmured lowly, and Minseok hummed, checking the clock on a nearby tower.
"Don't ask me. Maybe Baekhyun dyes his hair black to melt into the shadows, I'm not exactly an expert in this field."
Jongdae's grip on the dirty containers tightened.
*Please let him be alright.*
A loud bang made him jump, and his eyes focused back on the building. A tall figure had exited the shadows, walking towards the building almost leisurely. Jongdae's mind went blank when he got a look at his profile.
"What's he doing?!!" Luhan whispered harshly.
White, tousled hair and a striped suit. He didn't look like himself, he was too unnatural, his features too harsh, but there was no doubt. Chanyeol didn't even try to hide as he made his way towards the building. He stopped, lifted his head to look at some point above the door, and stuck out his tongue.
"The camera - he's looking into the damn camera!" Luhan hissed, and Jongdae could only stare in a mixture of shock and confusion as Chanyeol lifted his hand and placed it on the door. One smooth swipe to the side was enough to burn right through it. With a searing glow and resonating hiss, the door all but melted away beneath his palm.
The sirens went off with a shrill howl.
Junmyeon's features were hard as he walked down the hallway, two guards following right behind them. The neutral walls with the tell-tale cyan stripe below the ceiling made him feel queasy. It hadn't always been like this - but the words and stories of Oh Sehun were still resonating inside his head, painting pictures of horror across the blank walls.

*It's not about myself. I have no interest in taking revenge,* Sehun had said.

*It's for people like that phoenix. For those who let themselves get tricked into this, who have no chance to see behind it. I'm telling you this for their sake.*

Junmyeon already knew more than the public about department E. For starters, he'd always known it existed and dealt with anomalies, studying in cooperation with willing participants to gain knowledge. This included supporting the participant's anomaly and help them to keep it under control, maybe even enhancing it if the stability was given. There were very few people and most of them had nothing but minor quirks, meaning that the department wasn't something that was on people's mind all that often. They'd been a mostly obscure department, rumored to be a waste of the government's money. That is, until Oh Sehun had left with a bang, leaving behind a trail of six dead bodies and pressing questions. What had happened? Who was this boy and where did he leave from with such violent means?

Just like that, department E had been pushed into the spotlight. Concerned and scared people wanted to know what was going on. The people in charge stepped up, offered simple statements and provided the public with a list of their participants. Other than Oh Sehun, none of their participants suffered from an anomaly that could endanger those around them.

Junmyeon himself had confirmed those statements, alongside other important politicians. They had met up with the participants, seen them, talked to a few of them. People whose senses were oddly linked to other Layers, someone who dreamt of places he'd never seen before, a girl whose body reacted to stuff that wasn't in her actual environment. All sorts of small quirks that appeared harmless enough. He remembered the challenging tone in Sehun's voice all-too clearly.

*Yeah, but did you meet everyone? Did you talk to Park Chanyeol?*

Junmyeon had in fact met him, though he hadn't remembered the boy's name. A tall, lanky guy with a wry smile, who was able to heal minor scratches. He only remembered him because this type of ability went further than the mere reaching between Layers; it was almost like he was reaching back in time. In hindsight, Junmyeon should have gotten suspicious over how they'd played it down.

Junmyeon passed by rows of closed doors, his feet echoing through the vicinity. It was eerily quiet, but he'd heard that there were rarely people in here, especially not on a Sunday evening. This wasn't the main research center. But behind these closed doors, there would be plenty of evidence.

Somewhere, between all the legitimate reports, there would be hidden ones. Reports listing the organized emotional and physical abuse exposed to promising patients. How they had purposefully put them in danger by sending them into war zones, how they'd played mind games. How Sehun's supposed first love was completely scripted, trying to coax new reactions out of him. How they'd carefully observed Chanyeol during his first kill, not even attempting to step in.

Junmyeon knew it all now. He knew about the reports, about the different laboratories and even about co-representative Lee Seungri, who had sweet-talked and threatened them alike, telling them to protect others, to use their ability for a better future, when all he wanted was a powerful weapon in human form.

They had obviously underestimated Sehun; they'd assumed that Oh Sehun, who had been brainwashed by them since the tender age of six when he'd been adopted at an orphanage, would be too far in to ever find out. That by owing his whole life to them, he'd stay put. That by isolating him, he'd become detached and unable to see or face reality. A grave mistake. It was comparable to humans trying to train a tiger - at one point the tiger would realize that nothing would truly stop it from biting through its owners’ necks.

At the age of 19, Oh Sehun had snapped.

He didn't even show remorse over being responsible for the death of six people. He had leaned back in his armchair, looked Junmyeon straight in the eye, and told him he'd taken his life back from them.
He stopped in front of a room he heard noises coming from. Giving the guards a wave, Junmyeon stepped back, leaving it to them to open the door and resolutely tell the three present scientists that they were remanded in custody.

“What? What’s even going on?” one of them angrily inquired, and Junmyeon stepped out of the bulky guard’s shadow.

Two people had gone missing on the orange Layer, leaving behind four dead bodies. They were now moving in a group, accompanied by both a shifter and former patient Park Chanyeol - also known as the phoenix - who had studiously been kept away from the public’s eye, presumably to gloss over the mistreatment and the threat he represented. Junmyeon didn’t know the phoenix’s motives, but if he wanted to find him, he needed information. He’d uncover this whole charade and finally get a look at the big picture.

“You are being accused of participating in the organized abuse of department E patients.” Junmyeon stated neutrally, his eyes flitting across angry features. Which slowly melted into haughtiness.

“Oh really?” one of the men said with his eyebrows raised and Junmyeon blinked in surprise. The realization came a mere second too late. When he turned his head, he was looking into the barrel of a weapon, held by the guard. The guards were in on it.

Junmyeon’s heart stopped for a second and violently jumped back to life when the sirens went off, red light suddenly flooding the room.

“Wait! It’s probably a false alarm!” one of the scientists yelled over the deafening sound, and Junmyeon didn’t dare move a muscle.

One of the guards scrambled away to check the security cams, and the remaining one addressed the scientists.

“Should I shoot him?”

Junmyeon couldn’t think anything other than how he should have told Heechul everything. If he died now, the secret would be buried yet again.

“Should we? But the alarm, the cops are gonna be here any second, fuck-”

The door burst open with a violent gush of heat and the guard whipped his weapon around, aiming at the intruder and firing. In a flash, a figure moved across the room, pointing the weapon upwards, one hand wrapped around the guy’s throat. A harsh sizzling sound was drowned out by tortured screams. Junmyeon stumbled backwards, weakly trying to scramble away.

The scientists screamed and yelled, trying to make a run for it. With swift movements, the tall guy effectively took them out one by one and Junmyeon watched them try to escape through the open door only to stumble away from it, blisters bubbling up on their skin. The heat radiating from them was stifling and he felt sweat rolling down his temple.

That was him, there was no doubt. The phoenix. A rogue with the itch and skill to kill. He didn’t stand the slightest chance.

With a gurgling scream, the last person sank to the floor and the phoenix turned towards him. Junmyeon was still sweating, his back digging into a desk. Two steps and he was there, looking down at Junmyeon with wide, alarmed eyes.

“Hey. Get up. You gotta get out of here-” he shouted urgently, pulling Junmyeon to his feet. He wanted to say something but nothing came to mind, so he let the tall guy drag him out of the room. With white hair, darkly rimmed eyes, a matching striped suit in pink and violet and an unused black face mask framing his neck like a scarf, he was the most surreal person Junmyeon had ever met.

“Why?” he finally uttered, and the phoenix shot him an almost lethal grin.

"'Cause I'm about to burn this hellhole down."

He quickly dragged him along the halls and Junmyeon yelled over the sound of the sirens.

"Why? Why are you doing this? Why are you with that shifter and the boys from Orange?"

The phoenix suddenly spun him around, pushing him up against a wall, hot anger radiating off him.

"Who told you? Are you with Seungri? ‘Cause I might have a message for you, then."

Junmyeon squirmed away from the hot hands pinning him into place.

"No! Sehun told me, I'm trying to put a stop to this!"

The grip loosened immediately at the mention of Sehun’s name. Disbelief met distrust in his
expressive eyes.
"Who are you?"
Junmyeon decided to be honest - after all, he owed this man his life.
"Kim Junmyeon, blue representative, aiming to put a stop to the illegal activities in department E." he rushed out in one breath.
Recognition bloomed on his face and the man finally let him go, just to continue dragging him down the hallways.
"Right. I've seen you before."
Junmyeon couldn't blame the guy for not recognizing him. This man had nothing in common with the tense, introverted boy he'd met before, either.
"The boys are alright, both alive and healthy." he called over the sirens. "I'm sending them away to take cover later."
"Where to?" Junmyeon asked, taking hasty gulps of air as he tried to keep up with his long legs. The walls were glistening oddly.
"Can't tell, it's too risky."
A sudden idea struck him.
"Send them to Sehun! It's by far the safest place for them! No one will dare go there!"
The phoenix threw him a side glance.
"That... I can't be sure Sehun will cover for them-"
"He will. I know he will. The height level should be right, too-"
They stopped short in front of an emergency exit, and he grabbed Junmyeon's shoulders, looking at him intently.
"Look. I don't know why exactly, but I trust you. I'll send them to Oh Sehun instead. They're smart and skilled, but not invincible. If you can, take care of them."
Junmyeon nodded quickly. When it came to emotional matters, he tended to judge and react quickly; Heechul would probably laugh at him.
"You just saved my life. I'll do my best to ensure their security and we're even."
The phoenix nodded.
"And another thing..."
Junmyeon listened intently, distant sirens telling him that the police were well on their way.
The phoenix opened the door and ushered him out into the backyard, telling him to leave.
"Don't tell anyone you've met me."
"Why?" Junmyeon called after him like a lost kitten and the tall guy looked over his shoulder, adjusting his face mask.
"'Cause the phoenix is gonna provide the news with some headlines today. Show Seungri who he's messing with, so he'll think twice before threatening my loved ones ever again."
With that, he turned around and walked down the hallway with measured steps, fingertips grazing the wall and setting it on fire.

"It's burning! What is he doing?!" Jongdae inquired, his hand surely bruising Minseok's arm, who looked both alarmed and confused alike, just like Kyungsoo.
"I don't... know. I have no idea." he uttered slowly, and if even Minseok was at a loss, things were bad.
"What are we gonna do?" Luhan asked, desperately craning his neck to spot Chanyeol in the building. It was no use though. Smoke erupted from various windows, and he appeared to be methodically burning down everything. He was sure he'd heard screams for a second.
"Nothing! You wanna run into the cops?!!" Minseok retorted and indeed, sirens already announced the arrival of both firefighters and policemen. Jongdae observed them getting the hose ready and suddenly halting, all but throwing it aside.

"Why aren't they trying to extinguish it?!!"

It took a split second for Minseok to reply but when they pulled out extinguishers, he got it.

"They don't want a boilover - it's burning fat!"

Jongdae ducked behind the container at a particularly vicious wave of heat.

What was Chanyeol doing? What if Jongin was somewhere in there?

The fire traveled up the walls and engulfed everything with poisonous, black smoke. The police were positioned around the building, weapons raised. Someone yelled into a megaphone.

"We've gotten notice about you! Surrender and you won't be harmed!"

The building was burning from top to bottom when a faint figure stepped out of the smoke and towards the edge of the roof. Minseok placed an arm over Jongdae's mouth in precaution.

It was Chanyeol, the white hair was unmistakable.

With a wide movement, he threw up a stack of papers that burnt mid-air, dissolved like a swarm of dying fireflies. Jongdae's eyes were glued to him, glued to the way he raised his hands, showing nine fingers to the police, palm up. Then he turned to show the back of his hands, holding up six digits. He went back to showing his palms, keeping the six fingers up.

He vaguely heard Minseok mutter the numbers under his breath, frantically repeating them, but to Jongdae, there was nothing but Chanyeol, up there, surrounded by flames. The weapons aimed at him. The way he lifted two of his own fingers to his temple, ripped down the facemask with the other. Jongdae swore he saw him smiling.

He heard the shots being fired, saw the explosion, felt the wave of heat and pressure hit him. And then there was nothing but fire, and he couldn't see Chanyeol anywhere. His mind went blank.

No.

"Nine, Six, Six. Nine, Six- fuck, I got it!"

He was still up there. He could heal himself. But there was an explosion, and the police had fired.

"It's a code, we gotta go there! The second one was backhanded and nine is too high, so the second one's the letter, Luhan help me-"

Chanyeol wasn't immune to bullets.

He tried to get to his feet, to get closer and try to spot Chanyeol, but hands were holding him back. Minseok forced the injection into his arm but Jongdae struggled.

"We can't leave, he's still here!" he yelled hysterically, clawing at the container and trying to pull himself up and away from Minseok's firm grasp.

"We gotta leave, they'll spot us!"

"No!"

They shot him. The explosion had gotten him.

He ripped himself free when another, much stronger hand gripped his and harshly tugged him away from the building without mercy. It was Kyungsoo. Kyungsoo, whose loved one had disappeared as well. Kyungsoo, who hated him.

"Come!" he simply yelled, tightly intertwining their fingers. Jongdae tried to resist, but his grip was unrelenting.

"Chanyeol wants you to leave!"

The world moved in a blur but Kyungsoo's eyes were steady, pushing away everything else and he tugged on his hand once more, for emphasis.

"Now!"

Jongdae obeyed, closed his eyes and desperately concentrated on the feeling of Kyungsoo's fingers in his.

The ground broke away and he fell.

It only lasted mere seconds and happened too fast for his muddled mind to comprehend. He felt the impact and his body and senses were submerged in water. The shock had already pressed most of the oxygen out of his lungs, and he struggled to reach the top. With a gasp, his head broke the surface
and whipped around, looking for the others. For a split second, he feared they may have landed in the middle of an ocean, doomed to drown slowly. Could he shift in water? But they'd landed in some kind of lake and the shore wasn't too far away. A few meters to the left and he'd have safely landed on the slope behind him, but at least his head hadn't collided with the rocky cliff.

Next to him, Kyungsoo kept popping up and coughing violently. Jongdae attempted to help him, but Kyungsoo swatted at him, swimming towards the cliff instead to steady himself at some of the rocks. He was still coughing, blindly pointing at another splashing figure. Without thinking, Jongdae darted towards it as fast as he could. He wasn't an excellent swimmer, but blindly grabbed around the water nonetheless, until he got hold of an upper arm. It was Luhan, sputtering and flailing wildly. Couldn't he swim? It took a great deal of strength and endurance but slowly, he dragged the struggling blonde to the shore where they collapsed in the wet sand, heavily breathing. Jongdae turned his head away from the grey sky to see Kyungsoo reaching the shore. Someone yelled in the distance. It sounded like Minseok. With a groan, he sat up and saw his friend approaching with a taller stranger in tow. Minseok mindlessly threw his bag to the side and crouched down between them.

"Dae, you're fine? Shit, Luhan. Is it broken?"

Jongdae blinked away the water, only to sharply inhale at the red stain quickly spreading through the fabric of Luhan's sleeve. Only now did he notice that the boy had hurt his arm. Badly, judging by the hiss he made trying to sit up. The stranger gently pushed Minseok aside, crouching down besides the injured boy.

"Let me have a look at it." he mumbled, his hands already wandering along his arm, bunching up the fabric. Jongdae cringed at the sight of a gaping flesh wound near his elbow and blearily watched the stranger cover the wound with their last scrap of bandage before knotting an old shirt around it. His movements were quick and efficient, almost as if he practiced this routinely. He checked the boy's fingers for jewelry, and Luhan winced at the slightest touch.

Minseok jumped to his feet and announced he'd search for help, telling Jongdae to stay and watch over the others. Jongdae obeyed, and while the stranger went back and forth between healing Luhan and asking analytical questions, he looked around the area. There was no sign of Chanyeol. Not on the water, not on the slope, nowhere. He'd surely catch up to them though. He had to.

Only he didn't. There was no trace of Chanyeol anywhere, and when they were led to a nearby village, he wasn't waiting for them there either. He was gone.

Jongdae separated himself from the others, wandering through the village, peeking in every corner and not minding the stares he got. He asked people, but got nothing but the same answer over and over again.

_There are no strangers in this village aside from you and your friends._

He told himself to keep looking. Unwilling to return, he kept wandering, waiting. When dawn was close enough to brighten the sky, Jongdae was still sitting in the abandoned square, staring into the sky. The realization intensified the burning sensation and he had to give in. Chanyeol wasn't coming. He'd left them. He might be dead. It wasn't too unlikely. He didn't know whether he was getting his hopes up because he didn't want to accept reality or whether there was a chance he'd survived. Right then, Jongdae only knew that he wanted him back; that he couldn't imagine what he'd do if Chanyeol wasn't in this world anymore. There was so much he regretted - maybe, if he'd gotten ahold of himself and treated him right... if only he'd been more open about their relationship or put his feelings into words, maybe then Chanyeol wouldn't have decided to leave like this.

He was still numbly sitting there, staring into the sky in disbelief, when a villager returned, carrying a bag of trading goods and newspapers. Wordlessly, the young man handed him one, not daring to meet his eyes before scrambling away to deliver the others. The thin paper felt clammy in the morning air, and Jongdae's nails left indents where he clawed into the sides. He'd meant to return the newspaper, tell the man that he wasn't interested in these things... until he saw the cover. The black and white photograph of a burning building. The close-up of Chanyeol's sardonic grin, the two fingers placed against his own temple.

_Suicide Attack_, the bold headlines stated.
Another escaped experiment, how many more are there?
Deliberate infiltration of a research center, destruction of countless data. Duplications vary, damage has yet to be estimated. Attacker referenced to first experiment Sehun by showing his location coordinates. Explosion caused by shots. Burnt corpse on the rooftop.

The Phoenix is Dead, the bold headline says.
The stack of cheap paper was carelessly flung away with a protesting rustle and landed in the dirt.
Not true.
It wasn't true.
Chanyeol was still alive.

Pressing his eyes closed didn't help, the tears found their way down his dirtied skin either way, hot streaks of salt against cold, trembling skin.
A few, stray droplets of rain dotted the paper, smearing the letters.
"Jongdae."
He vaguely heard Minseok's voice, but before he could approach him, before he could comfort him or say anything, really, Jongdae had already walked away, avoiding eye contact. He was ashamed. Confused. Hurt.
That day, the village was soaked in rain. Thick, grey clouds hung above them heavily, incessant streams of rain coming down on them like never before. Occasionally, the sky lit up with sheet lightning, but if there was any thunder to begin with, it was swallowed by the deafening sound of rain hitting every available surface. Jongdae was curled up in an abandoned hut, crying, and the sky cried with him. At one point, he faintly heard someone entering the room. He didn't turn around, hiding his face in his arms. A dull thud of shoes meeting the floor was followed by soundless steps and then there was a wet back against Jongdae's. He flinched, but the person remained quiet. Jongdae knew it was Kyungsoo anyway, and made no move to push him away.
They sat in silence, with Jongdae sobbing openly and Kyungsoo just sitting there, being there, until exhaustion got to both of them.
Until the rain stopped.
"You read the newspaper this morning?" Baekhyun conversationally asked, his slim fingers flying over his clothes, checking whether everything was still in place. The other made a dismissive sound while tugging at his face mask and patting down his straight, black hair.

Baekhyun threw him a look over his shoulder.

"No? They've gotten quite a good shot of you. You didn't only make it to the front page, I think you take up half of the magazine!"

"Pfft. Are you telling me this so you can brag about your styling choices?" Chanyeol replied with a good-natured roll of his eyes before training the brown orbs back on their target.

Baekhyun chuckled.

"Oh, please. I don't need any confirmation, I already know you looked awesome. Besides, you were pretty lucky I still had that fancy suit of yours. Judging by the article, they obviously remembered it."

Chanyeol shook his head.

"Of course they did. It was the outfit I wore when I left. I bet they have had it printed out about a hundred times."

"Then they'll have a few new shots to add to the series now. Let's get the show going." Baekhyun simply said, jumping to his feet. Chanyeol followed suit. The area was dire. Black-4 was a Layer known for its ongoing civil war, but there were hardly any people around this area. With almost casual steps they approached the tiny, inconspicuous building. The only two guards present were taken out before they knew it, and, most importantly, before they could alert the security. The second guard got no further than one hand placed over his walkie talkie before finding a quick and painful death. The device met the floor with a resounding thud, and Chanyeol kicked it away. Baekhyun had already stepped over the body of the first guard, his fingers hovering over the keys of an old keyboard, eyes trained on the bulky monitor showing the security cams.

"Damn this high tech stuff. I've got no clue what to do about those, to be honest. As soon as I have Kyung back, we'll take the world..." he swore under his breath. Chanyeol wasn't too familiar with computers either, but he could easily tell this was far from being advanced technology. But to Baekhyun, who only moseyed around poor Layers that barely had anything better than a tape recorder, it was understandable that even this ratty old thing remained a mystery.

Getting impatient, Baekhyun brushed the keyboard aside and crouched down next to the guards, frisking them for useful stuff.

"Whatever, we'll do it the old school way."

"You're getting your hands dirty." Chanyeol provided helpfully while melting both the camera and the drive of the computer.

Even if there were backups, this couldn't do any harm. Baekhyun wrinkled his nose at the smell of burnt plastic.

"Please. I'm a professional."

Indeed, Baekhyun's fingers were still spotless when he pressed the elevator buttons a moment later. The door closed, and the elevator moved swiftly, silently. Far more modern than anything on this Layer had a right to be. This place was obviously well-maintained. Baekhyun hummed quietly, repeatedly balling his hand into a fist to get use to the feeling of his fingerless gloves. Or maybe he was just admiring the sight of his hands in them - an entirely possible scenario with Baekhyun.

"It's been quite some time since we've been out like this." he remarked, and Chanyeol leaned his back into the elevator, inhaling deeply.

"Yeah. Let's just get this over with quickly."

"Ah, you're no fun, Yeollie." Baekhyun whined with a pout sent his way. The elevator came to a halt, and Chanyeol tensed.

Baekhyun was still grinning when the doors slid open, though it had taken on a wolfish quality.

"Let's wreck some havoc and take back our kid."
In one fluid movement, Baekhyun ducked, and Chanyeol darted forwards. They barely had a plan, but they didn't need one. Chanyeol burst into the room, and there were guards jumping to their feet, reaching for their weapons, but Chanyeol barely minded them and instead aimed for the light switch to his right, slapping it with his open palm. It turned dark, with nothing but another monitor lighting up the room. He rolled across the floor, taking shelter behind the desks that were spread across the room and quickly took out the monitor, which died in a rain of sparks. The room was flooded with darkness, and a mere second later, he already heard the first guy cry out in pain, probably hit by the knife Baekhyun had gripped when the door opened earlier. No one dared to fire in the dark, instead relying on weapons and fists. Chanyeol crawled over the floor, trying to get away from the enemies and towards the door. Confused shouts turned to gurgling noises, and thuds told him the guards were falling, colliding with the furniture. Someone stepped on his foot, and though it did hurt, it was so minor that Chanyeol healed the pain without sparing it a thought. The only discernible sound Baekhyun made was one soft, breathy gasp, but Chanyeol knew he was darting around the room, methodically taking the guards out one by one, starting with those closest to the light switch. He wouldn't want them to press it - Baekhyun preffered it dark. Preferred his enemies blind, while he could put his little talent to use. That little quirk of his which was one of the main reasons he'd come this far without getting himself killed. His sixth sense, as he lovingly called it. The ability to feel structures well enough to be aware of obstacles in a certain range. It was something he'd trained meticulously and Chanyeol liked to call it 'the vision' in his head - for Baekhyun didn't need light to see. He just knew.

A last thud was followed by a huff, and Baekhyun spoke up curtly. "Light."

Chanyeol got to his feet, a small flame licking around his palm and upwards. Baekhyun had once pestered him and whined, wanting him to throw fireballs, like he saw in the movies, but this was as far as he could go with actual fire. His power settled around heat first and foremost, and while his affinity for fire was extremely high, it was hard to keep it alive with nothing it could consume. Even more so if it was far away from his body. There had been a reason Baekhyun had all but soaked the archive in gasoline. A dim glow illuminated the room, and he took sight of Baekhyun.

The boy looked a little ruffled, a little out of breath, but otherwise completely fine. Behind the door, he could hear the commotion. There was no one entering though.
"Bet those were the only ones." Baekhyun voiced out what Chanyeol was thinking, while wiping his knife and bloody hands on his pants. Whoever worked behind those doors certainly was neither strong nor stupid enough to take them on full front.
"Someone was pretty confident, huh? Let's see where we can find our little puppy."
Chanyeol nodded, and they entered the hallway, switching off the light once more, though Chanyeol kept his flame alive. Unlike Baekhyun, he couldn't see well in the darkness and wasn't familiar with this building. People screamed and scrambled away from them.
"Though you obviously already have a puppy. Or no, scratch that - you're the overgrown puppy to your little boy toy slash kitty cat." Baekhyun conversationally stated as they hurried down what looked like a hospital corridor. Chanyeol only nudged him in the side, and Baekhyun chuckled, obviously high on adrenaline.
"I mean, he's cute! But last time I checked, you were into girls!"
"Details, details!" Chanyeol huffed, his eyes skimming the plates next to the doors. One of them burst open a few meters ahead, letting artificial light flood the hallway and Baekhyun singsonged a carefree "Oh-oh", his fingers running over the name plates.
"Okay, the letters are embossed, leave it to me!" he announced, darting away with the grace of a cat while Chanyeol skidded to a halt, both hands raised and ready to defend himself, facing several barely lit figures.
"Yeah, yeah, just go and leave the actual work to me!" Chanyeol called after him, most of his mind already focused on calling forth the heat.
It was his job to distract everyone and cover for Baekhyun. He chuckled soundlessly.
Being subtle wasn't his forte, anyway.
Jongdae awoke to a dull ache. Rather than a headache, it was the hard wooden floor digging into his shoulder uncomfortably. He was probably covered in dust. It was rather chilly, except for the warmth covering his back. With a low, confused groan he rubbed his eyes. The motion made him aware of the puffiness of his eyes and the rough streaks of dried tears on his skin. The previous happenings flooded his brain and with a start, he sat up, turning towards the warm body of... Kyungsoo. It was the most ridiculous thing, how hope had gotten to his sleep-induced brain that quickly, just to taunt him right after with a cold shower of reality.

The instant wave of misery was slightly dimmed by the sight of Kyungsoo, curled up on the dirty floor, his back facing him. The sudden movement had evidently roused him, too, and Jongdae watched his limbs tense as he stretched them with a silent yawn. Slowly, Kyungsoo sat up as well, his bones cracking in protest, lips parted carelessly.

Jongdae was still exhausted. Not even physically - by now he was getting used to sleeping in the most random of places.

But mental exhaustion was no less taxing, and his befuddled brain was still busy gathering the facts when Kyungsoo nudged his upper arm.

"Good morning, Kyungsoo." he mumbled belatedly, eyes skimming over the twinkling raindrops gathered on the window glass.

"Are you better now?" Kyungsoo asked quietly, voice still scratchy from sleep. Jongdae only shrugged vaguely. He wasn't crying right now. But he could feel the burn lingering, waiting for its chance to overwhelm him once more. Kyungsoo clearly noticed his reluctance to make eye contact and indignantly tugged at his arm until Jongdae gave in and looked at him, fiercely blinking away any trace of wetness.

"Then let's go. We have to get them back." he announced, his voice as steady as his gaze. Jongdae blinked numbly. The way Kyungsoo said it made it sound so... easy. Natural. There was not the tiniest doubt that it could be too late, Kyungsoo was just sure they simply had to head out and 'get them back'.

"Yeah." Jongdae breathed out in response, because there really was no other option. Maybe it was delusional, and maybe he wanted to be delusional for a little longer, together with Kyungsoo.

"You're right."

Kyungsoo had already gotten to his feet when Jongdae faintly touched his leg, asking for his attention once more.

"You think I'm pretty pathetic, right? A hypocrite..." Jongdae mumbled. He didn't mean to, but knew it would gnaw at him forever, anyway.

Maybe his choice of words wasn't brilliant, but after being the cause of Kyungsoo's misery, relying on him like this just felt wrong.

Kyungsoo stared down at him with eyebrows scrunched together in mild confusion before he finally shook his head.

"No. You're not." he replied neutrally, and that was it. Because whatever Kyungsoo said sounded simple and obvious. Jongdae was still sitting on the floor, looking a little lost, while Kyungsoo was already halfway to the door. Kyungsoo halted when he noticed the other wasn’t following and turned to look at him inquiringly. Expectantly.

"Come?"

Jongdae blinked, his limbs obeying automatically. The shorter one patiently waited for him to catch up before opening the door. The comforting wave of warmth rushing through him had nothing to do with the early sunlight flooding his face. Even though Kyungsoo had been so angry at him... now that Jongdae had broken down, he’d still come for him. In a fit of bravery, he reached for his hand.
and while Kyungsoo threw a quick glance at their fingers, he didn't hesitate interlocking them, pulling Jongdae along.

Jongdae wasn't usually one to burden others. Therefore he felt quite nervous, wondering whether he'd have to justify himself in front of the others. Kyungsoo didn't leave him a second to ponder this and entered one of the smaller, but definitely most advanced houses. Homey decoration and wood carvings passed by in a blur and then they stood in what he assumed to be a cramped living room. Cramped mostly due to the low table in front of a dead fireplace, sparsely occupied by three people while the fourth was lounging in a plush armchair. The table had clearly been added just for the visitors. All eyes turned to them, and Jongdae immediately sought Minseok's eyes, just to move on to the familiar sight of Luhan grinning weakly, his right arm supported by a sling running over his shoulder. The other two were strangers, though the friendly man around the table stirred something in him.

"Hello." Jongdae rasped out, clearing his throat right afterwards.

Without a moment of hesitation, Minseok waved him over, patting the space next to him.

"Morning. You're just in time for breakfast."

His voice was friendly, amicable and only a little reserved. With a relieved sigh, Jongdae crossed the room and sank into the cushion next to his friend.

He turned towards him and opened his mouth, but Minseok was quicker.

"We got actual pineapple juice from the villagers. You definitely have to try it."

I'm sorry for rejecting you, he had meant to say.

Save it, Minseok had silently cut him off. With a small smile, Jongdae accepted the jar and filled his and Kyungsoo's mug while Minseok helped himself and Jongdae with a slice of bread. Everyone followed suit. Everyone but the pale and cold-looking young man in the armchair. His intense gaze made Jongdae stop with the glass raised midair, awkwardly setting it down again. Was he the owner of this house?

"Uhm. Sorry. I'm Kim Jongdae," he announced, alluding a careful bow of his head, unsure of what was tradition on this Layer, "forgive my rudeness...?"

The stranger only blinked, appearing mildly surprised by his introduction, before shrugging and averting his gaze. Jongdae helplessly looked around and Luhan crossed his arms defiantly.

"Not even introducing yourself back - Jongdae, you have nothing to be ashamed of. This guy is at least twice as rude as you." he assured him, throwing a poisonous look at the black-haired stranger who flat out ignored the jab.

"Huh. The almighty Luhan just defended me. I hope you all heard that, I'd like to have ear-witnesses in the future, just in case."

Luhan stuck out the tip of his tongue and it painfully reminded him of Chanyeol, who'd taught him the gesture. To occupy himself, he turned towards the second stranger with a tilted head.

"And... I feel like I've met you before. I'm sorry, I'm usually good with faces, but the last weeks have been kinda crazy."

The man looked very friendly and soft. A little older than him, too. Clean, unblemished porcelain skin, orderly cropped, dark hair that gave a boyish touch to his otherwise mature face and a distinct look of sleepiness, though Jongdae was observant enough to tell that this was merely an impression his features naturally gave. Currently, his raised eyebrows spoke of a mix of disapproval and amusement.

"I can imagine. Though I can clearly place your face, and my week was equally... crazy." he said not unkindly, reaching for the little jar of jam.

Jongdae thought hard, momentarily forgetting his own breakfast.

"Did we talk?"

"You could say that. I think it was more of you making me talk."

Another two seconds passed with Jongdae being genuinely confused, before the realization hit him, and his body went rigid.
"You're the doctor! The doctor we threatened! Dr. Zhang... Yixing, right?"
Now the man looked pleasantly surprised.
"Oh, you even remember my name, that's kinda astounding-"
"I'm so sorry. Really, I'm terribly sorry we had to do that. We had our reasons but it's nothing that justifies our behaviour, I realize that." Jongdae burst out immediately, almost bowing into his mug. The doctor only waved him off dismissively.
"I really think you owe me nothing. If anything, I should probably thank you for keeping your friend from blowing off my head." he stated neutrally, looking at Minseok with an arched brow.
"Though it's amazing that you feel so sorry while the actual culprit doesn't even bother to fake it." He didn't look furious, just mildly unimpressed, but Jongdae still nudged Minseok's shoulder.
"Kim Minseok. You didn't apologize?!"
His friend only shrugged, calmly spreading jam over an additional slice of bread before plopping it on Jongdae's plate.
"I didn't even harm him." he stated nonchalantly.
With an exasperated expression, Jongdae kept apologizing on his friend's behalf until Yixing cut him off.
"Please stop stressing over it. I've had worse things happen to me and by actually sheltering me, I think we can all call ourselves even, no?"
Jongdae nodded numbly, and after receiving a stern look from Minseok, who was obviously more aware of his grumbling stomach than Jongdae himself, he finally dug in. A blissed moan escaped him and he tried his best to restrain himself and eat in a civilized manner. Both the pineapple juice and the strawberry jam were delicious. Strawberries were extremely rare and he'd never even tried a pineapple before. Jongdae began to understand why people would travel just for food.
"Alright, but why did we shelter you? From what? I didn't... really pay attention back then, I guess."
"It's a long story, we should eat first."
"Oh. Alright. Don't you want anything?" he asked the supposed house-owner around a mouthful of bread, only to get shot down with a cool look. To his surprise, Luhan didn't even bother making a snide remark at any of them, and a side glance told him that the translator was occupied by his own food, delicate features scrunched up in obvious displeasure at the first bite of his strawberry jam-covered bread. Kyungsoo regarded it curiously, and Luhan moved the slice to his plate, intent on getting rid of it. Kyungsoo carefully dipped a fingertip into the jam, licked it off, tentatively smacked his lips a bit, just to finally eat the slice without complaint under Luhan's subtly grossed out gaze and misplaced sympathetic grimaces.
There were so many questions burning on Jongdae’s tongue. What they were going to do, where Yixing came from, where they even were, and why the hostile-looking man granted them shelter. But for now, those had to wait, so he listened to Minseok talk about the specifics of the fruit they were eating - because Minseok's good educational background never failed to amaze him - with the quiet house owner curtly throwing in additional facts once in awhile. He did seem rather icy, but at the same time unable to completely leave them be; Jongdae interpreted him as being more interested in them than he let on. Though not as interested as Yixing was in Kyungsoo. Throughout their meal, the medic constantly eyed Kyungsoo over the table. To Jongdae, Kyungsoo’s behavior had become natural. The way his attention was always caught by something invisible to others, like a cat watching a tiny insect fly around the room. The way his fingers occasionally traced out surfaces or air, his overall unique way of thinking and acting. Though he was currently behaving quite inconspicuously, munching on his slice of bread in silent content.
Jongdae really hoped the doctor wouldn't feel obligated to examine him, since he could imagine Kyungsoo not being too happy about it. Fortunately, Yixing did no such thing, and while the air between him and Minseok was rather thick, he appeared amicable overall.
Jongdae was thankful for the presence of two new people as well as Kyungsoo being on good terms with him again. It eased the tension inside him, distracted him a little. He let his eyes wander across the room, wondering what kind of Layer they were currently on. The development level seemed to be a little lower than on his home Layer. The carpets looked handmade, complex patterns decorating
not only them, but also the cushions, curtains and tapestries on the walls. Now that he thought about it, the sheer number of objects was what made this house so overwhelming. Every inch of the wall was occupied by shelves, pictures drawn by kids or hand-stitched tapestries, leaving close to no room for the warm wallpaper beyond to show. There was also an astounding amount of wind chimes attached in random places. Wooden ones hanging from a high shelf, one made of glass marbles dangling from the ceiling; some clumsily crafted, others looking like a piece of art. It didn't seem to be a room befitting the grumpy-looking owner, but then again, it may be a second hint that there was more to him than his expression betrayed.

After a generous meal that ended in Jongdae and Kyungsoo sharing a slice of bread (sharing meaning that Kyungsoo was curious about the slice of cheese and Jongdae about the bread, analyzing it like the baker his mother would be proud of), they gathered around a freshly brewed can of tea.

"We're still gonna look for Jongin and Chanyeol, right?" Jongdae immediately asked, and his heart plummeted when he saw the anxious looks Minseok and Luhan exchanged.

"The thing is," Minseok began neutrally, "he took the data we got."

"And also the pager." Luhan added.

"We won't even be able to contact Baekhyun, wherever that guy went off to." Jongdae swallowed down the disappointment.

"But... you do think they're both fine, right?"

"Yeah." Minseok replied immediately and his certainty was more soothing than any of his own reasoning could have been.

"I had a feeling that something was off, and taking the pager and our data... it makes no sense. I also have no doubt that Chanyeol would stage something flashy like this, but he also had Baekhyun, who has the wits to do it right." Jongdae threw in, seeking an explanation rather than sowing doubt. Minseok remained unfazed.

"When do you think they planned it? I was around him all the time..." Jongdae threw in, seeking an explanation rather than sowing doubt. Minseok remained unfazed.

"Yeah, but you didn't read all the messages he exchanged with Baekhyun, right?"

Oh. He was right, of course. Jongdae hadn't thought anything into it, assuming they were merely exchanging information.

"Okay, but why would he do that?"

Why would he leave them behind?

"Certainly not to abandon us, that much is obvious. He wouldn't leave you behind like this, Dae." He blushed a little, but Minseok didn't address it further, just taking a deep sip from his tea.

"We came up with several theories, but in the end, we can't be sure." Luhan picked up where his friend had ended.

"The only thing we know is that he deliberately took away our chance to find Jongin. And that he sent us here, to a safe place."

"Without asking me, thank you very much." the boy piped up from his chair, his voice slightly nasal and annoyed.

"Are you a friend of Chanyeol’s?" Jongdae asked carefully; the boy snorted.

"He wishes."

"That's Oh Sehun." Minseok introduced curtly, and Jongdae went quiet, mouth forming a silent 'o'. That was the infamous Oh Sehun?

"You don't look like 19 though. You look older." was the first thing that came to his mind and while Sehun looked ticked off, Luhan snickered.

"Not everyone is on good terms with the goddess of youth," Luhan claimed with a satisfied smile, "not that it's surprising. She prefers to smile at those who smile back."

No one questioned this particular metaphor, and Sehun looked awfully tempted to strangle Luhan.

"I think the visual age of Oh Sehun is pretty low on our list of things we ought to discuss." Minseok reminded them, and Jongdae swore he heard Sehun mutter an 'easy for you to say' under his breath.

"Alright, then... can someone tell me since when and why we are in the company of Dr. Zhang?"
"Please don't call me that. I really don't feel like I'm on duty anymore. I'd be more comfortable with just Yixing." the doctor insisted gently, but firmly. Jongdae nodded but Yixing still hesitated, looking around the room warily and Minseok waved Kyungsoo over. With confusion, Jongdae watched his friend whisper something into Kyungsoo's ear. Whatever he said had his blank gaze wandering around the room, slowly taking in every detail, fixating on random spots. Finally, he shook his head, not meeting any of their eyes. The reactions were split between relief and confusion.

"Alright, the coast is clear. Go on, tell them." Minseok instructed the doctor, who seemed subtly unimpressed by the fact that Minseok tried to order him, but complied nonetheless, though his eyes still explored the room in between the lines.

"As some of you already know, I'm a doctor. A medic, to be precise, meaning that I deal with all the matters revolving around shifting. I'm mentioning that because as a medic, I get around, visiting many layers. I dare say it can get... stressful. Because of that, I didn't think a lot into it when my body showed symptoms of aforementioned stress. I assumed I was simply exhausted and needed rest. It started with little things, odd dreams at night-"

Jongdae flinched at this, but Yixing didn't notice, too caught up in retelling his story.

"...fatigue during the day. I tried to treat it myself by taking it easy, with light use of caffeine and sleeping pills, when it got worse. But as a medic, you can't just lie down for too long, and I know I shouldn't have, but I neglected the signs. I pushed through, even when I began to experience microsleep and it became increasingly difficult to keep myself together."

"That's an awful attitude - what if you hurt your patients?" Luhan interrupted him, and Yixing sighed.

"I know. But I do not perform surgery of any kind and none of my patients or even colleagues have ever noticed any of it. Somewhere, along the way, I began to sleepwalk."

At this point, both Luhan and Minseok looked over at Jongdae, who froze in his seat.

"It wasn't something I'd ever done before, but I found myself waking up in the middle of the night, pants drenched in water and half my apartment flooded. I became suspicious - and quite unsettled, to be honest- and analyzed my own blood, just to find odd components in there. As if I'd taken certain medicaments unconsciously. Everything was slipping out of my control, I was gradually losing it. It took me a long time to piece it all together, but eventually I realized... that I've done a lot of bad things."

He stopped there, the neutral report coming to a halt as conflicting emotions fought over his expression.

His folded hands on the table were so tense that Jongdae could see his fingertips turning white.

"What? What did you do?" Sehun surprisingly piped up, revealing that he'd been listening more than intently.

Yixing looked up at him, solemn and broken around the seams.

"I caused the death of many people. I, a medic, killed people."

"While you were sleepwalking?!" Jongdae immediately asked, his own fingers clawing into his thigh. Yixing nodded hesitantly.

"This epidemic on the lavender Layer, have you heard of it?"

Sehun appeared thoughtful, while the deserted area was still rather fresh on the other's minds.

"I caused it. It was me. I dumped chemicals into the water, poisoning everyone."

The revelation came as a shock, but now that Yixing had finally confessed it, there was no holding back anymore.

"That was the true reason my clothes were all wet. The reason I was so tired during the day was because I sneaked out at night. All the substances that have been declared missing, I stole them. And up to this very moment, I don't know what I've done with them or where they even are - there was also this giant explosion on cyan-"

"The one in the middle of town, right at the heart of the research facilities?" Luhan fell in, looking just as disturbed as Jongdae felt. Yixing nodded miserably, more and more words tumbling out in his slightly shaky voice.

"Yes. Yes, that one. I'm pretty sure I caused that one as well. It's all woozy, but that's what I'm
getting from analyzing the situation; and again, I'm sure I stole something, but can't remember what or where I placed it. No one has seen me and since I'm living alone, there's nobody to observe me, either. I can't even tell you what I was doing when you threatened me. I wasn't even supposed to be there in the first place."

With a deep breath, he hid his face in one hand, dimming his voice and attempting to mask the desperation.

"When it all clicked, I was determined to hand myself in. I went to the police station on the cyan Layer immediately. They took me in for questioning, but something was definitely off. One of them was keen on getting to be alone with me and the moment he was, he pointed a weapon at me and made a call. He told someone I had a very interesting story to tell and I panicked."

Minseok nodded with a quirk of his eyebrows, as if the story wasn't utterly unbelievable and shocking. Usually it would be Jongdae who'd react like this. But currently, he was still too shaken up about the sleepwalking issue.

"I was lucky the guard was careless enough for me to knock him out - I realize I don't look like it, but if you know the human body, it's not that difficult. I just threw on his jacket, a sloppy disguise. But I was even luckier that you and your friend caused this scene. The moment I scurried down the corridor, all the alarms went off and people were falling all over themselves in an attempt to get there, and I just sort of went along. When we reached the burning building, I made a run for it and stumbled across you. The rest, you know already."

Jongdae fleetingly looked at Minseok, who took the cue to speak up and fill the gaps.

"You didn't notice because you were kinda out of it Dae," he said casually enough so as not to draw attention to the stitch Jongdae felt at this, "but he just ran up to us, asking us to help him. As we all know justice warrior Luhan, he didn't hesitate a second and gave him a shot."

"I think we owe him that much." Luhan just threw in with a faint pout over the new nickname.

"Besides, it was you sticking to him and making sure he didn't get lost or anything."

Minseok decided to ignore this statement and looked at Jongdae instead.

"Now we're all on the same page."

They took a while to mull over this story. It was a lot to take in, and while Yixing was nothing but a stranger to him, Jongdae couldn't help the emphatic lump sitting heavily in his throat. Yixing had tried his best to do the right thing, and yet there he sat, dull eyes fixated on the table with his whole life being ripped away from under his feet. Jongdae reached out for the can of tea and filled his own, empty mug with the steaming liquid. Afterwards, he switched his mug with Yixing's untouched one that was barely warmer than his own skin.

"You should drink it while it's still hot."

The doctor looked at him with a thin smile, and Jongdae only nodded towards the mug.

A few beats of silence passed with Yixing sipping the tea, gratefully accepting something to occupy himself with.

"I can't even say I don't believe you," Luhan suddenly broke the silence, "not after all the weird stuff that happened to us. Especially to Jongdae."

Minseok nodded.

"Something is definitely going on."

Jongdae felt the need to speak up about it, to set himself apart.

"But the things I saw... I never really did anything at night. It didn't happen during the day. Not... really."

He wasn't like that. He wasn't losing it. Or at least that's what he told himself.

"Maybe it was just some early sign of the whole pull thing."

"You have the pull?!" Sehun suddenly threw in, and Luhan looked at him haughtily.

"Well, where do you think the heavy rain shower came from? The clouds literally appeared out of nowhere." he said with a certain glint of satisfaction and pride at something Jongdae still had difficulties accepting. Instead of looking scandalized, Sehun merely groaned in annoyance.

"That was you? Can you not? I fucking hate rain, and god knows there's been enough of that this month already."
Jongdae flinched lightly. He'd love to make a joke out of it, but the topic was still a little too sensitive. Maybe one day he'd be able to fully embrace this power of his and be confident enough to joke along. Sensing his predicament, Minseok knocked on the table once, gathering the attention of everyone.

"We're not done yet. There's something else that's been bothering me for awhile. I can't guarantee it'll be of relevance, but I feel like we're on to something. Might be a step into the right direction."

That wasn't it? Jongdae still hadn't had enough time to mull over Yixing's words, trying to make sense of them, and yet Minseok was pushing forward.

His friend threw a look over at Kyungsoo, whose attention was mostly on them, before speaking up.

"Do you remember the time Dae asked Kyungsoo what he was seeing?"

Jongdae nodded while Luhan scrunched his brows in question. Right, he hadn't been in on the short conversation.

"You remember how he said he saw a girl with red hair?" Jongdae nodded again, vaguely this time.

"Straight hair? Blue eyes? Pale skin, very subtle freckles, young and slim?" Minseok prodded, and that's where Jongdae hesitated.

Minseok didn't wait for him to voice it out.

"No, he didn't mention those details. I know because I saw her, too."

What?

Even Kyungsoo looked surprised at the revelation, while Luhan unconsciously looked around the room.

"What do you mean, 'you saw her, too'?" Jongdae asked, highly confused. Minseok had never showed tendencies like that before - maybe the whole drug experience had caused permanent damage, after all?

"Not back then, no. It's been awhile for me. I've seen her... back in that maze-like place. When I was experiencing ups... and later on, during the downs, too."

It was subtle, but Jongdae could never miss the way his eyes flitted down to the table for a second as he said it. Below his mask of maturity and control rested a feeling of shame that would need much more time to heal.

Yixing was the first one to speak up, as he lacked the urge to be on eggshells around Minseok.

"It may have just been part of the hallucinations. I don't know anything about either of you, but maybe it's just the same after effect." he proposed calmly, and Jongdae had to salute to his bravery.

He didn't know whether he'd have the guts to say that to someone who's held a gun to his head before. Minseok shot him a cool look.

"Thanks for bringing this possibility to my attention, but I'm not delusional."

"After leaving that place, I never saw her again, no matter whether I was hallucinating or not. Kyungsoo, when did you see her for the first time?"

All attention turned to the latter, who hesitated, searching his memories.

"Behind you." Jongdae turned around, but Kyungsoo lightly shook his head.

"She's hovering in the air, walking beside you. Looking over your shoulder."

Jongdae felt the goosebumps wandering down his arms, and his muscles went rigid. Sensing the difference, Kyungsoo scooted closer and, after a moment of consideration, looped his arm around
Jongdae's, half-hugging him from the side. *I'm close to you*, it said. And though Kyungsoo's hold was surprisingly strong, Jongdae knew he was too tiny to envelop him the way Chanyeol used to. It hurt, and he felt horrible for even thinking it. But maybe Kyungsoo felt the same, felt the way Jongdae didn't quite fit into his hold. Certainly he, too, missed the perpetual proximity and warmth of Jongin. The thought made Jongdae reciprocate the touch by leaning into it.

"See? All of this is too much to be coincidental," Minseok argued, not without a genuine look of worry towards Jongdae, "there's something off and it has to do with this red-haired girl. And seeing as Jongdae and you show basically the same symptoms, maybe she's been messing with you as well."

The statement created a heavy silence. Yixing didn't seem inclined to argue to defend his pride and looked thoughtful instead. Sehun looked downright confused, trying to piece everything together, while Minseok appeared almost challenging as he patiently waited for their take on it. Luhan was the first one jumping to it.

"If it's about odd dreams and hallucinations... the incident in the camp! You think it was her, too?"

"It would be plausible." Minseok replied with a nod, not elaborating any further, much to Sehun's and Yixing's confusion. Jongdae himself felt confused as well, and he of all people should understand most of the current situation. Turning his head ever so slightly towards the boy tucked into his side, he spoke up as quiet as possible.

"Did she ever... do anything? Did she try to hurt us?"

Kyungsoo shook his head.

"No. She's just watching. Sometimes she smiles. Sometimes she frowns."

"What do you think about her? What do you think she wants?" Jongdae prodded, trying to get away from the neutral descriptions. Unlike many other people Kyungsoo had probably answered to in his life, Jongdae actually valued his personal opinion. He was convinced that Kyungsoo wasn't just crazy and unreasonable, quite the opposite even. In this twisted world part of him was living in, Kyungsoo knew his way around, and though it was questionable what was real and what was not, what existed somewhere and what was a figment of his imagination... Jongdae trusted Kyungsoo's intuition and grasp of his surroundings. So far, he'd never disappointed them.

Though mildly surprised that Jongdae would ask something like this, Kyungsoo answered with barely any hesitation.

"I think she's a cat. And you are her mouse. She's playing with you."

His stomach dropped.

"Because she wants to eat me?"

Kyungsoo considered this.

"No... but sometimes, a cat kills its mouse while playing, anyway."

Jongdae nodded, trying to stay composed. She wasn't here, right now. He had to think this through calmly.

There was a girl watching him, and she somehow gave him these weird dreams. If she wanted to actually kill him, she'd have probably done so already.

"But how?" Yixing mumbled, one hand ruffling his hair in frustration.

"How would someone manipulate us like this? It makes no sense."

"And if she's not here right now, where is she? Off to mess with other people?" Luhan wondered aloud, getting a sharp look from Minseok, but it was too late.

"You think she's with Chanyeol or Jongin?" Jongdae asked, sitting up with a rush of fresh panic.

"I barely got half of what you were spouting there, but it sounds like you're bringing plenty of trouble with you." Sehun announced, looking extremely unimpressed.

"You," he began, pointing at Yixing, "are in trouble with the authorities, while all of you," he continued, looking at the rest of them, "have been seen in the presence of the damn phoenix, making you wanted by different people altogether, and on top of that you have mysterious people stalking you?"

Minseok didn't even blink.

"You're forgetting that I'm an escapee drug experiment, Jongdae has recently discovered his ability
of the pull, and Luhan here is probably sought after by the whole yellow kingdom. I'm not sure the mental asylum Kyungsoo came from is looking for him though, so we got that going for us."

Sehun stared and despite everything, Jongdae snorted. Minseok's idea of humor was usually drier than the desert itself, and the absurdity of the situation wasn't helping. Sehun didn't seem to share their amusement.

"What the fuck. Why on earth did Park Chanyeol think it'd be a good idea to send you here again?!"

"It wasn't his idea. It was mine."

---

Baekhyun swiftly ran down the dark hallway, his fingers skimming over the name plates. Most doors had a window, letting in streams of artificial light, but Baekhyun quickly dismissed them, seeing as he’d lose more time squinting inside than simply reading the signs. Instead, he lowered the outer curtains of every door he’d passed by, further darkening the corridor and marking the spots he’d already covered. He was met with many unfamiliar names and terms and darted between left and right to get all of them. Behind him, he heard shouts, and dim light told him that Chanyeol was going all out with his power. He only hoped the clumsy guy had the presence of mind to keep it down with the actual fire - he had no idea how well the AC would adapt to all the smoke, and a yowling fire alarm was the last thing he needed right now. He’d get a headache for sure.

At the end of the hallway, he found a staircase. Surely, Jongin was being kept at the heart of the facility, seeing as he had to be their most precious gem. With this thought in mind, Baekhyun crossed the whole hallway and started searching from the back when he found no third staircase. People began to panic when he switched off the light, but whoever got in his way was taken out quickly and efficiently. On this level, there were only scientists. None of them posed the slightest threat. Just a bunch of people in white lab coats who thought it was alright to experiment on others, disregarding their dignity. He should probably feel sorry either way, but Baekhyun wasn’t a very good person. Which was exactly the reason why he was currently stepping over a limp body to further cross the hallway, and not Luhan or Jongdae. He skidded to a halt in front of a promising door. The sign affirmed his suspicions - Kim Jongin, natural shifter.

The door was locked and Baekhyun’s fingers ran down the lock, inspecting it. He could make use of his pick and tension wrench, sure, but there was neither time nor need for precision work. He felt up the door hinges. He could remove them, but lucky for him, the door opened inwards, meaning that he could try to break it down. He hopped back a step, got in position and rammed the heel of his right foot into the door, just below the lock. The pose wasn't too stable and there was nothing to support himself on, so it was no wonder that there was no immediate effect. Readjusting his stance, he tried again, imagining the door to budge a tiny bit. The material appeared to be metal, but it was obviously hollow, seeing as it creaked and bent. With a triumphant smile, Baekhyun braced himself for a last kick and with a bang, the door unhinged. The momentum sent him jumping into the tiny, starkly lit room. He could almost feel his pupils shrinking away from the aggressive white light radiating off white walls, white blankets, white clothes - brown orbs.

Jongin was sitting in the farthest corner of the room, curled together and looking at him fearfully. The moment Baekhyun had broken down the door, it had hit the high bed - that looked more like an operation table than anything else - from the middle of the room into another corner. Jongin's arms were raised in defense, but the momentum had sent him jumping into the tiny, starkly lit room. He could almost feel his pupils shrinking away from the aggressive white light radiating off white walls, white blankets, white clothes - brown orbs. Jongin was sitting in the farthest corner of the room, curled together and looking at him fearfully. The moment Baekhyun had broken down the door, it had hit the high bed - that looked more like an operation table than anything else - from the middle of the room into another corner. Jongin's arms were raised in defense, but the bed luckily hadn’t hit him.

"There you are!" Baekhyun exclaimed and without further ado, he rushed over to the brunet, crouching down next to him. He didn't appear to be injured, which sent a wave of relief over him. Still, Baekhyun hesitated with one hand mid-air, not daring to touch him. Something was off. Jongin looked scared, but not even outright panicked; more like mildly unsettled, like a child that was about
to cry. His eyes were glazed, pupils far too wide for the awful lighting. "Who are you?" he asked, voice quiet and fragile against the violent screams and sounds rumbling in the background like thunder. Baekhyun exhaled shakily. This was bad. But there was no time.

"I'm a friend. I'll take you back to your family, so up with you-" he began, reaching for Jongin's upper arm, but said one shook him off, flinching away from the touch. With his back already pressed to the wall, he looked more pitiful than intimidating.

"Liar! I don't have friends. And my family's dead." he uttered, eyes flitting between Baekhyun and the floor. Unable to help himself, Baekhyun rolled his eyes.

"Excuse me? Then what am I, a piece of furniture? I'm your friend!"

Jongin shook his head, blindly pushing at Baekhyun's chest. "I don't know you-"
The rest of the sentence was lost in a gasp, and certain wonder danced over Jongin's expression, shining through his haze.

Baekhyun tried not to move a muscle as probing fingers went up to his ear, shakily feeling up his earring.

"Why... does this thing make me feel weird?"

Baekhyun's eyes flit over to Jongin's ears. The stud was missing. Maybe, if he was lucky... he jumped away from the shifter, who flinched in fear, and scrambled over to the bed. Looked around the devices and cables, checked the little drawers-

"There. Got it."

With quick movements he returned to Jongin, showed him the black stud that was the counterpart to the one he was wearing, and hurriedly fumbled it back into Jongin's ear, talking all the while.

"Look, buddy. You already told me the thing about your family sending you away, I get that. Maybe the people we're going to now aren't related to you by blood. And they might be a little unusual - scratch that, they're outright crazy, but they're still your family."
The stud gave in with a click and Jongin thumbed around it in wonder, his eyes tearing away from Baekhyun's matching one and to his earnest eyes.

"Just believe me that there is a place for you. And it sure as hell isn't here."

With this, he got to his feet, offering him his hand.

"So - are you coming or what? Wanna meet your family? Your boyfriend?"
The weak hand was already grasping for his, and Baekhyun pulled the sinewy, but still heavier body up with a quiet groan.

While still hesitant, endless curiosity tinged with mild disbelief flickered across Jongin's features.

"I have a boyfriend? Wait. Maybe... I do?" he uttered thoughtfully, but Baekhyun only tugged him out of the room.

"No time for this, let's hurry up before Channie burns down everything and buries us here!"

"Who's that?"

Baekhyun felt him tumbling along in the darkness, his eyes trained on the dim light in the distance.

The poor shifter was completely blinded by the stark light in his room and had to completely rely on Baekhyun to lead the way. He tightened his grip around Jongin, wondering what on earth they had done to him. What type of drugs had they forced into his body? Jongin was a shifter. He could go anywhere and to clip his wings, they'd trapped him inside his head. What would have been the next step? Brainwashing? Another mindless puppet?

Jongin gasped at the sight of glowing metal and the overall burnt corridor, but even louder when they swiftly approached Chanyeol, who chased everyone away with a last, awfully precise wave of heated air, before throwing his arm around Jongin's shoulder. Without even stopping once, they hurried for the stairs.

"H-hi. Do you know me?" Jongin asked breathily, and Chanyeol almost stopped in his tracks.

"What?"

"Less talking, more walking!" Baekhyun yelled, "Jongin, we'll shift to my home for now. You haven't been there before, but you'll be able to follow us, right?"

"What? I can't go anywhere, look-" he began, waving his blank left arm in front of Baekhyun. It
showed nothing but a dark pink symbol and Baekhyun knew it was the tell-tale ellipse with a vertical line crossing it, four little stubs sprouting from it. The symbol of the plum layer.

"Are you insane? Jongin, you can go everywhere!"

They reached the first office, and edged on by the screams following them, they ran into the elevator, quickly closing it. Jongin pressed himself against the farthest metal wall at the first bumps of fists against the doors. The elevator refused to move, alarm sirens going off and red lights blinking. Chanyeol did it again, placing an arm around Jongin's shoulder protectively, while he nodded towards Baekhyun.

"You go first, I'll help him."

"We should have taken substances with us-"

"Just go, we'll be fine!" Chanyeol barked and the sudden streak of determination effectively shut him up. Baekhyun ruffled through Jongin's hair with one hand and quickly saluted with the other.

"Alright, see you in a sec."

The moment he vanished, Chanyeol swung Jongin around, both palms resting on his shoulders, their faces so close that even the screams outside couldn't distract the shifter.

"Jongin. We're leaving, too. You're a shifter, and no matter what drugs you're on, you can go anywhere you want. You got me? Anywhere. Can you feel the structures around you?"

Jongin blinked, wet his lips and tried. His mind was still muddled, trying to grasp what he knew about Layers, about structures.

There was a certain tingling feeling, but...

"Okay. Hold on to me, follow my lead. Let's try." Chanyeol fell in before he had time to gather half of his thoughts. Anxiously, he grasped his upper arms, before Chanyeol pried off Jongin's hands to fully manhandle them around his upper body.

"Don't be shy, hold on tight. You used to need that."

Jongin felt weird, but followed nonetheless, leaving a sliver of space between their bodies. Chanyeol closed his eyes and Jongin followed suit.

"I'll go now, okay? Go with the flow, follow along."

Jongin tried. He tried to feel the particles around him, the little spider webs building this world.

He felt like there was another pair of hands, draping around his chest from behind. And he followed. There was no height difference, just gravel. His eyes flew open to inspect the run down buildings around him. With a gleeful smile, he let go of Chanyeol, seeking his eyes. It worked, he wanted to say. But the words got stuck in his throat when his supposed friend looked confused instead of ecstatic. Their surroundings looked like a forgotten city, the sun soaring from above. Everything seemed normal.

Perfectly normal, except for the fact that their shadows pointed into different directions. Jongin stared at them, brain too slow to do anything but grant him with a shudder at the sight. Chanyeol's voice sounded almost hollow to his ears.

"Where are we?"
Their heads simultaneously flew around to meet yet another man standing in the doorway. Yixing turned pale while Sehun snarled.

"Who let you in?"
The stranger smiled off-handedly, almost cheerily.

"Since I've been here before, they deemed it alright to check me for weapons and let me in."

"Since when does one visit mean a permanent visa? I bet it was Seunghyun. Did you bribe him with anything?"

Ignoring the hostile accusations, the man casually stepped inside, the tiniest bow of his head substituting handshakes.

"Kim Junmyeon, it's nice to meet you all."

Minseok inhaled sharply.

"Why would the highest politician from the blue Layer be here? Unless-" he began and Jongdae already saw the muscles tense beneath his flimsy shirt, ready to attack. The alarmed atmosphere was quickly put out by the man himself, who raised his hands in defense.

"Oh, don't worry. I don't take prisoners. Besides, Sehun here would probably choke me before I'd be able to lift a finger. Maybe not out of kindness, but because he's stubborn regarding his authority on his territory."

Sehun flatout glared at him and Luhan looked unconvinced, his pose still one twitch away from jumping to his feet.

"I can't say I'm too keen on any of you politicians at the moment. The last encounter was enough already."

If Chanyeol was here, he'd probably know whether to trust this man or not, Jongdae thought. Unlike them, he had an extensive knowledge that went beyond the news in the paper. Then again, so did Sehun, right?

"You should know. Is he is with Seungri?" he asked and Sehun looked slightly taken aback by the sudden placement of faith in him. With a resigned sigh, he shook his head.

"No. He's got nothing to do with the research or prosecution of... anomalies." he announced, almost spitting the last word and looking extremely unhappy over admitting this. With a jovial smile, Junmyeon settled around the table as if it was second nature. Jongdae rarely read the news, but even he had seen Junmyeon's face before, on the screen of the market, back at home. He looked different in reality. Younger, more approachable. It was hard to believe he was one of the most influential men in the world. Maybe that was the reason the words tumbled out of his mouth before Jongdae could help it.

"Then you're against him? Can you help us?"

"Hold on, Dae. He said he sent us here. Meaning you met Chanyeol?" Minseok fell in sharply, and Jongdae retreated immediately. Right. Maybe he was their enemy, after all. But Junmyeon only nodded.

"You mean the phoenix? I met him. He saved my life, to be exact. I'm here on his behalf."

"What did he say? Where is he? He's alive, right?" Jongdae pressed on but Junmyeon only shook his head.

"I don't know anything, sorry. He didn't tell me about his intentions..."

Jongdae slumped back against Kyungsoo with a weak, forced smile.

"Of course. Sure."

He left it to Minseok and Luhan to let Junmyeon, Yixing and Sehun in on their situation; he was far too trusting and would probably give more information than absolutely necessary, anyway. Instead he used the time to think about that mysterious, red-haired girl, going over all of the past, strange events they'd been through with this new premise. So she'd supposedly been around Minseok first, but at some point swayed towards him. The idea of an invisible threat looming around them at all
times was not only eerie, it was also hard to believe. Jongdae tried his best to stay calm, to neither
deny the rather obvious signs, nor rely on the theory too much. Things could be entirely different,
after all. Then again, there were Kyungsoo's words echoing around in his mind.
She was a cat and Jongdae was her mouse.
"Seungri? Are you sure?" Junmyeon exclaimed, genuine shock painted over his features. Jongdae
blinked, trying to get his head back into the conversation. Minseok had just retold Jongin's
kidnapping.
"We've seen him. Chanyeol, who has probably met him before, confirmed his identity." Minseok
firmly said.
"This... these are very harsh accusations-" Junmyeon began hesitantly only to be cut off by Sehun.
"Come on, they're obviously true! It matches with what you got from me, regarding the research
centers. I thought you wanted the truth to get out. Now that you have it served on a fucking silver
platter you hesitate, because the criminal is one of yours?!"
Junmyeon shook his head, unwilling to be swayed by Sehun's aggressive mood.
"That's not it. I do wish to put a stop to all these illegal activities. Originally, I was just out to find out
the truth behind the corpses on the orange Layer and the three missing boys. But as I followed the
trails, one problem led to a bigger one and now I'm facing undercover research programs that
illegally abuse kids to misuse them as lab rats. And I'm not even sure I'm at the core of the problem
yet. In any case, I'd need a whole lot of solid proof to get someone of Seungri's level arrested."
"Well, seeing as that Seungri-guy has had connections with a whole camp of abused mercenary-
children, kidnapped a shifter not only without his consent, but also without sharing this new trophy
of his with any of you, should be enough of a tip-off, right?" Luhan threw in sarcastically, and
desperation slowly got to Junmyeon.
"Yes, but how am I supposed to prove all this? There are no survivors from this camp you told me
about and the testimonies of persecuted people like Sehun or your phoenix won't do it."
He sighed, looking genuinely apologetic.
"Don't misunderstand, I do believe you. Seungri has always had plenty of rumors surrounding him,
it's just that there's neither proof nor someone courageous enough to call him out on it. But pulling
you into the spotlight when I'm sure you will be declared mentally incapacitated won't help anyone. I
promised the phoenix to look after you, not get you admitted to a mental asylum."
"Then I'll do the testimony." Jongdae spoke up, his voice clear and void of doubts. Everyone turned
towards him and Minseok looked extremely unhappy about this proposal.
"You shouldn't-"
"I'm the only one who can." Jongdae cut him off, sitting up straight to get his point across. Kyungsoo
just followed, still linked to his arm.
"You said it yourself, Chanyeol and Sehun can't. Yixing here has nothing to do with this. Minseok
and Kyungsoo will be declared mentally incapacitated and Luhan is an escapee from the yellow
kingdom. I'm pretty sure having him as a witness will cause trouble of historical extents. That leaves
me. I'll do it. I've seen him, he held a damn gun to my head. Pretty sure that counts as convincing
evidence."
Minseok only shook his head in denial while Luhan grimaced, the truth getting through to him,
though he didn't like it. Junmyeon looked thoughtful and Jongdae could practically see the clogs
moving inside his mind.
"That's... true. But, and I'm obviously not abiding by any etiquette here, assuming the level of
corruption you mentioned is true... I could imagine this to be very dangerous for you, being pulled
into the spotlight like that."
"Too dangerous. Dae, what if some assassin is in court? It's ridiculously risky. You can't do that."
Minseok argued but for once, Jongdae wasn't swayed.
"Well, someone has to! The only trail we've got left to retrieve Jongin is Seungri. One way or
another, we won't be living a normal life anytime soon, anyway - and if it takes me exposing myself
to help, I'll do it. Jongin gave up much more than that."
Jongdae's voice was steady and Minseok knew him well enough to know this was final. Jongdae
didn't mind letting others take the lead, nor was he unreasonable. But he was not a pushover when there was something he truly wanted; and this was about Jongin's safety.
Junmyeon appeared happy with the turn of events, though he tried his best to keep it low-key in order not to upset Minseok. They decided on Jongdae giving a hand-written testimony first, to avoid dragging him into public for as long as possible. He sat down with both Junmyeon and Luhan, composing the testimony for hours on end. Lucky for him, Luhan's extensive education included formal writing and together, they came up with something Junmyeon deemed appropriate. Shortly after, Junmyeon left them, the signed and sealed envelope neatly stacked away, with the promise of returning in the evening.

"Now you can only hope he'll convey the message." Sehun blankly stated, surprising Jongdae, who was standing in the doorframe, looking after the young politician.
"I trust him." Jongdae mumbled, finally closing the door to face Sehun. The boy was leaning against a shelf, arms crossed and gaze defiant.
"Yeah because you're naive."
"Then you're naive, too." Jongdae replied gently, catching Sehun off guard, who snorted and tried in vain to cover the surprise.
"That's not even what I'm talking about. This guy is even more famous than any of you. If there's anyone who should watch his back, it should be him."
Jongdae leaned his back against the door, seizing the moment he had to get a more thorough impression of Sehun.
"I'm sure his bodyguards are waiting for him outside the village...?" he half-asked and Sehun huffed with this cynical little smile that made him look so unapproachable.
"He probably ditched them. Protecting his bodyguards, you know. It's utterly stupid behavior and I'm surprised no one's ambushed him and thrown him into a river yet."
"Well, at least he's trying to make a change." Jongdae cut in quite rudely, the morbid undertone not boding well with him. He thought back to Chanyeol. How he stated he wanted to make a change with that power he had.
"He wants to actually do something with the influence he's given. I think that's something to be proud of."
The implication hit home, and Sehun narrowed his eyes.
"You're lucky I'm not kicking you out. I don't owe the world anything."
"No. You don't. Junmyeon doesn't, either. And yet he tries his hardest. If you want to run and hide away from the world, it's nothing to be ashamed of. But maybe that's not enough for others and you shouldn't look down on them." Jongdae retorted, surprising himself with how strict the words came out.
"Quite the heroic phrases you're throwing around, considering that you are comfortably sitting back, waiting for someone else to do the dirty work." Sehun countered and it was Jongdae's time to flinch in anger, though he tried not to show it. Sehun chose those words on purpose, aiming to hurt him. He'd heard their earlier conversation with his own ears. How Jongdae had fought and argued that they should go and search for Chanyeol until the eventual appointment at court. How Minseok insisted on waiting for a few days, that Chanyeol surely had a plan. How Luhan sided with his friend and Jongdae ultimately had to relent. Though he was sure his face betrayed nothing, the silence had stretched on for far too long already to be casual.
"At least it doesn't come easily to me... like it does to you." he mumbled with a lowered gaze before turning to twist the doorknob and leave. He didn't turn around to see Sehun's blank expression as he was left alone in his now quiet house.

Jongdae knew that Minseok and Luhan were out, roaming their surroundings and offering help in turn for the generous amount of food they'd been gifted. Jongdae had been planning on joining them, but with Sehun's words echoing around his head, he changed his mind, looking for Kyungsoo instead. He found the younger one just behind the house, sitting on a forgotten box in the backyard,
fully entertained by the way the slightly damp leaves of the plants around him felt under his fingertips.
"Hey Kyungsoo," Jongdae greeted him quietly, and Kyungsoo immediately looked up at him, scooting a bit to the side to make room for him. He gratefully took the opportunity, sinking down next to him, back against the house’s wall.
As always with Kyungsoo, Jongdae didn't have to say anything at all. He just sat there, letting his thoughts wander freely while Kyungsoo went back to doing his own thing, exploring the world around him.
He was just sitting there, observing Kyungsoo without really seeing him, not saying a word for what felt like an eternity. It might have been half an hour later, when Jongdae broke the silence, the dangerous little idea that had grown inside his mind over the past half hour finally wanting out.
"Kyungsoo? Aren't you tired of waiting?"
The motions stilled and Kyungsoo fully turned towards him, watching him. Jongdae almost faltered under the intense gaze.
"If I... wanted to search for Jongin and Chanyeol... right now," he began slowly, gauging Kyungsoo's blank face carefully, "would you accompany me?"
There, he'd said it. He wanted to betray his friends. A part of him wished for Kyungsoo to reprimand him, but he knew he wouldn't, that's why he'd turned towards him in the first place. Wordlessly, Kyungsoo nodded. It lighted a flicker of urgency in him. If he wanted to leave, he should do it quickly, before the others returned and noticed.
"Where do you want to search?" Kyungsoo asked, ripping him out of his short-lived reverie.
"I was thinking... we start at the camp, looking for clues?"
Kyungsoo nodded.
"Okay."
With this confirmation, Jongdae got up and his last ounce of hesitation vanished upon seeing Kyungsoo follow suit without batting an eyelash.
"Okay..." he murmured to himself, turning to make his way back into the house. He had access to a solid number of Layers by now, but Kyungsoo didn't. He felt like a thief, but he wouldn't take much of the substances. Just enough for Kyungsoo to get by. They could always return to this place and get the others after finding some hints. Yes, Jongdae told himself, this was only temporary. They'd be back soon.
The sun was already dipping low on the horizon when Jongdae and Kyungsoo knelt in their room on the first floor. He rummaged through their backpacks, hastily stuffing whatever he assumed would be useful into one of them. They had to hurry - after all, old-fashioned villages like this one usually put their work down when it became to dark to see.
Alright. A few pieces of clothing, a couple maps, but where were the substances? Jongdae's fingers just wrapped around a promising plastic bag when a familiar voice made him freeze in his tracks.
"Really now, Jongdae? What are you doing?"
He whirled around to look up at Minseok, who stood in the doorway, looking unimpressed but not exactly surprised. He should have made Kyungsoo stand guard, but he was unwilling to risk anyone getting hurt in case the unpredictable boy got provoked.
"I..." he began, fingers digging into the plastic bag Minseok couldn't see but surely knew was there.
"You?" he asked, one eyebrow raised. Jongdae gave up.
"I just wanted to go search for Chanyeol and Jongin-"
"Of course you'd want that." Minseok sighed and was that exasperation on his face? Jongdae glared at him defiantly, still unwilling to let go of the substances. Kyungsoo's eyes attentively flitted between them and he knew the boy would jump at his command, but now that Minseok had seen them, it was pointless. They needed careful calculation to shift anywhere without getting hurt and if it came down to it, Minseok was too strong of an opponent for him, maybe even for Kyungsoo.
"Don't look at me like that!" Jongdae complained with furrowed brows. He should be reasoning with his friend now, but not only did he know that it would be of no use, he was also getting angry at his
"How can we keep sitting here, wasting time? We're doing nothing but alerting the world that we're here, caging ourselves in-
"You didn't even have a plan, did you?" Minseok cut in sharply and despite himself, Jongdae snapped right back at him.
"For your information, I did, actually. I'm not completely retarded, in case you forgot!"
Kyungsoo looked at him with wide eyes, distressed over his loss of composure while Minseok took a step back immediately.
"I know you're not, Dae. We both know," he said softly, "but why don't you try to trust Chanyeol for awhile?"
Jongdae shook his head violently.
"It's not a matter of trust-"
"But it is. Just give him a few days, wait it out and he'll be back in no time-
"I waited a whole fucking year for you and you didn't come back! And if I continued to wait, you'd still be lost today!"
Minseok stared at him, all words stuck in his throat. Jongdae didn't even look him in the eye, both hands painfully digging into his own thighs.
"You are strong, too." Jongdae began, voice quiet but still cracking audibly, "you always know what you're doing. But you still didn't come back, Minseok."
He heard his friend exhaling shakily and felt the sensation of hot tears blurring his sight in a horribly familiar way. Just thinking about the days he'd spent waiting, worrying, searching. All the times he'd look twice at people with Minseok's body structure, hair color, laugh. How patience turned to doubt and finally into a never-ending feeling of guilt, eating away at him with every passing day. Every day he'd ask himself whether he'd really done everything in his might. One day everything was fine, the next a person you treasured could be gone, just like that. Jongdae had let him slip away, and he vowed to never let something like this happen ever again. Especially not to Chanyeol. He wanted him in his life.
"It's not your fault." he whispered, swallowing the heavy lump in his throat. "But everything is going downhill and people want our heads and now some invisible girl plays sick games with us. She's not here, so how do we know she's not with one of them? We should at least split up, I don't know. Just... we should try. Try our hardest, right now."
He tried to blink the unshed tears away before meeting Minseok's gaze.
"Don't you think you'd regret it if we missed the chance to save Jongin and Chanyeol?"
Minseok looked conflicted, pale and his eyes were suspiciously wet as well.
"I know I would." Jongdae continued earnestly, still sniffing and blinking, fingers working at the wet spots in the corners of his eyes.
"And I already know how it feels. It's not something time can heal. It's something that stays and grows, every. Single. Day."
Never before had Jongdae fought with Minseok. They'd had their fair share of arguments and bad days, sure, but everything would always be resolved neatly. There were no vicious words or accusations between them, and especially no tears and shouts. Jongdae was already feeling sorry for everything he'd said. He'd rarely seen Minseok lose his composure like that, and never because of him. His knuckles were white where they dug into the door frame and his expression looked upset, but also broken. He let go of the door frame and took a step towards Jongdae just as he, too, was getting to his feet.
"Dae, I-"
A loud crash resounded from downstairs, interrupting them.
Luhan's eyes wandered over the wood carvings decorating the window frame of Sehun's guest room. To him, they were rather sloppy; nothing compared to the statues he knew from home, but they were still rather cute in their own way and gave everything a comfortable atmosphere. Like a transparent film above it all, he saw cerulean sky and the bark of trees, similar to those on the green Layer. Another, slightly more transparent Layer bore nothing but darkness. Luhan tried to focus on his current surroundings but driving away the darkness only spiked his headache and he leaned back into the soft mattress with a groan, closing his eyes. He really had to keep it down with his pride. He'd put up quite the fight when Minseok insisted on him getting back to catch some rest while he kept helping the farmers, but secretly Luhan knew it was for the best. He was exhausted. Not only did he have a broken arm which hurt tremendously with every wrong move, but the constant shifting was also beginning to take its toll on him. Now, Luhan knew he wasn't particularly weak. Most people were barely able to shift more than twice a day, much less temporarily adjust to different structures all the time. He'd been wondering how far he could push his body, but it felt like he was slowly approaching the limit; he wasn't like Chanyeol the phoenix or Jongdae with his odd sensitivity - he had to take it easy the following days, giving his body some time to calm down. If he was already experiencing trouble keeping his gift, his vision in check, he knew a break was overdue. It only ever went this far when he was close to collapsing, a state that wasn't unfamiliar to Luhan, who had gone through years of ruthless training in order to be a worthy member of the palace. Obviously no one had ever known about his vision, so Luhan just had to endure the additional burden silently. Maybe his resilience was what had gotten him this far in the first place. Luhan sighed in relief. Only seers would be able to shift more than twice a day, much less temporarily adjust to different structures all the time. He'd been wondering how far he could push his body, but it felt like he was slowly approaching the limit; he wasn't like Chanyeol the phoenix or Jongdae with his odd sensitivity - he had to take it easy the following days, giving his body some time to calm down. If he was already experiencing trouble keeping his gift, his vision in check, he knew a break was overdue. It only ever went this far when he was close to collapsing, a state that wasn't unfamiliar to Luhan, who had gone through years of ruthless training in order to be a worthy member of the palace. Obviously no one had ever known about his vision, so Luhan just had to endure the additional burden silently. Maybe his resilience was what had gotten him this far in the first place. Luhan sighed in relief. Only seers would be able to understand the bliss that came with closing your eyes. Nothing but cool, blank darkness. He heard people walking around the house, padding upstairs, hushed talking but it all faded into the background as Luhan's senses slowly shut down and he dozed off.
"Finally I found you."
He startled awake instantly, sitting up with a hiss. A stranger was standing in the room, dressed in an attire Luhan knew all too well. He was from the yellow undercover unit. A trained spy. His body went rigid and he was about to call for the others when the man lifted a finger to his lips, taking a step back.
"I wasn't sent to force you back to the kingdom. I'm here with a proposal from a candidate to the throne."
Luhan hesitated, though he refrained from calling for help. He didn't even know whether there was anyone around, anyway. Slowly, he got to his feet, though he took great care in being out of the spy's reach. His basic education in the martial arts didn't stand a chance against the government's spy - they were basically trained assassins.
"Which candidate are you referring to?" he asked warily, wishing the man would take off his face mask so he could try to gauge his reactions.
"It's Huang Shengyi, though I hardly see how it matters."
Luhan resisted the urge to tilt his head in a manner of spite. It obviously mattered, seeing as Huang Shengyi despised Luhan for everything he was. Being a direct child of the former emperor she had the right to openly show her dislike towards Luhan, who was born of low status and reached his position by working harder than she'd probably ever had to in her life. To Luhan's secret glee, she had to hold herself on a leash around the emperor himself though, since her father had always been quite fond of him, no matter how many subtle jabs she'd make. Her lack of hard work was probably showing now, with people competing for the throne. Their people weren't silly, and Shengyi obviously never cared too much about the ordinary folk.
"What could she possibly desire from me?" Luhan asked, his voice quiet but sharp. The spy that really was more of a messenger it seemed, wore a hard gaze, unimpressed at the display of attitude. "She offers to take you back, let you return to the palace, regardless of whether she is going to be chosen or not. The charges of treason will be let off as well."
Luhan couldn't keep the suspicious look off his face.
"On which premise?"
"You'll merely have to offer your services to the kingdom," the messenger replied, almost spitting the word 'services', making very clear what he thought of Luhan's ability to see. Luhan stared at him. It was the one thing he'd never wanted. On the other hand, it would be a chance to see his mothers again. Not now, obviously. Right now they had to retrieve Jongin. There was the possibility of the yellow kingdom backing him up on this but no, this was a bad idea.
"It should be a given, providing your abilities for the kingdom." the messenger added with narrowed eyes.
Luhan unconsciously took half a step back. Suddenly, he recalled the face of Huang Shengyi, looking at him with open spite. Being at the beck and call of such a person, becoming a tool for a whole nation...
"No."
"No?" the messenger repeated in disbelief.
Luhan stared back defiantly.
"I refuse."
He might be able to see his mothers again, but what use would it be if he wouldn't be able to look them in the eye, having become the nation's dog?
"Is that your final statement?"
Luhan nodded, stance firm.
"That's unfortunate." the messenger said, reaching into his pocket.
"Because if that's the case, I'll hereby punish you for treason against our kingdom."
Luhan was already stumbling backwards when the spy pulled out a knife, face distorting in what must be a grin. There was no weapon he'd be able to use with his left hand and in a spur of the moment, Luhan frantically pulled at a shelf on the wall next to him. It did fall, but way too slowly. Before it could bury the enemy, he'd ducked below the falling wood, flying at Luhan, whose back crashed into the closed door that he was pinned up against, twisting his broken arm painfully. White, hot pain blinded all his senses temporarily as he screamed in pain.
"If you refuse to see for the kingdom, I'll take back the eyes it gave you-"
Through his teary-eyed vision, Luhan saw a blinking knife being raised to his face and then everything turned red.

A shrill scream followed the thud and it startled both Jongdae and Minseok into action.
"Luhan." Minseok breathed and bolted for the door, Kyungsoo on his heels. Jongdae quickly reached for Minseok's gun and followed. He heard more crashes and when he'd reached the bottom of the stairs, Kyungsoo had broken down the door. He called out to Minseok and threw the gun over to his friend, who caught it in one fluid motion, aiming at someone clad in black who vanished right away. While he stayed alert, checking their surroundings, Jongdae collapsed next to Luhan. There was so much blood smeared across his face that he couldn't even see the source. Luhan kept wailing in pain, his healthy hand covering the bloody mess over his eyes.
"I can't see-"
"Calm down Luhan, stop touching the wounds, we gotta bandage them-" Jongdae began, already frantically looking around.
"I can't see, Jongdae! Jongdae- don't go away, don't-" Luhan all but screamed, his free hand grabbing Jongdae's shirt and the additional pain of moving his injured arm ripped another whimper out of him. Jongdae felt the panic like a shower of ice-cold water.
"Kyungsoo! Help Jongdae carry him, we gotta bring him to the sick station!" Minseok barked and
everyone followed his command. Luhan didn't even hear them and kept clawing at Jongdae as they heaved him up. On their way out, they ran into Junmyeon, who gasped and tried his best to help and coax Minseok to let go of the weapon. Jongdae didn't pay their bickering any heed. Luhan lay heavy in his arms and he tried not to stare at his face with little success. But the worst were the words flowing from his mouth, in a never-ending string of helpless hysteria.

_I can't see. I think he cut my eyes._
_I might be turning blind._
_Don't go away, I don't know where I am._
_I can't see anything, Jongdae._
_It's all red._

Jongdae kept talking, kept assuring him that they'd treat him, that surely there was a way to save him, that he wouldn't leave him now. They made it to the sick station where Yixing had been lingering. He was by Luhan's side in a second, getting to work with a shocked nurse. Luhan kept thrashing, and Jongdae tried his best to keep him still with both words and his hands while Minseok steadied his legs.

"I can barely see anything but he definitely needs stitches, possibly surgery. I don't have anything here though." he said just loud enough for everyone to hear, placing a wet rag over Luhan's face.

"I can stitch him up but he really needs to get to a hospital."

"Then we'll go to one." Junmyeon suddenly stated.

"We'll go to the cyan hospital and get him treated, right now."

"No!" Luhan wailed indignantly.

"We can't go there, they're looking for us!"

"I don't care." Junmyeon gave back strictly, nodding towards the nurse.

"Prepare a few shots of Cyan, we're leaving."

"But-"

"No, Luhan. No buts. We will go there and patch you up and you'll be my responsibility. There is nothing to worry about."

The nurse was already placing the syringe in the crook of Luhan's neck. He barely twitched at the prick, too overwhelmed with pain and Jongdae wondered whether he'd make it to Cyan. The nurse was about to prepare a second shot when Minseok heaved Luhan off the table all on his own.

"Enough. Jongdae, you go first, we'll follow as soon as we can, we've got no time for this!" he yelled, already crossing the room with a moaning Luhan, and with a quick nod, Jongdae jumped to his feet, following them.

"Good idea." Junmyeon curtly said, striding forwards and tapping away on the pager fixed around his wrist.

"I'll call up some people to get us from the platform."

Jongdae nodded, trailing after them with quick steps. A hand grabbed his upper arm but made no move to stop him and he turned to see Kyungsoo looking tense. He squeezed his shoulder, trying not to fall behind.

"It's okay, Kyungsoo. You just stay with Min, and then you'll follow later, yeah?" Jongdae babbled, still in his comforter-mode. They'd reached the platform, and gently put Luhan down. He was still moaning in pain and confusion, one free hand reaching out blindly.

"Jongdae?"

He immediately rushed to his side, kneeling next to him and touching his healthy arm.

"I'm here. We'll go to Cyan now. Can you do that?" he asked as gently as possible, and Luhan whimpered.

"I don't know. To be honest, it's been difficult to shift-"

"Yeah, but this is just Cyan. We've been there before, it's easier than usual. You're extremely strong, Luhan. You can do this."

"Okay..." he whispered, and now that he was sitting, it was even more obvious that he was shaking from head to toe. _Okay_, he repeated to himself over and over again. For a second, Jongdae feared he
wouldn't make it, but then he finally vanished and with a curt goodbye, Junmyeon went with him. Jongdae closed his eyes and was about to shift himself, when Kyungsoo urgently shook his shoulder. His eyelids fluttered open again and he was met with Kyungsoo's wide, serious orbs. "I'll follow later, with Minseok. It's okay." he insisted and Jongdae nodded. Only now, with Kyungsoo's comforting security keeping him together did he notice that he, too, had been shaking, almost as bad as Luhan.
"Yes. Please do so." Jongdae uttered with a crooked grin. He shared one last, meaningful look with Minseok before shifting over to Cyan, right in the middle of hectic people running around to get Luhan treated with Junmyeon giving commands left and right. He squeezed himself past everyone, ignoring every protest until Luhan's fingers were tightly intertwined with his. He didn't let go all the way to the hospital and only let them take Luhan away when he was sure the sedatives had kicked in, rendering the boy unconscious. Then he was left staring at white doors, both his hand and mind feeling shockingly empty.
Chapter 20

Time trickled by. Days were broken down to hours, to minutes. Tao felt every single one of them looming over him, dripping down on him agonizingly slowly. It was awful, but not as awful as it was during his 'phases'. When the world turned into nothing but a miserable whirlwind of colors and pain, stretching the seconds to a point where Tao waited for them to snap, for him to snap.

Sometimes, he regretted still being able to feel time picking up again. Regretted not ending it during the last rush of pain. But whenever it did come, he found himself too weak to do it. Physically weak, but also mentally.

He didn't want to die.

And then he'd think of that awful guy with the foxy eyes and condescending snark. The one who had pushed and tortured him, taunted him. It made him angry and at the same time appalled by his own body for betraying him by cowering at this guy's feet. Even though he truly loathed him, his body would crouch in the dust at his dominant appearance. Dominance he'd learned to obey to. His body was still hoping for a reward, while his mind knew it was pointless. The guy didn't have his treat and even if he did, he'd rather let him starve to death than hand it over. Tao couldn't remember the last time his mind had not been able to keep up. Before all this, it used to be his body that was too weak to follow what his mind demanded. Too weak to jump higher, to be alert, to be good, flawless even. Now that his body was perfectly steeled, his mind was lacking. Too weak to take control over his conditioned body.

Is it fun to be breakable?

Tao hissed quietly at the memory, his fingers balling into a fist. The guy hadn't visited him in a long time, and while this should make him happy, he was still in just as much pain as before, and the walls of his cell did nothing to distract him. His stomach was twisting, and he could still feel the sour bile from the last time he'd thrown up what meager food he'd managed to swallow before. Cold sweat was running down his neck, and his limbs were still twitching from time to time.

Long story short, he felt awful. And the worst above it all was that there wasn't even an end to look forward to. This wasn't a punishment someone had set up for him; it was his own body punishing him. Even if it were to stop miraculously, he was still sitting in a cell with no prospect of freedom. And even if he'd be set free, he had absolutely no ambitions. Where was he supposed to go, what would he do?

The door creaked open, and he lazily lifted his gaze, expecting another guard with a tablet of food. Instead of the sturdy armor, his eyes raked up a pair of dress pants and a simple woolen pullover. With a confused frown, he raised his gaze even further to meet clear eyes peeking out below a soft fringe. This man wasn't from here. He was pretty sure he'd never seen him before.

"Hello. I'm Junmyeon."

His voice was just as clear as it was soft, high but pleasant as it echoed into his cell. Without the slightest sign of fear, he stepped inside, stopping just before Tao's feet. He didn't crouch down on Tao's eye level, preferring to look down at him. There was no haughtiness mirrored in his eyes, but Tao still felt a spark of familiar submission running through his veins. He was no stranger to authority, by all means, but there was something different about this man. It was a silent, gentle kind of authority. Almost soothing. Quiet confidence instead of harsh words or even punches.

"Someone told me about you..."

A milky white hand - that had obviously never succumbed to hard labor before - was offered to him.

"You need a new owner?"

Tao stared at him, and the stranger held his gaze steadily. He thought back to the foxy guy, Minseok, who would probably kick him with disgust written all over his face, knowing what he was about to do. But he didn't understand, Tao needed this. His hand was already reaching out to the man he knew nothing about, but before their fingers could touch, the man drew them away, just a bit. Tao flinched, searching his eyes. Was he playing with him? His last shred of lucidity told him that he was
feeling attached already, that he was being desperate. "I won't reward you with the same treats you've gotten before," Junmyeon announced seriously, and Tao's expression dropped the slightest in disappointment, "because I'm a different type of owner. Different treats from a different owner. You still want it?"

He didn't sound menacing, not even challenging. It was a friendly, genuine question. To Tao, there was nothing to think about. It was too tempting. He didn't want freedom. He needed this. So he nodded with almost hopeful eyes, his hand still outstretched, waiting. "Use your words."

The imperative washed over him like cool water over his burnt out mind. "Yes. I'd like that. A lot." he breathed out, and with a tiny smile, Junmyeon, his new owner, took his hand. A real handshake, as if he was merely introducing himself to a fellow business partner and hadn't just decided to take Tao away from this horrible place.

"Aren't you gonna ask him what he needs you for first? Jeez. You're cheap." an unfamiliar voice piped up and Tao's eyes flew to the door, where a lanky guy was leaning in the doorway. He looked thoroughly judgmental. Junmyeon didn't even turn and simply smiled a little wider to himself. "It's nice to see you changed your mind, Sehun."

The boy sneered, and Tao already felt a streak of protectiveness. This was his new owner the guy was insulting. "Tss. Whatever fantasies help you sleep at night. I don't intend to help you."

Tao saw his new owner rolling his eyes good-naturedly and heard him mutter an exasperated 'brat' under his breath. Unsure of what was going on and how he was supposed to react, Tao looked between the two males. "I'm merely making sure you're treating him right."

Tao was about to tell the guy off, tell him he didn't need his help. After all, he didn't even know him. But before he could hiss at the condescending boy, Junmyeon had opened the cuffs around Tao's ankles and turned towards that Sehun guy. "That's nice. You better watch closely, then. Mind lending me a hand? I think his foot is still injured and you're about his height."

Tao wanted to let them know that he could very well walk on his own, but Sehun seemed determined to ignore his attempts at pushing him off. Tao ultimately gave in to the gangly boy steadying his side, but since his limp had gotten weak and Tao was both prideful and stubborn, he tried to rely as little on the other as possible. Unfortunately, Sehun proved himself to be equally as stubborn, and from an outsider's perspective, it must have looked like two friends walking together closely. Junmyeon didn't seem to be bothered in the least. He did throw a look back at them once in awhile, but the sight just made him smile. "I have a feeling that the two of you are going to get along well."

Tao begged to differ, but he didn't say anything. Never speak up against your owner. And what a gentle owner he was. He'd never experienced this feeling with his previous owners, but with Junmyeon, he already had the inkling that he'd follow his orders not for a treat, but for one of his smiles. They were strangely rewarding.

The hospital walls were colored in a very light cyan, and though it was subtle, Jongdae felt like it gave everything a slightly sickly quality. He'd caught glimpses of the operation room when they'd pushed Luhan inside a little over an hour ago, and at least the walls in that room had been blissfully white. He leaned his head against the wall with a sigh, and the movement jostled Kyungsoo, who
readjusted himself, looping his arm a little tighter around Jongdae's. He didn't snuggle up to Jongdae like he'd done before, but his mere presence was enough to calm Jongdae a little. On his other side sat Yixing, who looked stoically calm, slumped slightly in his seat. When Minseok and the others had joined Jongdae, Yixing had been wearing a face mask and clothes that looked like they belonged to Sehun: a leather jacket and slightly ripped jeans replacing the crumpled dress pants and lab coat, tousled hair and faint makeup contrasting his earlier, bare appearance. It looked unusual on the mature, mild-mannered man, but so far, no one had recognized him as a former medic and though the disguise was far from perfect, Yixing made up for it with surprisingly good acting and body language.

Unlike the three of them, Minseok was standing across the hallway, leaning against the wall with his eyes continuously scanning their surroundings. Jongdae could see how exhausted he was by the way his eyelids fluttered and muscles tensed occasionally; it was a habit of his to try and regain focus. He also knew that it was pointless to try and convince him to rest. Jongdae had had a talk with Junmyeon earlier, while they were waiting for the others. Now, the politician wasn't with them anymore but had reassured them that there was nothing to worry about - the Cyan main laboratories were huge and monitored; on top of that, he'd gotten the highest people onto this matter, even mentioning the Layer's main representative Ryeowook. Meanwhile, he'd rushed the process of serving a warrant of arrest for Seungri and made sure everyone knew. Jongdae was highly impressed by all the connections and organizational skills; seeing one of the most influential men in the world make things work was fascinating.

Still, no matter how clean and well-managed everything looked - it would never be enough to coax Minseok into letting his guard down. Jongdae would never truly know what was going on inside his best friend's head. Whether the aftermath of his addiction had left him paranoid or caused other permanent changes to his persona... Jongdae had his fair share of assumptions, but only time would truly tell.

When the doors of the operation room opened, Jongdae jumped to his feet immediately, startling Kyungsoo into following along.

A middle-aged, female doctor greeted them, looking for Junmyeon and settling for Jongdae when she couldn't find him.

"I can't have this talk with all of you but rest assured, your friend is alright." she said curtly and he saw Minseok finally sitting down, a bit of tension resolving in relief. Jongdae nodded, quickly told Kyungsoo to wait and quietly assigned both him and Yixing the important job of keeping an eye on Minseok, before following the doctor into an empty office room.

"He has been extremely lucky or quick-witted. His face has been severely cut up, but his eyes or nerves around the eyes have been spared. His eyesight won't be affected."

Jongdae exhaled in relief. Luhan isn't blind. The doctor gave him a small smile before continuing in a distant, professional tone.

"The way his arms and the side of his face have been cut suggests that he'd put up quite the fight. A lot of blood ran into his eyes, but that's nothing we couldn't fix. The cuts required a large amount of stitches, and in order to keep the muscles in and around his eyes from moving too much, he's currently wearing eye patches. Mr. Kim also told us he has seeing abilities, so it's even more crucial to give his eyes some rest, for psychological reasons as well. He's already suffered from severe shock due to the traumatic experience, but overall, he's taken it very well. However, it is advised you keep him a lot of company throughout the following days just to ease the stress. We've also taken a look at his arm, and while the initial treatment might have been suitable, during this fight he fractured yet another bone and we've applied a professional splint. I'll give you the scans and further information, but it won't contain anything other than what I just told you, just written in medical terms."

Jongdae nodded and was so focused on keeping all the information together that he almost ran into a guy waiting outside the doctor's office.

"Oh. I'm sorry." he mumbled distractedly, but the man touched his upper arm, willing him to stay.

"Don't worry about it. Are you Kim Jongdae?"

Only then did Jongdae look up from the report to truly look at the stranger. He wasn't extraordinarily
tall like Chanyeol or Yifan, but his carefully tailored black suit and shiny shoes made him look rather imposing. A polite smile was directed at him, and Jongdae warily nodded, eyes drawn to the tiny red brooch adorning his suit. Sensing his distress, the man offered his hand.

"I'm representative Choi Siwon. I've heard your story and would like to have a talk with you."

Jongdae still hesitated - after all, this was the official partner of Seungri - but Choi Siwon leaned in, his voice dropping an octave.

"Look, I've always had nothing but trouble with my co-representative. I think I can speak for both of us when I tell you I hope he'll get arrested as quick as possible. But there are other important matters that require our attention. I'm asking you to listen to me, nothing more."

Jongdae finally nodded, though he did take a step back as well. This guy wouldn't try anything funny in the middle of the hospital, right? As if on cue, the other shot him another overly polite smile.

"Just the two of us? So your companions can keep your injured friend company?"

"I'll... have to ask them first." Jongdae replied evasively, fiddling with the reports in his hands. The politician smiled.

"Of course. Meet me in office 2406, at five? I'll be there, waiting."

And the way he said it made Jongdae nervous for reasons he couldn't explain. Choi Siwon was all polite smiles, but his senses were tingling nonetheless.

Jongdae had originally been on time, but the seconds ticked by as he anxiously stared at the closed office door. He'd talked to the others and came to the conclusion that yes, he would listen to what this Siwon guy had to say. It was fishy that he only wanted to talk to Jongdae, but then again, he had been the one initially arriving with Junmyeon, so maybe that was the reason behind it.

They'd still alerted the security about their plans, in case something odd happened. Jongdae took a deep breath and finally knocked on the door. It was an ordinary-looking doctor's office, but the way Siwon sat behind the desk looked natural, as if he'd been doing this for years. After meeting Junmyeon, Jongdae shouldn't be too surprised by this oddly particular, attention-seeking aura. Maybe it came with being granted so much power.

"I'm glad you decided to come." he greeted him not unkindly, offering Jongdae a seat across him. It was an odd surrounding for a meeting with the highest politician of the red Layer, but said politician didn't seem to mind, casually resting his chin on the back of his hand.

"Let's start out slowly. I don't know whether you've ever paid a visit to Red, but I'm sure the news and your encounter with Lee Seungri were enough to leave a negative impression on you." he began, regret clear in his expression.

"You could say that." Jongdae replied noncommittally. He may not be as great of an actor as Chanyeol or Baekhyun, but he didn't have to act, strictly-speaking.

He just had to trust his instincts and not give away too much.

"I thought so. You see, my role as a representative is to try and change these unfortunate circumstances for the better. Day in and out I'm working on this, but said politician didn't seem to mind, casually resting his chin on the back of his hand.

"Let's start out slowly. I don't know whether you've ever paid a visit to Red, but I'm sure the news and your encounter with Lee Seungri were enough to leave a negative impression on you." he began, regret clear in his expression.

"You could say that." Jongdae replied noncommittally. He may not be as great of an actor as Chanyeol or Baekhyun, but he didn't have to act, strictly-speaking.

He just had to trust his instincts and not give away too much.

"I thought so. You see, my role as a representative is to try and change these unfortunate circumstances for the better. Day in and out I'm working on this, and as you may know, it's quite the workload we're talking about. Fighting the crime scene alone could've occupied both me and Seungri, if Seungri had ever bothered to do so."

"Instead of merrily participating." Jongdae threw in, unable to help it. The smile on Siwon's face wavered, but he decided not to respond to this jab.

"I haven't given up on Red yet. We may need a lot more regulations and rules, but I believe that there's still hope to one day retrieve our spot in the ranking, at least."

Jongdae nodded, not sure where this shallow, political talk was headed to.

"Now that Seungri's crimes are being unveiled, I came across some information on a very special criminal we've been searching for a long time already. Someone who has long passed the healthy ability to shift and turned into something deformed. No one has ever seen this person, but there have been a few instances where an alarming amount of substances were stolen."

Jongdae stared at him unblinkingly, trying to keep the shock off his face.

"Some doctor confessed to the crime, but at the same time insisted that he was being used by someone else."
That wasn't entirely true. Yixing had never said that - rather than that, he'd doubted his own sanity. "We have a certain suspicion about the true identity of the criminal. You see, Seungri's been involved with a street gang called 2-1, formerly led by two women."

Jongdae nodded patiently, obviously not mentioning how this was not new to him. Siwon raised an eyebrow as if waiting for Jongdae to put two and two together. "Formerly led by two women," he repeated, tapping a finger on his documents, "today, only one of them is left. The second one, a young woman going by the alias Krystal, vanished years ago." He turned the documents around to show Jongdae the profile of a red-haired woman with white skin, light freckles and slim built. There was no doubt. This was the person Kyungsoo had claimed to see around him ever so often. Jongdae shivered at the thought of her being around right now. Now that he could place an actual face to the unknown culprit, the issue felt more real and unsettling - her gaze was piercing, her overall expression a mix between sadness and brusqueness. She may have a fragile build, but looked intimidating nonetheless.

"If we trust the protocol we found in Seungri's possession, she formed a romantic relationship with one of their customers, called Lee Taemin, who managed to share his drug addiction with her. The boy left shortly after, but the drugs stayed, like they usually do. She's said to have had a variety of anomalies before the whole ordeal already, but with the consummation of drugs, the traits were enhanced and went out of control."

Anomalies. Jongdae swallowed. Right, that was what the public called people whose senses expanded beyond their current Layer. People who could see or shift, people like Luhan and Jongin... and Chanyeol. And him. Anomalies, all of them. Anomalies to be hunted down, irregularities one had to smooth out.

"Following some disagreements between the two women, Krystal finally left, and no one ever saw her again. That happened a little over three years ago." Siwon concluded, looking at Jongdae with serious concern.

"The pattern of these recent happenings point towards her, according to the protocol and considering the fact that she's a variable with unknown power."

Jongdae's eyes flitted back to the paper, blinking. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, but unlike Siwon, Jongdae had actual proof that it was true. Kyungsoo and Minseok had proven this girl existed, and the photo confirmed her identity. He had no intention of sharing those bits of information with Siwon though; he was obviously holding back on information, as well.

"Why are you telling me this? It has nothing to do with us." he said instead, gauging his reaction. The small, polite smile was flawless. Way too flawless.

"Of course it doesn't. But I've heard from Junmyeon that you and your friends are... in a bit of trouble." He made a vague snapping gesture, and Jongdae felt his eyebrow twitch in annoyance.

"That doesn't exactly answer my question."

"No, it doesn't. But I was hoping that you could help me get a hold of this person. She needs to be arrested and I figured you and your friends might be the best choice for this venture."

"And why would you think that?" Jongdae asked with open skepticism.

"Well, I got the impression you're much more... Resourceful and clever. Just how much did he know?"

"What would that be?"

"I was thinking about an official victim protection program. It looks like you've been chased by misfortune and misunderstandings. A protection program would ensure your security, both physically and prosecution-wise."
Jongdae stared at him, slowly digesting the meaning of this. This guy wanted them to catch Krystal and offered them protection in return. He almost laughed. What déjà-vu. Just like it had started out with Luhan. It was happening all over again. To what extents would they have to go in order to earn forgiveness from a world they had done nothing to?

He was thinking of Sehun, who had been facing the exact same problem and chose a reclusive life. Jongdae didn't want that. He didn't want to hide away. He'd immediately take the punishment he deserved, but the world didn't want to punish them for the very few times they'd actually stolen something - the world wanted to punish them for who they were. And Jongdae would never give in to that. So he shot him the coolest look he could muster, leaning back in his chair himself.

"I don't think my friends are interested in that. We don't want protection and observation, we'd like to be left alone."

He was acting in the spur of the moment now, but Minseok had told him to trust his instincts.

"If we retrieve this Krystal person for you - and I'm saying if... we would like it if none of the officials came looking for us ever again. Should we commit a crime, feel free to come for us. Otherwise, please don't."

Siwon looked taken aback by his sudden display of attitude, but agreed almost instantly.

"Of course. If that's what you wish."

Jongdae got to his feet first, and the other only spoke up when he was halfway to the door.

"We know her location. Just let me know and something shall be arranged."

With a simple nod, Jongdae left. The Cyan main hospital was a huge complex, giving him quite some time to think before he could reach Luhan's room. This Siwon person was more than suspicious. He was too vague, agreed way too quickly. But whatever his intentions were, he knew where Krystal was. That was definitely an important piece of information. Something told him that they should do it. If this woman caused all their mysterious problems, it would be logical to put a stop to it, regardless of the benefit others might gain from it.

He stopped in front of Luhan's room and knocked once, very gently, before pushing the door open a fraction.

"Come in?"

Luhan's voice was soft and probing.

"It's me, Jongdae." he introduced quietly, closing the door to take a seat next to him.

"Oh."

White bandages were covering Luhan's eyes, and he looked shockingly fragile. With all the things going on, all the dirt and occasional blood sticking to his skin, Jongdae had almost forgotten how delicate he'd originally looked. Now that he was cleaned and wrapped up in white, it became apparent again.

"Is the pain bearable?" Jongdae asked, mainly to start a conversation and distract Luhan from his misery.

"Yeah. The methods they use here are very professional." Luhan breathed out. He sounded dull, more resigned than actually tired, and Jongdae placed his hand on the translator's upper arm. He initially flinched, but let it happen without protest.

"I hate the bandages." he added, sounding unusually small. Jongdae figured it was only natural - taking the eyesight from a seer was probably the most terrifying experience imaginable, not to mention that he was on foreign and possibly dangerous territory.

"It's just for a few days." Jongdae replied simply.

"We'll be your agreeable short-sighted eyes in the meantime."

Luhan hummed, and Jongdae's eyes wandered through the room. There was nothing remarkable about it. Just one lonely machine that wasn't even used and no other patients. It felt empty, even without closing his eyes.

"Your hair is still colorful, you know?" Jongdae conversationally said, flicking at one of the soft, strawberry blonde strands. Since Baekhyun had dyed it, they had shifted multiple times, and while Minseok and Chanyeol had returned to their original hair color, Luhan still wore the skillfully blended, creamy colors. Baekhyun had mentioned how it was incredibly hard to take along the color.
"Isn't it all washed out by now?"
"Only a little."
"That's good, then."

Hearing Luhan so placid and docile was upsetting, to say the least.
"You really gave up on denying how much you love it, huh? Baekhyun will be delighted to hear that." Jongdae teased, and in retaliation, Luhan blindly swatted at him with his right arm. Jongdae caught it mid-air, before it could hit the metal tray next to the bed.
"Woah there, take it easy tiger." Jongdae joked, ready to let go of him, but Luhan's fingers reached around until he could grasp Jongdae's hand and carefully place it at his side. With a faint smile, Jongdae squeezed his fingers.
"Just for a bit, okay?" Luhan asked quietly, and Jongdae hummed in agreement. It was rare to see Luhan seek affection like this. For a couple minutes, it was quiet. Jongdae knew Luhan would eventually pester him to fill him in on what Siwon had proposed, but he was more than ready to indulge him in this rare moment of vulnerability.
"I was pretty surprised, you know?" Jongdae finally broke the silence. Luhan turned his head the tiniest bit to indicate he was listening.
"That you called for me."
A tiny, soundless laugh escaped Luhan.
"You expected me to call Kyungsoo?"
"Well, no," Jongdae retorted with a small smile tugging at his lips, "but what about Minseok? I figured you'd prefer him over me."
"You make it sound like I really dislike you." Luhan hummed, quite amused himself.
"You did, at first."
"That's such a long time ago though..."
Jongdae didn't reply, patiently waiting for Luhan to speak up again.
"It's... not easy to explain. I do have a tighter bond with Minseok, and there's no doubt he would rush in to fight off any enemy but you... you are the one to rush in and hold other people's hands, you know? Just like now? I guess I needed that. Sorry if that doesn't make a lot of sense to you."
"Oh no, it makes perfect sense." Jongdae argued gently, looking at their intertwined hands.
"There are many ways to care."
"You would know. You care about everyone." Luhan accused him, but it was all in good nature.
"As if you don't."
A soft chuckle led to silence.
Jongdae stared at the blank walls. Being in this room for such a short time span was enough to sharpen his own senses, and by now, he heard the constant hum of the stark halogen lamp fixed into the ceiling.
"Did I ever apologize for treating you so rudely the first time we met?" Luhan suddenly piped up, making Jongdae grin fondly at the memory, back when Luhan had had nothing but a look of disdain on his face. What had become of him, if people pointing a lance to his face were considered good old times already?
"Even if you had, I wouldn't mind you repeating it. Kidding. We're good, man."
Luhan made an unconvinced noise, and Jongdae shifted a bit, until his upper body rested on the mattress. He could just as well get comfortable, since he was probably going to be here for a little longer.
"Really, I should apologize. I don't know whether Jongin counts, since being a shifter is something different altogether, but you were the first person I ever met from the outside. Kinda shocking, isn't it? That we from the yellow Layer call all foreigners 'outsiders'. And so silly that I still say 'we', though I'll clearly never be able to return."
"I'm sorry about that."
"And I'm sorry that I feel sorry about it." Luhan only replied, sounding tired.
"Maybe it's because I started at the bottom, maybe it's because I've always been a seer... but I always felt like our kingdom wasn't ideal. It worked, maybe even quite well, but... there's just so much more
to the world. Actually experiencing it is amazing. Every little detail, all the different people - but it still hurts, knowing that I'm not welcomed back in my home, even though it shaped me into the person I am now."

Jongdae could only hum in agreement. For once, he could empathize - he, too, was amazed by the many facets of every Layer and he, too, could probably never return home, though he hadn't been banished. Still, there were too many people after them at this point. There was no way to predict whether he could ever show himself at home without endangering his family and friends.

"I just wish there was finally some improvement regarding the relationship between my home and the rest of the world... does it have to be this Utopian?" Luhan asked, and the desperation in his voice was the resigned type.

"When I grew up, my mothers always encouraged me to look further, to go beyond, to keep fighting..."

"You never disappointed them, right?" Jongdae threw in gently.

"You always fought for what you felt was right. You always looked further than the norms drilled inside your head, never got angry when people questioned your culture. Always curious about anything and everything... I'm sure your mothers are proud."

"Yeah, but Jongdae..."

"Hmm?"

"Somehow, I still don't wanna give up like this. Do you think it'd be foolish to press on?"

Even after his home had basically shunned him, Luhan was still unwilling to let go of what he'd intended to fight for all his life. Jongdae earnestly thought about it, recalling the way the servants had flocked around them with the very same curiosity he'd seen in Luhan's eyes when Chanyeol had explained colloquial expressions to him.

"Not at all. I don't think it's foolish. Tough probably, but not foolish."

A quick glance told him the translator was smiling.

"Okay."

"You should get some rest. Then we'll snatch back Jongin and Chanyeol so we can get back to the political stuff."

"What makes you think you'd be of help?" Luhan asked cheekily, and Jongdae hummed pensively.

"If you'd prefer Baekhyun's help-"

"God, no. He'd ignite a war."

Jongdae chuckled.

"Thought so."

Luhan was dozing, still weakened by the sedatives, when Minseok peeked inside the room, Kyungsoo in tow. They shared a meaningful look, and Jongdae waved Kyungsoo over with his free hand, gesturing for him to take his place and hold Luhan's hand instead.

"Keep a close eye on him, okay?" he whispered into his ear, and though Kyungsoo looked a little reluctant to be left out, he still nodded. Jongdae gratefully ruffled his hair, and when he joined Minseok in the hallway, Kyungsoo had already positioned himself beside the sleeping boy, looking seriously concentrated.

The door closed with a soft click, and Jongdae sighed.

"Is he doing okay?" Minseok asked, offering him a steaming cup of coffee.

"Of course. He's too stubborn to be down for long." Jongdae half-joked, wrapping his hands around the wonderfully warm plastic cup.

Minseok shot him a crooked grin and set off, walking down the hallway.

"Our nurse tipped me off regarding a place to talk." he mentioned casually, and Jongdae nodded into his coffee. It was disgustingly sweet - just the way he liked it.

"You don't like Lay all that much, do you?" Jongdae piped up, the fake alias rolling off his tongue naturally, and Minseok snorted.

"It's nothing like that."

"Sure it's not."
They left it at that, both rather exhausted. Jongdae wondered whether Yixing would wait for them anywhere, but when they reached the secluded terrace on one of the higher floors, he was nowhere in sight. Jongdae gracelessly plopped down on the stone floor, causing his coffee to sway precariously as he leaned against a wall and groaned in relief. Relief over being alone, over getting room to breathe and time to think. Minseok obviously shared his sentiments, relaxing for once. "We really don't get a break, do we?" Jongdae complained half-heartedly, and Minseok shrugged with a nonchalant quirk of his eyebrow.

"Guess not. Wouldn't want life to be too easy, now would we?"

"Are you really sure we're alone here?" Jongdae asked, looking around, unconvinced.

"If we trust the doctor, it's a yes. The walls are obviously soundproof and there are neither cameras, windows nor other balconies within hearing range. But who could even tell whether we're truly alone or not at this point?" he trailed off, reaching inside a plastic bag for a few packed hot dogs. They were still warm and therefore perfect in every way. Jongdae all but wolfed down his first one, reveling in the rarity of remotely warm food. Only after he'd washed away the taste with another gulp of coffee, did he decide to confront the problem at hand.

"Alright. Let's recapitulate."

Licking his lips, Jongdae looked into the distance as he gathered the facts. He'd never been one to plan or keep protocol, but if there was one thing he'd learned from Minseok over the past weeks, it was that recapitulation was necessary. Direly so, to be specific. All this information made his head spin.

"Okay. Jongin has been taken by Seungri. We don't know where to. Chanyeol has left-"

"Presumably to get Jongin and disperse the attention." Minseok cut in, and Jongdae looked at him fleetingly. He seemed so sure about that, it was comforting.

"Presumably to get Jongin, alright," he repeated, "and Chanyeol probably knows where Jongin is. He took the documents. On the other end, Seungri is being searched by the officials now, while his fellow politician wants us to take out Krystal."

Minseok shot him a questioning look, but waited patiently for Jongdae to gather his thoughts.

"Krystal is the ex-partner of Chaerin, whom we've met. She's a drug addict who has supposedly a lot of genetic quirks. We obviously witnessed those first hand since she's been messing with us for a fucking long time."

Nodding along, Minseok picked up where he left off.

"If our observations so far are true... she first stuck around me, but for some reason, got more interested in you instead. She somehow influenced you like she influenced the doctor."

"Yeah." Jongdae breathed out, taking another sip of his coffee, willing the upcoming headache away.

"I used to think it was all about hallucinations, but then there was this incident on the yellow Layer and it all seemed pretty real to me."

"Then again, that one was a fucking nightmare." Minseok mumbled, reaching for a second hot dog.

"True. Alright, what does this woman want? She plays around with us, steals substances and causes an epidemic? What for?"

"Maybe she's just fucked up. Who knows what kinda drugs she's on." Minseok spat bitterly, but didn't seem like he was truly convinced himself.

"Either way, this Siwon guy offers us some shit about protection if we catch her and yes, I know that this is some major nonsense right there," Jongdae quickly stated at the sight of exasperation on his friend's face, "but he knows where Krystal is, and we should probably actually stop her, right? Not for his sake, but for ours."

Minseok didn't reply to that, and Jongdae opened his second hot dog.

"That... should be everything. I don't know the specifics about the whole shady business in those research departments, but I think it's obvious someone should stay with Luhan. I don't trust this place at all."

When Minseok still didn't reply, he shot him a suspicious look.

"What? What are you not telling me?"
Minseok sighed.
"A letter arrived at Sehun's village. Anonymous. It said 'he didn't come home'."
Jongdae paused and let the cup sink into his lap.

*He didn't come home.*

It could only be from-
"Baekhyun? Yeah, that's what I think, too. Technically, he's the only one out of all of us who has anything remotely close to a home." Minseok stated with a crooked grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.
"Who's 'he' though? Chanyeol? It can only be Chanyeol." Jongdae murmured, and he wasn't sure whether he was relieved about how Chanyeol did apparently have a plan and survived... or worried that something had gone wrong.

Minseok attentively gauged his reaction, maybe expecting Jongdae to do something irrational again, but things were different now. Luhan was injured and they were in the Cyan hospital, which equaled to being on a silver platter for everyone to see. Jongdae never intended to endanger the others on his quest to find Chanyeol. He knew it wouldn't be in the phoenix' interest, either. So he tapped his thigh absently, thinking carefully.

"So..." he finally began in a thoughtful tone, "we are still going to go after Krystal. Because we need to get rid of her anyway and Luhan won't get a treatment as good as this anywhere else. If we fake being all into this proposal, both Siwon and Junmyeon are protecting us while we're in here. As soon as Luhan is better, we do our own thing again. Right?" he ended with a helpless look at Minseok, who shrugged with a small smile.

"You're asking me as if I'm a leader or something."
"Oh please, we all know you are." he dismissed him, finishing his coffee.
"I'm not inerrant." Minseok protested in an unusually low voice.
"A comforting thought to a mere mortal like me." Jongdae joked, and Minseok playfully shoved his shoulder.

"Seriously though, I don't mean to force my opinion on any of you. Especially not on you, Dae." The atmosphere shifted as Jongdae recalled their previous fight.
"Listen," he began, half-turning his body towards Minseok, "what I was trying to do back there... it was stupid. And clearly a dick move. I should have told you all and it was really good you stopped me."

Minseok didn't look all that convinced. His gaze roamed the horizon, breaking eye contact.
"Maybe. But that doesn't mean you weren't right, Jongdae. You said I would've been lost if you never came for me - that's kind of an understatement. I'm sure I would be dead by now. Withered away in a dirty corner, with a blissed out smile on my face."

Jongdae placed a hand on his shoulder, deeply regretting his earlier accusation. Not a day passed where Jongdae wasn't aware of how much his friend was suffering from the year of torture. How hard, determined and ruthless he'd been acting. How he didn't hesitate a second before pulling the trigger to end someone's life. Still, below that, hidden from the world, he was still the cheeky little boy Jongdae had played cards with in their bakery, when their legs were still dangling off the stools. The shy, chubby kid who won the girls’ admiration in elementary school with his talent of creating bubbles with gum, urged on by Jongdae. They were in this together and while they were both changing, Jongdae vowed not to let the lightheartedness disappear from their life entirely.
"I'm sorry." Minseok mumbled now, gaze lowered to his lap.
"I don't wanna sound like I'm drowning in self-pity. I'm saying this because you think I did the right thing by stopping you, but I think you did the right thing by wanting to actively search for him. The truth must lie somewhere in between."
With a fond smile, Jongdae slumped down the wall, his head resting against Minseok's upper arm.
"We just gotta keep each other in line, huh?" he suggested in a deceivingly light tone wrapping around all the feelings that were mutual but left unsaid.
"Yeah."
When they emerged the terrace about half an hour later and strode down the hospital's hallways, Jongdae felt like his steps had become much lighter already. Having talked about their next steps and sorted out his issues with Minseok, his confidence had improved a lot. He couldn't wait to have Chanyeol back, already planning on how to scold and guilt-trip him into giving him lots of kisses. They took a turn to the left and at the end of the short hallway, he saw representative Siwon leaning over a few documents in a small office, only showing his profile.

"Oh. That's convenient, we can catch him before he leaves, telling him we accept the offer." Jongdae proposed excitedly. His friend didn't reply immediately and all of a sudden, the sound of his steps stopped. Jongdae turned to find Minseok frozen in his tracks, a look of utter horror on his face.

"What...?" he trailed off in genuine concern, but Minseok shook his head rapidly, almost spasmodically, as he tumbled around a corner and against a wall.

"Nothing." he uttered, and Jongdae huffed in disbelief.

"Nothing my ass. You look like you've seen a ghost, what's wrong?" Minseok shook his hands off, stumbling away from Jongdae, though his clenched fist was still seeking support on the wall. He was shaking all over.

"Just... the usual. Don't mind it. I'll- I'll go back to our room and get some rest."

"I'll come with you." Jongdae began, but Minseok quickly raised one palm, avoiding his eyes.

"No. No, you go to him and tell him we'll do it. No buts. I'll be f-fine."

Jongdae looked at him with doubt written all over his face, but he gave in, calling after him to let Yixing take a look at him.

It had been quite a while since his withdrawal symptoms had gotten to him like that. Maybe they should have him treated, too, later.

"Yeah, whatever."

"Don't 'whatever' me, Kim Minseok. I'm sure Yi- Lay will be in our room anyway." Jongdae called after him, but Minseok didn't turn around again, only giving him a shaky wave of his hand. With a last concerned look, Jongdae turned on his heels to catch Choi Siwon before he'd have to leave.

With a yawn, Minseok stretched his arms over his head, throwing a look at the fancy clock in his shared office. It was Saturday, and the sun was already setting. He should really stop working overtime. His computer finally shut down with a faint click, and he threw his messenger bag over one shoulder. One last time he checked whether the blueprints he was currently working on were safely locked away in the correct drawer, and then it was finally time to call it a day. He left the office and strolled down the deserted corridor, fondly smiling at the late rays of sunlight filtering through the many glass walls. The building was huge, twenty stories of massive metal and glass, but only very few companies inhabiting it worked at this time of the week. Minseok usually did, but then again he was an architect and a rookie in this small company. Today, Jongdae had his compatibility test, and Minseok felt guilty for working this long. He couldn't wait to hear all about it. Maybe he could escort him on the day of his audition, catch something to eat in that restaurant he was itching to show him... Minseok slowed in his tracks, one hand massaging his neck and running into the freshly dyed, rose-colored hairline. There were voices. Someone was still around. He should probably wish them a nice evening. A few offices ahead, he peeked into a room, only to see someone hunched over spread out blueprints, one hand steadied on the table, two co-workers around him. The profile of the man in his black suit looked so familiar- 

"But how strong are the contingencies you factored in? Are you aware of how vicious they can become?"

In a flash, Minseok soundlessly flinched back from the door before anyone could see him.
"The walls are solid and soundproof, and we thought of a surveillance system." one of his co-workers said, and Minseok scrunched his brows. He knew this man they were addressing and word would have definitely reached him if he was one of their clients.  
"I don't know whether you're aware of the level of danger. We're not talking about harmless anomalies like seers or shifters. We're talking along the lines of freaks who can cut your air supply without batting an eyelash," the client exclaimed strictly.  
Seers. Shifters. The guy who had been in the news, Oh Sehun.  
What was he talking about?  
"We... have been considering this. That's why we built in this mechanism to block the exit in case of emergencies. The facility is located five stories underground. No matter what ominous skills they possess, it won't help them underground."  
"All that doesn't mean anything if a hypothetical anomaly decides to pollute the air and turn the thing into a giant grave. I want you to further concentrate on the air supply system."
"Yes, Sir."
"What about the electricity supply?"

Minseok inched away from the room, now extremely careful not to make any noise at all. Something was very wrong about this. He should probably report this to someone. With slow, soundless steps he went back the way he’d come from, intending to take the fire escape stairs. His heart was pounding quickly, but he willed himself to stay calm. There was no need to see the plans, Minseok wasn't stupid. Whatever they were building was supposed to lock up 'anomalies', as they called it. People with genetic quirks, locked up against their own will. This was something big, something illegal, happening right under their noses and Minseok wouldn't be the one to look away.  
His fingers touched the door handle when hands brutally grabbed him, twisting his wrists while forcing a damp cloth over his face.  
There was no time to attack, as the world blurred and his conscious was brutally ripped away, leaving behind a numb haze. He struggled, but his limbs were heavy and the world spun too much. Words floated through the air, their origin unclear.  
How can you be so careless?  
Is he disposable?  
We'll make something up.  
Don't throw him away. He's smart, right?  
I could use a few more like him, for... **personal** matters.

When Minseok came to, facing narrow gray walls and an innocent-looking syringe on the floor, the splitting headache and dancing lights had already smudged his memories, and he'd forgotten all about the two co-workers and the representative Choi Siwon leaning over the blue prints.

Minseok grabbed his head, trying to defeat the stinging pain with sheer will. Now that his memory had been triggered, he felt the adrenaline pulsing through him and the visual of Choi Siwon appearing behind his closed lids all the time; it was as if his body was eager to hold on to the memory for good now, burning it into his head forever.  
He took a deep breath. This was not the time to space out. Peeking through the keyhole, he found the moonlight still flooding the hallway. His sense of time told him that it was around three in the morning. Getting out of the patient wing where they were occupying an empty room close to Luhan had been relatively easy - sneaking around the administrative buildings where he had no knowledge about the local surveillance system was much harder. He’d been at it for hours and hadn't found...
anything so far. Heck, he didn't even know exactly what he was looking for. Still, he knew there had to be something Siwon had left behind, some form of proof. His alibi couldn't be perfect.

Minseok pushed open the door of a cleaning cabinet he'd hidden himself in to take a breather, just to see a figure fumbling with a door. He was about to draw back, when he recognized him. Yixing. He left his hideout and the doctor whirled around, sucking in a breath when Minseok wordlessly grabbed his arm to pull him away. He didn't put up a fight, which Minseok was thankful for. He swiftly pulled him into the next best room that wasn't locked and for good measure, crossed that room and entered the adjoining small lab, softly closing this door as well before pushing against the doctor's shoulder in a rather harsh manner.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, but Yixing didn't look intimidated, not budging an inch. Thin, horizontal strips of moonlight filtered in through half-closed blinds and Minseok caught glimpses of calm eyes.

"Probably the same thing you're doing." Yixing whispered back. They looked into each other’s eyes defiantly, until Minseok backed off.

Zhang Yixing wasn't their enemy; he may not like it, but it was the truth.

"And what would that be?" Minseok asked in a challenging tone, half of his attention already on the items around them.

Yixing followed his example, gloved fingers sliding across the labels of drawers and bottles.

"Something fishy is going on and it involves anomalies and substances. Someone manipulated me and the representative wants that someone. What for?" he whispered, skimming the files crammed into a corner.

"Either to use their powers or disarm them." Minseok replied, opening a random cupboard and wiping the spots with a cloth later.

"Exactly. If it was anything legal, he would've made it official. Either way, he needs special means. A medicament or drug, something to overpower the anomalies. Something that's not public yet and is therefore probably being developed illegally."

Minseok halted in his movements, shooting him a side glance.

He'd known it the moment he saw the doctor - he was extremely smart. Hidden behind soft benevolence lay a mind sharp as a knife.

"What makes you think that's what I'm searching for as well?" he asked nonetheless, testing his reaction. Yixing paused to scrutinize him for a second, as if seeking for something.

"You're not one to fight for justice alone."

Minseok didn't even bat an eyelash, but he could feel his fingers twitch in annoyance.

"You seek it to protect either you or your friends. You're also not one to indulge in drugs, therefore I'm guessing whatever happened to you in the past was forced upon you. Under these circumstances, I doubt that's a coincidence... you know more than I do about this, don’t you?" he ended in a voice barely above a whisper.

Dangerously smart.

"Assuming a lot, are we?"

Yixing shrugged, turning to inspect the last cupboard in the room.

Minseok didn't reply immediately, but there was no reason not to trust him. He'd already gotten involved beyond return.

"Choi Siwon himself leads the research."

At this, Yixing paused and approached him with a look of mild disbelief, observing his expression closely.

"How do you know that?"

Minseok took half a step back, and Yixing must have realized he was overstepping a boundary, that Minseok was far from being comfortable around him and kept the polite distance.

"Something triggered my memory. Before I was taken away to be used as a test subject for some obscure drug."

Yixing nodded, and Minseok could see him filling the gaps of his theory with this new information.

"But why..." he whispered absentely and though he didn't expect an answer, Minseok replied
anyway. "Not sure. It's all about the people with powers though. The coworkers of my former workplace constructed some sort of jail just for people like Chanyeol or Luhan. He wants to lock them up, and there's a lot of personal hate involved. Calls them anomalies in a way others would regard vermin." Minseok wasn't attentive and sensitive like Jongdae, but he'd been friends with him for long enough. Sometimes, subtle details like the pitch of your voice or choice of words in general could tell a lot. 'Anomaly' in itself wasn't an unusual term, but the way he said it spoke of pure spite. Again, Yixing only nodded. He didn't doubt him, didn't waste his breath on complaints over the cruelty of all this, and even though Minseok told himself that he had to give him all the facts because he'd be too smart not to notice him holding back on information... it felt good, getting it off his chest, confiding in someone, even if it was Zhang Yixing.

"Now that we're on the same page... all the more reason to find what this is all about." the doctor stated, straightening up.

"What if it's not here? This is the main branch, after all." Minseok threw in but Yixing dismissed his concern with a shake of his head.

"Yes and the instruments and means in this facility are one of a kind. If you wanna get anywhere with your development, it has to be in here. And if it's in here, we can find it."

Yixing reached into his pocket to hand Minseok a second pair of thin gloves. He accepted them with a quiet huff.

"I'm surprised you remembered to wear those. You were fucking obvious, standing out in the open like this."

Yixing just smiled this calm little smile that got under his skin more than he was ready to admit.

"I know this place quite well, thank you very much. And you can find out a lot about the position of cameras if you just look attentively."

"You can't have been around that often if no one recognizes you with this flimsy disguise." Minseok retorted.

"You can really get around if you pretend to be lost." Yixing only said, having the nerve to wink. He was already back in the office when Minseok called after him.

"I used to be someone who'd fight for justice alone, you know?"

Back then, before his life had become someone's toy. Even he had once been a good person. Those times might be over, but he refused to let go just yet.

Yixing regarded him with this small smile of his, too warm and genuine to suit the situation.

"I can imagine."

They sneaked along dark hallways, and things got trickier when they left behind department A and B. There were still a few lost souls working in C, and Minseok pulled Yixing away and into something akin to a storage room. The doctor was evidently unhappy about Minseok tugging him around all the time.

"I know the camera positions better than you-"

"And I'm an architect. I know buildings better than you do." Minseok cut in, already fumbling with an old-fashioned lock leading them into a narrow corridor full of pipes. Yixing wasn't too proud to give him an impressed nod and let him lead the way. It was too narrow to walk side by side and surprisingly hot.

"The slim, multiple pipes are for heating, the thick ones for other sorts of water supply." Minseok whispered into the silence. He wasn't sure why he was even sharing this information but Yixing didn't complain.

"I see."

"I can't foresee where the exits will be placed, but I have a vague idea." He didn't say it out loud, but he was glad to have stumbled across Yixing. Minseok might be persistent and maybe even cunning, but he was barely skilled in first aid, not to mention anything beyond it. He may find whatever they were developing, but Yixing would be able to understand it. He ignored the first exit and stopped at the second one, methodically breaking open the primitive
lock with a piece of crooked metal he teared off a nearby pipe. "You're pretty resourceful." Yixing softly noted, and Minseok ignored the statement in favor of completing his task. He didn't open the door right away, choosing to step away and wipe the dirt off his hands.

"Talk about yourself. I'm starting to think you're fooling even Jongdae with that airy attitude of yours." Minseok remarked. He'd certainly fooled him, if only to an extent. Yixing was still smiling in the dim light of emergency lamps scattered about.

"I must say, you're very inspiring in that department. After all, you've got all of them fooled, even your precious Jongdae."

This time, Minseok couldn't hide the annoyed tick of his eyebrow. He'd never quite liked Yixing and the reason didn't lie in his serene smile. It was the source of the smile, the underlying knowledge.

"Every single one of them treats you with awe, like porcelain. Or rather like a delicate rose. They think you can't help your thorns, can't be held responsible for your actions or lack of moral. It's the side effects, pure instinct that makes him lift a weapon so quickly - when in reality, you've been fully recovered for ages, haven't you, Minseok?" Yixing asked smoothly, the glint of knowledge tugging at his lips to form this damn, little smile. Minseok tried to stay away from Yixing because he knew, had always known it. The physical withdrawal symptoms may have haunted him until around that time when they were wandering through the forest. But the psychological ones... Minseok didn't know whether he'd ever tell any living soul that he wasn't suffering from any psychological side effects, never had. The only one who had picked up on this was Jongin, and he wasn't consciously comprehending it, he merely trusted the way Minseok would ruffle his hair in comfort whenever they'd been left alone and the shifter looked scared of him.

But all the decisions Minseok had made, all the lives he had taken; there was no drug to take the blame, no one to save his reputation.

It was all him. And he didn't regret any of it.

Minseok's lips twitched into a lopsided grin.

"Maybe." he simply said, walking past Yixing to open the door.

"You still cowered in front of the gun. I might just be a good actor."

Because at no point had he ever planned to actually shoot the doctor. He didn't voice it, but he counted on Yixing to be smart enough to pick up on it.

Maybe he did, maybe he didn't.

Either way, he was still smiling as he trailed after Minseok.
Chapter 21

His surroundings were blurred, like they were immersed in water. Or maybe the air was just flickering with heat. Heat. Yes, maybe Chanyeol caused this. But wait. Chanyeol wasn't around. He was dreaming. Or maybe he wasn't, but he was hallucinating. Right. His fingers ran down the blank hospital walls, traced the blue ink running down in rivulets. To outsiders, he must look like Kyungsoo now. In a way, he felt like Kyungsoo probably did. Unable to trust his senses. Chanyeol wasn't there and the other beds in the room were empty, or at least they looked empty. Wasn't there anyone around to confirm what was real? Tell him whether he could snap out of this or not? He didn't hear the door open, but suddenly Yixing was standing there, looking at him with a strained smile.

"Jongdae. Preparations are done, you can leave as soon as you're ready."

Jongdae halted in his movements. Stared at the doctor, trying to get a feeling for whether he was real or not. Hesitated.

"Jongdae. Can you try to focus on me, please?" Yixing calmly said, sitting down on one of their beds, gesturing for Jongdae to take a seat beside him. Even though he must be aware of Jongdae's condition, he didn't show it. Jongdae blinked, and his fingers lost contact with the wall. Slowly, he made his way over to him, and when he sank into the mattress, he found that his surroundings were already much clearer.

"I'd touch your arm or something, but seeing as we're basically strangers, I don't think it would help."

Yixing stated, and Jongdae turned towards him. They really were strangers, but he still felt strangely reassured by his presence. Yixing was a rather peculiar individual. So far, he'd been rather quiet, but Jongdae could already tell that he was a gentle and well-balanced person. Maybe his occupation played into it; as a medic, he surely knew better than to get stressed easily. He was one to observe, to lead quietly, only stepping in when his guidance was needed. It reminded him of Minseok - or rather of the way he used to be. When he first saw Yixing, the doctor seemed a little flighty, slightly unsettled. Understandable, considering his background. But he'd recovered quickly, and now his distinct presence easily anchored Jongdae to the present.

"It's okay. I snapped out of it, I guess." Jongdae provided carefully, fingers absently combing through his bedhead. Another, stronger hand caught his wrist, and he looked at Yixing with alarmed eyes.

"You guess? Guessing is no good. Are you a hundred percent sure?" he asked seriously, and Jongdae chuckled good-naturedly.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Just a figure of speech, sorry."

Yixing visibly relaxed, retracting his hand.

"Alright. Forgive me if I come across as harsh."

"Oh no, harsh, such nonsense," Jongdae immediately denied, waving his hand dismissively, "after all, you'd know best what it's like, right?"

The doctor smiled sadly and folded both hands in his lap. A quick look out of the window told Jongdae that noon had passed by now. To think that he was already seeing things during a small nap...

"It's definitely time to put a stop to this." he murmured, more to himself than anything, but Yixing nodded nonetheless.

"Are you sure you don't want me to accompany you? I might be of use, considering I've also experienced her manipulation techniques first hand," Yixing suggested, "unless you suspect I'll cave in easily, since she's managed to fool me before; I wouldn't hold it against you."

The way he said it didn't even sound particularly self-deprecating. He just wanted to understand; it was the natural curiosity of a good doctor.

Jongdae dismissed his worries yet again.

"No. I just think it would be better if you stayed with Minseok and Luhan. After all, you're a doctor."
If anything happens, they'll need you. Besides, I really don't think she'd manage to fool you again," he earnestly said, searching his eyes. "You hardly had a chance back then, right? But now you know what you're up against. Another reason for you to stay with the other two."

Mild surprise found its way to Yixing's eyes, before he broke into a grin. Not the usual, polite smile, but an actual grin, accentuating his dimples and making him look younger. "Thank you. It's one thing to tell it to yourself, but another to hear it from someone else. I can see why you're the talisman of your group."

"A talisman? Huh? Who said that?"

Yixing shook his head. "No one said that. It's just obvious from the way they treat you."

"Hah, like a mascot? Now, now, don't make me cry, Yixing." he whined with a playful nudge, and the fond look on the doctor's face told him that he saw right through his attempt at not making a big deal out of it.

"A mascot, hah. Rather like a precious bunch of keys they're all sharing." he all but sing-songed, and Jongdae blushed, despite everything. Sharing sounded really wrong.

What would Chanyeol have to say about this? He'd probably laugh but be silently jealous anyway. "Sharing. I feel objectified." he sighed dramatically, and as if Yixing could read his thoughts, he continued with a bright smile. "I would never. Besides, they probably only share what the phoenix leaves of you, from what I heard, anyway."

"What? Who even told you about Chanyeol?" Jongdae spluttered, and Yixing's brilliant smile was one of those men who willingly caused other people's downfall. "Who knows." he hummed lightly, and Jongdae looked at him in disbelief.

"You're playing with me!" he whined, childishly shaking him by his upper arm. "That's not very nice, playing with others' feelings. Just because you're smart enough to notice doesn't give you the right!"

Yixing actually chuckled, half-heartedly pawing at Jongdae's hands to get him to back off. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. Haah, I really shouldn't underestimate you." he said, a hint of truth hidden beneath a layer of light jokes. A game Jongdae had mastered ages ago.

"You'd better not!" he retorted with a laugh, and decided that he really liked Yixing. He was rather different from the others, gentleness and wit going hand in hand, but at the end of the day, he was a good person. They finally ceased the banter, and Jongdae got to his feet, stretching his arms over his head. "So, everything's ready, huh?"

Yixing nodded while Jongdae wandered around the room, carelessly tugging off his shirt to reach for a fresh one. "Yes. The substance has been prepared, for both of you."

With a hum, he put on a pair of pants and slipped into his shoes. They had talked about this the day before. Choi Siwon had offered them enough substances for two, at most three people to go after Krystal. Since Luhan was still bedridden, Jongdae had chosen Kyungsoo to accompany him, leaving the other two to stay behind and keep an eye on the shifter. He'd carefully thought about all the possible combinations, but this was the one he deemed the smartest. Minseok hadn't protested at all, saying that this was his choice to make, while Kyungsoo even smiled when Jongdae asked him for company. It was as much calming as it was unsettling, considering how Kyungsoo usually only smiled at Jongin or things that terrified other people. No matter how hard he tried to feel reassured, the walk down the hall and into an old conference room they would use as a getaway to this Krystal person felt like a walk to a scaffold. There wasn't even anything in particular he could prepare - sure, they'd insisted on him taking one of those advanced guns which could both stun or kill, but deep down, Jongdae knew that his greatest weapon lay in the strength of his own mind, relying on
whether or not he'd be able to control his power. They entered the room to find two nurses next to a tray with medical supplies. Kyungsoo was already seated, fingers absentmindedly stroking over the leather band of his necklace, while Minseok was nowhere in sight - he was probably with Luhan.

"Please take a seat and bare your arm." one of the nurses ordered calmly, and Jongdae complied. By now, the injection had become a routine already, but the sheer prospect of venturing into the unknown had him at the edge of his seat either way.

"Okay," he murmured, head turned to face Kyungsoo next to him.

"We're going there, knocking out this crazy girl and bringing her back. And hoping to find Chanyeol, or at the very least come to take back Luhan and then find the other two.

He only communicated it with his eyes, but Kyungsoo understood. They'd explained it all to him and every plan that resulted in them finding Jongin was fine by him.

They both got to their feet, and Jongdae inhaled deeply, trying to clear his head.

"Wait." Yixing suddenly intervened, turning quiet when all eyes in the room were on him.

"Don't you want to see Minseok before you leave? To tell him goodbye?"

Well. Jongdae was a little miffed over him not being present, but he wasn't planning on being a baby about it. Still, the way Yixing said it, immediately told him to take the suggestion.

"I'd like to, actually. Is he with Luhan?"

Yixing nodded nonchalantly, staying behind with Kyungsoo under the watchful eyes of the nurses, while a confused Jongdae padded down the hallways, deliberately ignoring the prickling sensation of the new structures around him. Before he even reached the hallway Luhan was situated in, strong arms tugged him into an unoccupied room, swiftly closing the door. Jongdae knew it was Minseok the moment he'd grabbed him, just by memorizing the way he'd tugged him around the previous weeks.

"What's wrong?" he asked immediately, looking around, alarmed. The room was rather dark, looking almost ghostly with two empty beds and minimal sunlight filtering through the gaps in the curtains. Minseok pressed his back against the door as if he feared someone might open it any second.

"Did someone see us? There was no one, right?" he asked quietly, and Jongdae simply shook his head.

"No one. Is there a change of plans?"

With a denying click of his tongue, Minseok pulled out one of their syringes and placed it in Jongdae's hand, clasping it tightly.

"This," he began, his eyes focused on Jongdae, "is something Yixing found yesterday. They've been developing this for quite some time and it's possible that I was one of the test subjects for it."

Jongdae sucked in a breath, looking at their hands.

"What is it?"

His friend hesitated, cocking his head to the right.

"We cannot be perfectly sure, but according to Yixing, it's something that damages certain receptors in your body. Yixing assumes it's highly concentrated to a point where it might not only make you forget all the structures, but permanently destroy the receptors. Speaking in crude terms, it'll take away your ability to shift. For good."

"That's awful..." Jongdae breathed, thinking of people like Yifan, who wished for nothing more than to be able to step into other places.

"I can only guess, but I'd say they wanna use it as a punishment for criminals." Minseok added, and Jongdae hesitated, unsure whether he'd approve of this.

"Anyway, they won't notice this little vial going amiss. But Yixing is planning to either take it all or destroy it, so prepare for your return to be quite messy." Minseok warned, and Jongdae couldn't help the crooked grin on his face.

"When is it not? Thanks for the heads up though. So you're giving me this in case of an emergency?"

"You could say that. Look, I know confronting Krystal is very dangerous. But this place is no better.
I remembered some stuff about this representative. He has his fingers in this just as much as Seungri, if not more."
"Why didn't you tell me-"
"Because," Minseok cut in earnestly, obviously hurrying to get his point across, "you wouldn't have been able to play it off so well, then."
Jongdae thought back to how Siwon seemed eager to talk to him only, avoiding the others. Avoiding Minseok. He'd probably recognized him.
"Sorry, man. I'll give you all the details later, if you want me to. My point is, there's a lot of shady stuff going on, and this place is far from being safe. I'd rather have you fight one crazy person with Kyungsoo than god knows how many people wandering around here."
"Should we cancel all of this?" Jongdae suggested immediately. The hospital really did expose them to all enemies that were possibly lurking around. But Minseok only shook his head.
"No. The substance inside Kyungsoo will grow weak and then you'll be the only one able to find her and you'll fight her alone. Not to mention that we should deal with this as quickly as possible. No more arguments, just go."
Jongdae nodded numbly, stashing the syringe in his back pocket.
He was worried out of his mind for Minseok, Luhan and Yixing. Therefore he decided to address him one last time, before leaving without him to look inconspicuous.
"I'm worried as fuck, just so you know," he proposed earnestly, one hand on Minseok's shoulder, "but if anyone could handle this mess, it would be you. After all, you got nerves of steel, Minseok."
At this, Minseok's eyes widened slightly, and for a short, rare moment, he looked unusually small.
"Jongdae, wait-" he uttered, tugging at his upper arm, and he complied, looking at his best friend with questioning eyes.
"When you get back... there's something I gotta tell you."
Jongdae already had an inkling as to what it was, but still smiled warmly, squeezing his hand once, before leaving Minseok alone in the dark room.
The way back to the conference room didn't take long, and though Minseok's words had added to the gravity of the situation, it only further fueled his determination. He proved it by firmly meeting the eyes of everyone in the room before settling on Kyungsoo.
"Alright. Let's do this. Ready?" he asked, and Kyungsoo nodded, closing his eyes. Jongdae touched his upper arms, tapping a countdown from four to zero.
The moment he'd reached zero, he pulled at the structures and for the first time ever, experienced no height difference at all. The smooth hospital floor was simply replaced by stone - this must be what it was like, to shift from the official platforms. He would have been confused if not for the wave of fresh air hitting him. His eyes fluttered open and saw that Kyungsoo was already scoping out his surroundings as well. He had expected some deserted wasteland, maybe a forest or even mountains. Not an actual town. He couldn't see or hear any living being besides him and Kyungsoo, and the buildings were oddly familiar. Neat, sophisticated, lots of very bright stone, all polished and showing straight lines instead of fancy carvings - his fingers brushed the stone of a nearby wall. It was cold and solid.
"Doesn't this kinda look like Lavender?" he asked out loud, and Kyungsoo immediately lifted his head, searching the horizons for something.
"The clock tower isn't here."
"The clock tower isn't here." he stated neutrally, and he was completely right. All these buildings forming a tight maze of narrow streets, patios and bridges resembled the lavender Layer perfectly, and yet the clock tower was missing.
"Do you think... it's the real city? The one we were in?" he asked carefully, while pushing the little metal rod they'd prepared into the ground, to mark their arrival point, just like Baekhyun would.
"There's only one city." Kyungsoo simply argued, and Jongdae hesitated. It was true, obviously so. This was too solid to be an illusion, and he highly doubted that the substances chose this exact moment to develop odd side effects - besides, Kyungsoo saw it too. Though Kyungsoo saw a lot of things.
"But we're not on Lavender. Because... the clock tower is missing."
Jongdae said more to himself
than anything as he trailed behind Kyungsoo, who had started walking in a random direction. They staggered down a declining, narrow alley, high buildings encasing them left and right to a point where barely any sunlight reached all the way down to the neat bricks covering the ground.

"Wait." Jongdae suddenly murmured, and Kyungsoo obediently stopped in his tracks, turning only his head.

"Our shadows. Look at this."

Dark orbs flitted to the ground, where a dark silhouette was clearly visible on the already shady ground. It was unnaturally dark and long, as if blinding sunlight was hitting their bodies. Which it wasn’t. Jongdae stepped next to Kyungsoo, looking back to compare and felt goosebumps running down his upper arms. Their shadows pointed in different directions.

This was so wrong and yet it wouldn't leave, no matter how often he’d blink. It didn't attack him, it didn't move, and maybe that's what made it so disturbing in the first place. It was just there.

"Y-you do see it, right?" he mumbled, trying to sound nonchalant and failing. Kyungsoo hummed in agreement.

"You think it's real?" Jongdae added, moving a hand just to see the shadow mirroring the movement, almost expecting it to do something different. It didn't. From the corner of his eye, he saw Kyungsoo regarding him intensely.

"You care a lot about what's real."

The way he said it made it sound like Jongdae was fussing.

"Of course I do!"

"Why?"

Why? Jongdae teared his eyes away from the shadow, blinking at Kyungsoo, a mix of indignation and confusion clouding his mind.

"Because," he began, rattling his brain to correctly word his feelings, "because what if it isn't? What if this is another crazy dream of mine? What if I'm lying somewhere, sleeping or what if I'm sleepwalking right now?"

Now that he was trying to voice out his concerns for the first time, they made so much more sense. It was like shedding light on a whole construct of worries, and the more he saw, the more he actually felt its weight.

"I've had those dreams and at some point, they stopped being dreams and I've been sleepwalking, but again, at some point I was awake, and what if I simply can't tell anymore?" he asked, well-aware that he was spiraling into panic.

"I might not be able to help anyone or endanger myself or others and-"

His words were cut off by Kyungsoo, who had placed a hand on Jongdae's neck and leaned in to press their lips together in one swift movement, just like that. Jongdae's body went rigid, and when he attempted to push him away, the pressure on his neck only increased, and it seemed to fuel Kyungsoo's determination. This was nowhere near the deep, languid and gentle way Chanyeol had kissed him. It was all hard pressure and teeth tugging at his bottom lip, the process only getting more painful due to Jongdae's struggles. With a final, bold lick across his lips as if attempting to force them open, Kyungsoo finally backed off, releasing Jongdae, who furiously rubbed his lips with the back of his hand.

"What the fuck, man?!"

Kyunsoo had the gall to smack his lips and shoot him a blank look.

"So, you think that was real?"

Jongdae stared. Kyungsoo quirked his eyebrow in an expectant manner. Seconds passed. Finally, Jongdae snorted in disbelief. This was just so absurd.

"Seriously? I don't even know what to say anymore," he began incredulously, before throwing his hands up in defeat, "yeah. Yeah, I guess this just happened. Damn."

Kyunsoo shrugged, turning on his heels.

"Good. Then let's go."

Jongdae was still shaking his head when Kyungsoo tugged him along by his upper arm.

_Only Do Kyungsoo_. How nice that this little incident was resolved so easily for him, he internally
commented, still dumbfounded and feeling highly violated. "It usually helps me." Kyungsoo suddenly spoke into the silence. Jongdae didn't reply immediately. Right, Kyungsoo was constantly seeing things that may or may not be real. Yet he had never seen him actually misinterpret his surroundings, nor had he ever looked disturbed or scared. It was probably a matter of attitude, and maybe not even that different from shifting or the pull. Kyungsoo might not be able to trust his own senses, but he still appeared incredibly stable and self-aware. Using physical contact as an anchor wasn't stupid, and initiating it this violently to create an impact wasn't, either.

Most people might disagree, but Jongdae felt like he could still learn a great deal of things from Kyungsoo.

"Still, I hope we can mutually agree on never repeating this. Ever." he earnestly threw in, still rubbing his lips. Kyungsoo shrugged.

"You're not a lot of fun to kiss."

"I'm sorry?!" Jongdae spluttered, "it's not like I tried, okay?"

He got a small smirk from Kyungsoo, telling him that he clearly enjoyed messing with him. It was nice that he was willing to play around with Jongdae, though he'd sure prefer something less intimate, thank you very much. Still, just like that, the fear and tense atmosphere had dissolved. "I know. It just wasn't fun because you're not Jongin." he stated matter-of-factly, and only now did Jongdae truly register the fact that he must kiss Jongin like this. Sweet, shy Jongin.

"Oh my god. You're corrupting him!"

Kyungsoo tilted his head a little, looking mildly confused.

"But he's corrupting me, too. Why does it only matter for him?"

"Stop! Too much exposure!" Jongdae exclaimed, mock-shielding his ears. Whatever Kyungsoo was about to say got stuck in his throat when his eyes caught on something. Immediately snapping out of it, Jongdae followed his line of vision. There was nothing but a blank wall: simple stone, a wooden door, nothing out of the ordinary.

He didn't even get to open his mouth in question, when Kyungsoo flew past him, opening the wooden door to run into the building.

"Jongin!"

"Wha- Kyungsoo, wait!" Jongdae called after him. He actually caught a glimpse of Kyungsoo stopping in his tracks, looking back at him when the sheer force he had pushed the door open with caused it to slam close again, and Jongdae's upper body heavily collided with the wood. It felt wrong, too solid for a simple layer of wood. His fingers flew to the door handle, frantically moving it up and down, even rattling the door, but it wouldn't budge an inch.

"What is this?!" he called more to himself than anything, ceasing the struggles to hear the muffled voice of Kyungsoo replying from the inside.

"There's a wall."

He heard the faint smacks and assumed he was exploring the texture with his palm.

"It's a stone wall."

"A pretty spontaneous wall, huh?" Jongdae retorted half-heartedly, palms dragging over the wall surrounding it. There had to be another way.

"Stay put Kyungsoo, will you?"

He received no reply and searched for a nearby window.

"Where did you even see Jongin? It never crossed my mind that he could be here." he stated loudly, more to keep Kyungsoo talking and be reassured of his presence.

"He's here. I can see him. I can always see him. He's... more real than reality."

He should probably tell him that he might be hallucinating, but right now, he felt like Kyungsoo was more reliable than Jongdae himself. Maybe Jongin really was here.

"Look, there's nothing here, I'll try getting into an adjacent building and-"

"Jongdae."

He seized the frantic movements.

Kyungsoo rarely called Jongdae by his name, showing a firm demeanor he only ever experienced
directed at himself.  
"Yes?"
"I want to go."

There was no threat or anger in his voice, just a very silent plead, a barely audible nuance Jongdae might have missed if he hadn't grown so fond of him. Jongdae couldn't find it in himself to hold him back.

"Where did you see him?" he repeated his question, staring at the innocent-looking wooden door.  
"Straight ahead, but far away."
"Alright," Jongdae sighed, "Go. I'll catch up with you later."

The dull sound of one step reached his ears, but Kyungsoo hesitated.

"Jongdae?"
"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry for hurting your hand. And for blaming you, too."

He didn't wait for a reply and just set off. Jongdae didn't know whether to smile at Kyungsoo's display of growth and affection or feel concerned at the timing - after all, it sounded so much more like a goodbye than a 'see you later'. Shaking his head, he continued to examine the adjacent buildings, searching for an open door. No need to get carried away, he just had to find him quickly. All the nearby buildings were either lacking a door or locked. They felt rather solid, too, and Jongdae decided against trying to break one of them down. Not only did he lack the knowledge of how exactly to break down a door (and would therefore risk hurting himself more than the door); if the entrance door was already locked, chances were high that he'd meet more locked doors inside.

Instead, he scrambled down the alleyway and got lucky at the fifth building. It looked different from the others, not like an apartment building or shop. Maybe an official building? The double doors were locked, but the wall was oddly flickering. It was something he only noticed out of the corner of his eye, but his touch confirmed it - something was off. There was a wall and yet it prickled strangely beneath his skin. Maybe it was all some kind of illusion, after all. Maybe it was beginning to fall apart. Jongdae shook his head, thinking back to the words Yixing had directed at him. 'Maybe' wouldn't do it here. If there was a hole in this illusion, he would step through it. His palm kept pushing against the stone, but while it felt strange, it wouldn't budge. He thought of Kyungsoo, who might have found Jongin by now and tried to turn the stress and pressure into certainty. 

This thing wasn't real and he'd go to see Kyungsoo, right now.

The moment his fingers actually reached through the stone was like opening a gate. It was only a few centimeters, but it was proof, providing him with utter certainty. Without a second of hesitance, he stepped through the wall, concentrating on the action itself. The building was dark and dusty from the inside, and there was still no living being in sight. Jongdae took tentative steps ahead, towards the rough direction Kyungsoo had walked off to. Whatever this institution had once been, it was extremely eerie in its current, deserted state. Through a window in the wall he saw the entrance area, the only spacious room it seemed, considering that the corridors Jongdae wandered down were extremely narrow, though they had high ceilings. Jongdae wasn't too sure how claustrophobia worked, but he could definitely say he felt uncomfortable. Not only due to the narrow space, but also due to the fact that the building felt... surreal. There was an odd scent lingering in the air, something akin to salt, and everything looked like it should be inhabited by people; it was like walking through a deserted school. He tried to shake off the feeling and concentrate on finding an exit. Unfortunately, the facility felt like a maze and soon he had rounded many corners, struggling not to get lost when suddenly, there were only stairs leading down. Jongdae hesitated, tried another route but ended up with stairs yet again. He decided to see where they'd lead him. After all, he might need to take them, might find an exit to one of those odd patios. His steps echoed off the walls and the salty scent intensified as he advanced further. For some reason, he felt hypersensitive, his senses sharpened to pick up on every little thing. Was he scared of a sudden attack by this Krystal person or merely waiting for the world around him to somehow step out of order? Maybe it was a bit of both. The walls appeared to flicker again but whenever he tried to focus on them, they seemed solid. Then again, the whole corridor was only dimly lit by a bunch of
candles hanging from the ceiling above him. It was probably his imagination. He palmed the walls to both of his sides and his arms weren't even stretched. Finally, the corridor lead into a spacious room full of-

"Water?"

Jongdae stilled in his tracks, back pressed against the wall right next to the entrance, warily observing the scene. There were water reservoirs of varying sizes. All of them were larger than his room back at home. The floor was covered in tiles, and discreet drains framed the reservoirs, presumably to avoid the floor getting flooded. The tiles inside the reservoir closest to him were tinted in a pale green and the only light in the room came from inside those reservoirs. At first, Jongdae thought the water itself was glowing, but a closer look told him that there were merely light sources embedded in the ground. The reflections of the water danced across the whole room, lazily wandering over the walls, covering Jongdae himself. He caught a movement and, struck by curiosity, stepped a little closer to the green reservoir. There was something inside it. Carefully, he crouched down, looking intensely into the gently moving water. Little specks were flitting around and there, Jongdae saw it now - they were fishes. Tiny, almost transparent-looking fishes with only their dark eyes betraying them. He looked around and now that he knew it, he spotted more and more of them, the water reflections illuminating the faint silhouette of their tiny fins. He backed away, eyes roaming the whole area. The scenery was thoroughly disturbing. What was this? An aquarium? He should not spent too much time and simply leave. There was actually an exit across the room, and with shaky steps, he wandered in between the narrow strips of tiles separating two reservoirs, eyes lowered and flitting around. It may be ridiculous, but he felt more than a little unsettled. Who knew what other things were floating through the water? But while he did see blurry movements coming from the faintly lavender water to his right, he didn't dare look too closely. The constant movements of the reflections across the crude walls of stone around him made him wary. He used to adore the patterns of light painted by water, but right now, they reminded him of the psychedelic kaleidoscope he'd seen in the sky, when everything had gone to hell on the yellow Layer. All of a sudden, there was something moving in front of his legs, and with a startled gasp he jumped back, almost stumbling on the wet tiles. His heart rate had spiked up within a split-second, and he expected someone to appear right in front of him, but instead, the disturbance in the air turned out to be... a fish. Another small, transparent fish, floating through the air without a care in the world. He sunk to his knees a respectable distance away, absently placing his bag on the ground. What was going on? Now that he was looking for them, he spotted more of them swimming above the surface. An illusion, it had to be an illusion. Only one way to find out, Jongdae thought, giving himself his usual pep talk before he reached out to touch one of them. Slowly, very slowly, his fingers reached out. He fully expected them to brush through the figure, but the pads of his fingers actually brushed something cool and soft, before the fish flitted away and Jongdae withdrew his hand like he'd suffered from a prick of static.

"What... is this?" he muttered, crawling backwards and away from the fishes. They were real, he could touch them. But they couldn't be real, it made no sense. Before he could move another muscle, he noticed another thing was off. The crude texture the water reflections were dancing across were no longer bricks - the walls were covered in sturdy plants and flowers, dark colors highlighted by the occasional strips of light. Had they been there all along? No, they hadn't. Right?

Jongdae felt panic creep up inside him, and no matter how hard he willed himself to calm down and just leave this place as quick as possible, he couldn't bring himself to do it, frozen in place by fear. Fearing that more things would change the moment he moved. Was this an illusion? And if so, was it made by him, unconsciously? Or was it real and still his fault? He firmly closed his eyes. It's not here, he told himself. That fish was just part of my imagination. No matter how many creepy talents that woman possessed, she couldn't make fish fly, this was ridiculous. Something warm touched his left hand and his eyes flew open to see a black, gooey mass bubbling up from the drains. His body jerked away, and when his right hand met water, instead of a solid surface, the world was turned upside down and he tumbled into the water with a loud splash. His yelp was drowned in water and
in a surge of panic, he twisted his body to avoid spraining his arm or hitting his head. Water flooded everything and his flailing hands touched the tiles on the ground. The smooth tiles gave way, too, and the feeling of sand running along his hand sent another shock coursing through him.

*If he sank through the ground, where would he end up? Another Layer? A place he'd be lost in forever?*

With frantic movements, he paddled to the surface and though his feet grazed the ground even with his head poking out of the water, he tried very hard not to touch the ground with his feet. He felt his teeth clacking, less from cold and more from sheer fear. Everything seemed to slip from his control and his clothes clung heavily to his skin, slowing his movements down. The black goo was still oozing from the drains, and though it really was black and viscous, Jongdae couldn't think of anything but blood at this point, scrambling away from the edges of the reservoir with his feet slipping on the tiles. It advanced until it touched the water and formed a thick, oily layer on top of the surface. Countless little dots were buzzing through the air above his head, the tiny fish eyes reminding him of bugs, flies maybe.

Another step backwards and his foot met neither ground nor sand, causing him to be submerged by water yet again. Scared, Jongdae was so scared. He opened his eyes to see thousands of tiny reflections, as if light met a diamond, rainbow dots spreading through the water and he had to get away. With frantic movements he broke through the surface, spluttering and gasping for air as he scrambled towards the nearest edge, the black liquid be damned.

"Jongdae!"

His breath hitched, and he froze in his tracks, looking up at... Chanyeol. Chanyeol, who crouched at the edge of the reservoir, offering his hand. With his brown curls, parted lips and eyes shining with worry.

Jongdae stared.

And hesitated.

Jongin was dozing, wrapped up in warm, pleasant darkness. Guilt was nagging at him to get up quickly, but his mind wasn't strong enough to pass the message to his muscles. Just a little longer, he told himself. Just a little longer; he could use the time to mull over the words Chanyeol had told him. Chanyeol. What a nice person.

It was exceptionally rare for Jongin to meet someone who had absolutely no intention of using him. And while wandering through this odd city with its shrewd shadows, Chanyeol had said that of all the people Jongin used to travel with, he was the one the shifter had liked the least - what a ridiculous thought, considering how overwhelmingly nice the other had been. He should really wake up and find him - when had they gotten separated in the first place? He was itching to meet those other people, who were supposedly even more awesome than Chanyeol. There were those vague shreds of memories, but he just couldn't make sense of them. A pair of dark eyes, a shoulder he'd leaned on, the image of someone's back... he really wished he could remember before meeting them face to face. Surely they would be disappointed if Jongin had forgotten all about them. Still, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't, and Chanyeol had comforted him by saying that his memories would return eventually - so maybe he should stop trying to remember and get up to search for them. But why did his head feel so muddy?

A dull pain throbbed in his shoulder, rousing him from his slumber. Someone was nudging him? Shaking him?

"Jongin."

He instinctively shied away from the noise and lifted his fingers to sluggishly rub his eyes.
Whoever it was, he was persistent.

"Jongin."

With a low groan, Jongin blinked up at the person hovering above him. The first thing he noticed were dark orbs intensely fixated on him. Those eyes. He was part of his family, Jongin just knew it. He slowly sat up, ignoring his protesting limbs. How long had he been asleep? The boy backed off just enough for Jongin to move, still staring at him. Something told him that this person should probably scare him, but he felt no such thing. Instead, he was oddly intrigued, drawn in by his seemingly blank expression. Was that expectation mirrored deep in his eyes? What were they? When it became obvious that Jongin wouldn't make the first move, the other slowly lifted his hand, inching closer to him. Jongin felt his muscles twitching but made no attempt to draw away, even when pale fingers wrapped around his throat almost gently, still seeking answers in the other's dark eyes. His grip was light and stirred something inside him. Something he couldn't explain if he tried, something heady and dark. Something that caused Jongin to close his eyes, tilt his head and slowly lean in until their lips brushed. If he'd had any doubts about this, they would have dissolved the moment they touched, because this felt so right. The fingers around his throat tightened ever so slightly, as if the other was feeling it, too. Before he could actually hurt him though, the grip on Jongin's throat loosened, and the strong hand trailed up the side of his face deceivingly gently, to settle in his hair, cupping the back of his head. He wasn't pushing him, but not allowing him to draw away either.

Jongin could definitely get lost in this, and judging by the way the other all but melted against him, those feelings were mutual. Where Jongin's motions were soft and probing, the other was way more urgent, quickly taking over to nip and tug at his lips. While Jongin's brain was still muddled by the remnants of unknown drugs, his body clearly remembered this much. Physical familiarity in itself was an unusual concept for Jongin, who'd always avoided other people where he could. Still, now that he'd gotten a taste of exactly this, not to mention the feeling of belonging Chanyeol had given him, he already knew that returning to the life he did remember was not an option anymore. There was something more, and Jongin was allowed to partake in it.

Their kisses didn't slowly ebb down. Rather than that, the other ripped away without warning, startling Jongin. The boy looked somewhat content, though it remained a mystery to Jongin as to why he would even assume this, since the emotions playing on his face were subtle, at best. The whole action had raised more questions than it had answered, and Jongin started with the most urgent one.

"Who are you?"

Instead of looking surprised or disappointed, the boy suppressed a chuckle, and with a wicked little smile he leaned in to whisper into Jongin's ear.

"Kyungsoo."

Kyungsoo. Jongin felt a shudder, but the way he instinctively supported himself on Kyungsoo's upper arm told him it wasn't from fear.

"Do Kyungsoo, 19 years old, permanently hospitalized." an unfamiliar, female voice called out, and they both turned their heads to see a girl leisurely floating in the air on her back, head thrown back to observe them upside down, leaving her bright red mane to dangle in the soft wind. In one fluid motion, she turned to lie on her stomach, supporting her chin on one hand as she looked down at them with a small smirk.

"Freedom tastes nice, doesn't it?"
"Jongdae?"

He kept staring, and while every other sensation slipped into the background at the sight of Chanyeol, the thick cloud of panic remained.

"Hey?" Chanyeol asked carefully.

Why wasn't he freaking out?

That's not Chanyeol, was the first thought that came to Jongdae's muddled mind.

"Come here, what are you doing?" he inquired, and the deep voice was perfect like the rest of his appearance.

Jongdae shook his head, clumsily sloshing around in the water.

"Don't you see any of this?" he asked almost accusingly, and Chanyeol looked around.

"The plants and fishes? I do see them; this place is kinda fucked up, I know. All the more reason to get out, why are you even hesitating? I don't know how you got here but I'm infinitely glad you're alright."

Jongdae's teeth were still clacking together, and when the ground beneath him flickered into nothingness once more, Jongdae yelped and scrambled to one of the edges, purposefully keeping his distance from Chanyeol. The taller one hurried to his side but Jongdae flinched away from him.

"No! Wait-" he snapped, and to his relief, Chanyeol complied, though the look on his face was heartbreaking. With hasty movements, he climbed out of the water and away from the black liquid, though it hadn't left any stains.

"I need to get out of here." he mumbled, shaking from head to toe, and Chanyeol nodded, reaching for Jongdae's discarded bag, but Jongdae was quicker. With one trembling hand absently checking whether the syringe was still in his back pocket, he stumbled through the room with Chanyeol trailing after him, at a respectable distance. Whenever he felt the minuscule pressure of a fish, Jongdae twitched and sped up his steps, firmly closing his mouth and shielding his eyes. He didn't want to see any more of this and could only hope that it would stop if he left the basement. With shaky steps, he took the stairs and the regular thumping sounds behind him told him that Chanyeol was still there. Or at least what looked like him was still there.

The stairs led into a few narrow rooms but Jongdae had to get out, out into the open. So he strode ahead with firm steps, one palm dragging across the outer walls because he wasn't ready to trust his eyes which were still blinded by negative specks of light from the sensory overload earlier.

"I tried searching for an exit, but there was none." Chanyeol stated, and Jongdae ignored him.

Concentrate. The nightmare is far away now, just concentrate.

"I tried burning my way through this, but it never worked. I thought I was going crazy for sure!" There. Jongdae halted, feeling the stone prickle beneath his skin.

"Here's an exit."

"What, really?" Chanyeol replied, his hand quickly coming up to mimic Jongdae's movements, and though he felt his heart picking up, he stayed put. Chanyeol's hand was so much bigger than his. Just like he remembered it to be. The temptation to try and touch him, to see whether he could lace their fingers together was incredibly strong. He resisted and stepped through the wall instead, ignoring Chanyeol's protests. It was easy, seeing as he'd done it before, knew it worked and therefore lacked any doubts. The gush of fresh air was liberating. Chanyeol didn't follow immediately, and he heard his muffled calls through the walls.

"Just come. The wall isn't solid." he exclaimed, taking a step back and crossing his arms. More muffled words followed, and after a while, Chanyeol made it and yes, in daylight he looked even more real. Jongdae found himself itching to hug him, but the wary feeling stubbornly remained.

"Woah, how did you know that?" Chanyeol asked, genuine amazement all over his face. Jongdae only shrugged, and Chanyeol directed his full attention back on him.

"What's wrong, Jongdae? Are you... scared of me? Did I do something?" he asked and was
dismissed by a simple shake of his head. Jongdae gulped and stretched out his hand to let his fingertips brush over the other's shoulder. Solid. Chanyeol followed the fingers with his eyes, looking hopelessly confused and worried. They traveled down his upper arm aimlessly, and Jongdae felt like crying from sheer helplessness. He did feel him, but could he really be a hundred percent sure?

"I," he began, breath hitching when Chanyeol grabbed his hand and looked at him inquiringly, "I just. I just don't know anymore. I'm not like Kyungsoo, I don't have anything under control. I just don't know anymore..."

His trailed off into a whisper, and Jongdae lowered his head to avoid seeing the possible accusation or disappointment in his expressive eyes.

"Hey, hey, hey," Chanyeol threw in, deep and soothing, "calm down. I don't really know what's wrong with this place, but it feels like it's falling apart. I don't blame you for getting confused, I could barely believe my own eyes either when I saw you. What can I do to make you feel better? Tell you how much I like you?" he asked, completely serious.

Jongdae shoved at the taller half-heartedly. The more he talked, the more real he felt. Surely, even Jongdae's vivid imagination couldn't make up this much, right?

"Okay. What else? I can tell you about the first time I saw you. Here it goes. I was this really chubby kid, buying sweets at your parents; shop. I mostly remember your parents bickering over whether it was alright to give a fattie like me even more sweets, but I do remember you sitting at the counter, dangling your legs. They were really skinny and I thought it was amazing that you'd stay so slim, when your parents had an amazing shop like this." Chanyeol rambled, his expressions really matching the story and retelling it enthusiastically. Jongdae could only look at him in wonder, not remembering any of it.

"I mean, I fell in love with the baked goods if anything, but when I returned for them years later, I saw you again and that's when you swept me off my feet. You, not the pudding pretzels, though those were delicious as well. Someone was scolding you for the amount of powdered sugar you put on them, I think? And you did this thing where your shoulders slump and you tilt your head back and you get all whiny. You replied that eating those was messy either way, so it wouldn't make a difference?"

Chanyeol scrunched his brows together, thinking hard, while Jongdae could only stare at him. Right, he did love to put powdered sugar on pudding pretzels, living with the firm belief that powdered sugar improved just about anything. He'd never even told Chanyeol this before.

"You said something, looking at me for confirmation, and I didn't even get half of it because I was sorta star-struck, but I just agreed like an idiot. Whatever I'd agreed to, you looked pretty happy about it. I know, I know, I'm a moron-"

The rest of the sentence was lost in a huff as Jongdae all but threw himself at him, hugging him as tightly as he possibly could.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry I doubted you, it was all too much, I'm such a jerk," he rambled with his face pressed against the side of Chanyeol's throat, who returned the hug with a pleased sigh, "I just didn't think I'd even meet you here and- I really missed you, you know? Wait."

Jongdae pulled away, suddenly remembering something and shoving Chanyeol's shoulder hard enough to make him wince.

"You jerk, I thought you were dead, of course I hesitated just now!"

The other looked like a kid receiving a scolding, and Jongdae shot him an extremely accusational stare, imitating Chanyeol's voice.

"Hey Jongdae, I'll go and fetch Jongin on my own, don't worry, I got this - would this be so hard to say?! Didn't you tell me you wouldn’t hold back on important stuff anymore? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Look, I really had a reason for doing this." Chanyeol began with his hands raised defensively. Jongdae looked at him expectantly, quirking a brow.

"Oh? I'm all ears."

"I just had to do this with Baek alone, you know? We're just too many people and it really wasn't
pretty - don't tell me any of you would have approved of this."
Jongdae wasn't impressed.
"Are you really going for the 'I didn't tell you cause I know you would have gotten angry' excuse?
Cause you gotta do better than that."
"There's another thing though!" Chanyeol hastily added, firmly placing both hands on Jongdae's
upper arms as if he was afraid Jongdae might just leave him like this, "I had to look dead to
everyone! Didn't you hear what Seungri said when he took Jongin? He was actively threatening me
with you! He was basically announcing that he'd blackmail me by taking you away as well."
Jongdae tried not to show it, but he definitely got what he was saying.
Back then, he'd been too stressed to really get it, but he had noticed how upset the taller had been
afterwards. Still...
"And wouldn't it be good enough to make the world believe you're dead and tell me beforehand?"
Jongdae retorted, not missing a beat.
Chanyeol was beginning to look desperate.
"But... what good would that be if Seungri got you, squeezing the information right out of you? This
was the safest way-"
"I don't want to be safe!" Jongdae cut in, raising his voice against Chanyeol for the first time. The
effect was immediate, and the other withdrew his hands as if he, of all people, had been burnt.
"I am not safe, Park Chanyeol," he began slowly, clearly enunciating every word, "this is nonsense!
None of us are safe and not being associated with you doesn't mean a thing! There are plenty of
other people after me! You actually think you're doing me a favor like this? Fucking stay with us and
watch over me yourself, that would be much more effective!"
Chanyeol still stared at him shell-shocked, while Jongdae breathed heavily. First Minseok and now
Chanyeol. When had he become a person who yelled at others during fits of anger? The chilling
question trickled down his spine and a voiceless, bitter chuckle escaped his lips.
He lowered his gaze, unable to meet Chanyeol's vulnerable expression any longer.
"You really do bring out the worst in me." he whispered, and just like that, the arm length of space
between them turned into the most solid object on this whole Layer while feeling much, much larger
at the same time. Every passing second added another mile, and Jongdae wished he could run away.
Run until he was out of breath, throw himself into the grass outside his home town, curl into a ball
and properly analyze himself only to return when he was all sorted out.
"Can I keep it, then?"
Jongdae looked up, tilting his head in confusion. Chanyeol looked about as miserable as he felt, but
his mellow voice was steady and it brought him back to the time he had confessed to him. He looked
so anxious, but also hopeful.
"I brought it out, so it's only fair, right?"
Jongdae hesitated. Could it be this easy?
"Only if you let me do the same..." he replied hesitantly, and yes, it was this easy, at least for
Chanyeol.
What felt like an impenetrable barrier to him was just an arm length of space to Chanyeol, who
reached out and pulled Jongdae into a firm hug.
With a sigh, the tension left his body, and he rested his chin on the broader shoulders.
"Sure," Chanyeol hummed into his hair, "but since you bring out the best in me, you shall have my
best from now on. If you'll have me."
With a chuckle, Jongdae tightened his grip around him, feeling the warm skin and subtle bumps of
his vertebrae.
"You can't take that back anymore, you know?"
"I wasn't planning to."
He closed his eyes, focusing all of his senses on the body in his arms. They'd get up and search for
the others but not right now. Just for another minute, they'd stay like this. The world could have
Jongdae back soon, but for one more moment, he'd enjoy just being like this.
Being only Chanyeol's.
In a flash, Kyungsoo had jumped to his feet and positioned himself in front of Jongin. The shifter stared at the girl with wide eyes, scrambling to get to his feet, as well. It wasn't easy with his aching muscles and lack of orientation as the remnants of fatigue were still nipping at his mind.

"Who are you?" Jongin asked, and something in the way her white fingers twirled around the strands of red hair triggered a vague memory of slim arms encircling his waist.

"My, my, you sure are tripping, huh?" the girl replied with a raised brow, and Kyungsoo twitched hard at her slightest movement, as if he was barely holding himself back from jumping her.

"Easy there, tiger. Don't be mad at me, it's not my fault," she stated with an unimpressed pout, "they basically fed him that stuff for breakfast, dinner and tea."

Jongin only blinked between the two of them, highly confused. Chanyeol had stated that he'd been drugged, that they'd weakened his body and brain so he wouldn't escape. It was getting more and more apparent with every second he'd spent awake since then. His mind was slowly piecing the blurry memories back together, bit by bit. But how did this woman know?

Kyungsoo only narrowed his eyes at her.

"He was sleeping just now." he countered steadily, and the woman shrugged.

"Maybe he was tired?"

When Kyungsoo took an angry step towards her, she vanished into thin air and reappeared seconds later, now standing to their right.

"Alright, fine. Though it was just some sleeping pills. Your sleeping beauty didn't get hurt at all." she spelled out like an exasperated teenager.

"How did you do that? Are you... a shifter, like me?" Jongin asked before he could help himself.

Kyungsoo moved in front of him protectively, openly unhappy about Jongin catching her attention. The girl chuckled, gaze wandering to the sky in amusement. She vanished again, and Jongin felt icy cold arms wrapping around his shoulders from behind.

"Oh, honey. I'm so much more than a shifter." she crooned into his ear, and with a distressed noise, Kyungsoo whirled around, clawing at the white skin - only to reach right through it. In a fresh surge of panic, Jongin jumped away as he tried to free himself from the ghostly contact. He felt the strong urge to run away, but still wasn't sure how or where to. The girl looked solid, but Kyungsoo didn't attempt attacking her again in favor of staying with Jongin.

"My name's Krystal and this is my Layer." she breathed in a conspiratorial tone, her bare feet sweeping through the earth on the ground in an elegant motion, leaving a trail of blue sand behind. Kyungsoo looked only mildly confused while Jongin couldn't keep his eyes of the dark blue grains.

"Don't get me wrong," she began, trailing in a generous circle around them as if scrutinizing a future pet, "shifters are pretty cute, too. You're just lacking the certain little something, the... potential." she said, snapping her fingers while searching for the correct words.

"I was actually hoping you'd bring your other friends, too. Sure, the doctor is kinda used up and the seer might be a little too righteous, but I definitely miss the feisty one."

"Minseok cannot be used." Kyungsoo argued curtly, but with utmost certainty. Krystal nodded tentatively, still padding around them under the piercing gaze of the shortest.

"So true. But that's the beautiful thing about him - his mind is incredibly strong, imagine the things he could do..." she sounded almost wistful, but caught herself and focused on Kyungsoo.

"Don't misunderstand. You're even better. Better than the phoenix and almost as good as his little lover. Just thinking about him gives me goosebumps. His mind is so open."
"What do you want?" Kyungsoo asked briskly, running out of patience. Krystal sighed and took a brave step towards them.
"Isn't it obvious?"
"No." Kyungsoo stubbornly replied despite it probably being a rhetorical question. By now, only two steps separated her from Kyungsoo. "I want to play." she breathed out, daringly leaning into his personal space with a thin smile. Her pupils were unnaturally dilated, and Jongin felt the tension running through Kyungsoo's body. "Someone to explore the borders with. Someone who has the potential to become more. More than a seer, more than a shifter."
"You hurt Jongin." Kyungsoo replied matter-of-factly, as if this statement alone was an answer to this unspoken demand. The girl made an exasperated face again, looking mildly annoyed. "I didn't hurt him. Sleeping pills, please. As if you hadn't received plenty of them from wherever you came from."
Kyungsoo didn't reply and it obviously grated on her patience. "Look, I know you're all about this little shifter. I'm not telling you to throw him away. We'll keep him, how does that sound? You of all people should be interested! All the things you sense... didn't you ever wonder how close they actually are? If people can wander between the worlds and look into them, if our senses are this connected and it needs nothing but a strong mind... did you never wonder what stops you from doing anything you want?"
For the first time, Kyungsoo looked hesitant, as if she was addressing an actual concern of his. "What stops you? Let me tell you - it's nothing. Nobody could stop you even if they tried." she spat out almost vengefully, battling conflicts Jongin couldn't grasp. The change in the atmosphere was scaring him and he clung onto Kyungsoo's shoulders tightly. "In here, I can do anything. You want a desert?"
The heat hit Jongin across the cheeks and stray grains of sand caused him to bury his face in the back of Kyungsoo's neck, seeking shelter. There were still buildings in the distance, but they looked like forgotten ruins with the dunes and flickering air around them. "If there is something like a 'pull', as the newspapers call it, why would you be limited to anything?" she called over the howl of wind, "If your mind wants it, what exactly stops you? What stops you from experiencing a red ocean?"
Just like this, the dry air turned salty and the dunes in the distance turned to water. Dark, bordeaux waves sending blood-red foam across Krystal's bare feet. "Just because mankind has never seen something, it doesn't exist? I disagree." she continued, crouching down to let her fingers dig through the wet sand. The moment she presented her open palm, the sand had turned to coarse, white crystals. "Everything exists somewhere. I believe in it and here it is."
She let the crystals fall to the ground, bit by bit, not breaking eye contact with Kyungsoo. The world around them flickered with every crystal hitting the ground and by the time the last one touched the ground, it soundlessly landed in soft grass. "And I know you believe in it, too." she whispered, the tiniest smirk painted across her face. Jongin barely spared a glance at the gentle, grassy slope around them and the oddly warm orange color the sky was tinted in. He was drawn in by the expression in her eyes. She was mad. Completely lost. "I believe in Jongin." Kyungsoo simply said, and Krystal groaned. "I got that already, what are you, a dog?"
"I believe in him the most. Therefore he is the most real thing." Kyungsoo elaborated, unfazed. The girl scoffed. "There is no such thing as the 'most' real thing. It's either real or not, there's no in between."
Kyungsoo reached behind to gently push Jongin's face into the back of his neck, quietly asking him to close his eyes. Jongin wasn't quite sure what he was planning to do, but complied nonetheless, burying his face between his surprisingly solid shoulder blades and closed his eyes.
"There is. There are always in betweens." he heard Kyungsoo arguing calmly. He felt the voice vibrating through the body he was holding on to, the minuscule twitches of his muscles.
"You say that everything exists somewhere, but your mind is narrow. Just because everything you believe in exists... doesn't mean everything you don't believe in doesn't." Kyungsoo stated slowly and for some reason, the air shifted and Jongin felt the hair in his necks prickle from a gush of cold wind. He heard Krystal inhale sharply and it took all his willpower to stay put. A few rustling noises were followed by a yelp of pain.
"Just because you call me a dog... doesn't make me one. So what exactly can you do?" Jongin couldn't resist the temptation any longer, slowly raising his head to peer over Kyungsoo's shoulder with a gasp. The sky had turned dark, so dark it almost appeared black and they were surrounded by a number of creatures so grotesque, Jongin couldn't even tell whether they were living beings or not. Some were the size of his fist, others loomed over them, dark masses of fur, deformed limbs, pearly white eyes. Some were dripping with suspicious-looking, red liquid, some had multiple eyes bulging out of their bodies like ulcers. Some didn't even have anything he'd be able to identify as eyes or limbs. They were all gathered around them in a loose circle and he felt like more of them appeared, but there was simply no movement, no sign of breathing, nothing. All of them were standing perfectly still, turned towards Krystal, who looked positively horrified, holding a bleeding hand to her chest where it stained her white dress. All the earlier cockiness was wiped off her face. Her eyes grazed Jongin for a second, but the shifter was staring at something above her shoulder with wide eyes, hands clawing into Kyungsoo's shoulders.
"You're boring. I don't play with boring people." Kyungsoo enunciated slowly as Krystal followed the shifter's line of sight and was faced with a creature at least three times her height with a long neck leading to fangs and leathery extremities. All of a sudden, time seemed to continue where it had left off and the creature snapped at her, big frame moving with the fluency of a spider. The girl emitted a shrill scream, lifted her arms in front of her face and vanished. The fangs closed around air with an almost metallic click, and Jongin whimpered. He wanted to tug Kyungsoo away, but they were everywhere and-
"You were supposed to close your eyes." Kyungsoo scolded him quietly. He pried Jongin's trembling hands off so he could turn around and face him. He looked completely unfazed as he lifted one of his hands to place it over Jongin's eyes. The shifter was still shaking from head to toe, hands blindly reaching out to grasp Kyungsoo's arms. Horrifying images were replaced with true, absolute darkness.
No vast, white space, no inhuman creatures threatening him, just warm fingers over his eyelids. The kiss came without a warning, short and hard, leaving Jongin gasping in surprise. He felt Kyungsoo's voice against his lips more than he heard it.
"I don't like it when you're scared." he said, a hint of disappointment in his voice. Jongin's fingers were still trembling as he trailed higher in jerky movements, cupping his shoulder with one hand and placing the other over Kyungsoo's eyes.
"Then you shouldn't be scared, either." he whispered, and with an amused huff, Kyungsoo leaned in to seek out his lips again.

The noise of the door opening was faint, but it echoed in Luhan's slumber-induced, lazy thoughts either way. Maybe only two days without the visual overload he was usually exposed to had already sharpened his other senses? He felt fingers grasping his healthy arm, but no words were spoken. "Kyungsoo?" Luhan mumbled, barely awake. The nurses and Minseok or Yixing normally talked to him. His sleeve was pulled up and when there was still no response, Luhan was roused into full
consciousness, feeling alarmed as he remembered that Kyungsoo had left earlier.
"Who is this?"
"Just a check up." a male voice replied, and when he felt something cool touching the crook of his
elbow, he ripped his arm free. The male shushed him, strong arms already grabbing his arm, and
Luhan felt helpless. His other arm was still in a cast and he didn't have the slightest idea about his
surroundings. Not being able to see anything was the worst. Trusting people blindly was worse.
"No-" he protested, tugging at his arm again and about to ask for Minseok or Yixing to be brought to
him, when the door opened a second time.
Someone was entering the room, and the man next to him gasped.
"Step away from him and let go of that syringe."
It was Minseok.
The translator felt instant relief flooding him, and the man followed suit, as far as he could tell from
the resounding clatter of something meeting the ground.
"What's going on?" he asked into the room, and despite trying to sound confident, Luhan was aware
of the tremble in his voice.
"Take that thing off, Luhan." Minseok instructed calmly, and Luhan obliged without hesitation, not
even asking what he was referring to. He'd genuinely looked forward to getting the permission and
in one swift movement, he sat up and pulled the bandages over his head, ruffling his hair in the
process.
"Finally-" Luhan exclaimed and tried to open his lids, but the visual shock was even stronger than
expected, flooding his sensitive eyes with the bright, artificial light coming from the ceiling. Wincing,
he half-tumbled off his bed, knocking into a machine before steadying himself on a wall where he
shielded his eyes with the back of his hand.
"There is no reason for you to point a weapon at me." the stranger reasoned, and Minseok huffed, his
voice laced with dark amusement.
"Oh yeah? Why do I get the feeling that you're not even
trying to protect your sorry ass?"
Luhan blinked rapidly, but the tiny motion tugged at his stitched up face, and he went to moving as
few muscles as possible. If his wounds ripped open now, he'd have a hard time protecting his eyes
from the blood.
"Ah, right. Because you know very well that you're screwed."
Everything was blurry, and his eyes were tearing up. Even though he was getting really annoyed and
impatient, Luhan tried to rub at the tears carefully.
"You have no proof." the man suddenly whispered.
With rapidly blinking eyes and one hand still protecting him from the light, Luhan squinted at the
scenery in front of him. He saw his home, some sort of tea room where half-transparent people were
spread out on cushions, a tinge of thick greenery behind it, blue sky, more transparent layers of
colors he all pushed aside in favor of focusing on the white hospital room.
There was a man wearing a lab coat over a black suit, looking strained, and then there was Minseok
standing in front of a now closed door with a gun pointed at the stranger's head. The small smirk on
his face was almost wicked and reminded him of the first time he'd met him, when drugs had
poisoned his mind and temper.
"Huh," he replied in a challenging tone, "you're alluding that I'm trying to get you arrested. Who said
anything like that?"
His voice, too, was greatly unsettling. It had an almost sadistic tinge to it, and the clearer Luhan’s
vision became, the more obvious the closed-off expression Minseok wore became.
"You... shouldn't-" the man began and his words were cut off by a flick of the pistol.
"I shouldn't. Can't help but notice you didn't say 'you wouldn't', and I'm assuming the reason is that
you know very well that I would, without hesitation." Minseok said, and while he was being quite
chatty, he was definitely not playing around. Everything about him seemed dangerous, like an animal
daring his prey to make a move.
"There are a lot of things we shouldn't do, especially not on Cyan," Minseok began, and it was as if
Luhan wasn't even present, "if you wanna get here, you gotta show curiosity and perseverance, if I
remember correctly? Luckily, I have both of those. Though they obviously brought me into a sticky situation. What do they say? Curiosity killed the cat?"

Minseok took another step forward and lowered the gun a tiny bit, to aim at the heart with earnest as his voice lowered in volume.

"Unfortunately for you, this particular cat turned out to be alive, after all--"
The door slammed open once again, and Yixing burst inside, quick to assess the situation and close the door behind him. Minseok didn't avert his gaze from the tense man, but the incident had served as an intervention. Luhan was very, very sure Minseok would have shot him on the spot. Yixing was tightly grasping the strap of a backpack, an exasperated gaze on the current situation.

"You got everything?" Minseok inquired without letting the man out of his sight.

"Yes." Yixing replied slightly breathlessly, eyes wandering towards Luhan, who tried to non-verbally share his confusion.

He itched to know what was going on, but in his slightly muddled state it would be nothing short of stupid to step into a situation that involved guns.

"Maybe you should have hidden your toys better, if he found them that easily." Minseok taunted their assaulter, who turned even paler, if that was possible.

"What are you talking about?"

"Can we cut the acting since you so clearly suck at it?" Minseok asked harshly, his patience running out as it seemed.

"Something this dangerous shouldn't be in the hands of corrupt people like you." Yixing took over firmly, turning towards Luhan.

"He's the one we told you about. The high-ranked politician who develops illegal drugs. Though I doubt that you could call these drugs, I'd rather put them in the toxic category."

So this was Choi Siwon, Luhan thought, regarding the man in a completely new light. That was the reason for Minseok's behavior - he wasn't only a criminal or drug dealer, no, he was the very person responsible for his misery. Said politician was getting frantic, shaking his head in panic.

"You don't know what you're dealing with!"

Yixing only raised an eyebrow.

"I believe I do, Sir. In all respect, I'm a certified medic and very much capable of recognizing the purpose of those substances - you aim to forcefully destroy receptors and judging by the story of this young man here," he calmly explained with a nod towards Minseok, "he was treated with the exact same substance, though it was obviously thinned down with a drug, which is not acceptable in any way-"

"Wait! Wait, listen to me!" Siwon began urgently, directed at Yixing alone.

"You have to hear me out, there's a reason for all of this, a perfect reason! Don't believe this guy, he's not in his right mind. He'll kill me, don't you see it?"

His voice was shaky, and Luhan knew it was genuine fear clouding his mind. Genuine, rightful fear, brought up by the slight smirk on Minseok's face. Yixing hesitated, observing the shorter boy whose aim was suspiciously steady. Siwon felt an upcoming breakthrough and hurried in his attempts to reason with him.

"You wouldn't let him kill me, right? You're a medic, you save lives! Even if I'm guilty of something, I should get a rightful punishment, not a bullet to the head!"

Yixing sighed quietly and his shoulders sagged a bit.

Luhan didn't know what to expect, but him suddenly raising a gun of his own, pointing it at Minseok, sure wasn't it.

"I'm sorry, but he's right." he stated ruefully, and though Minseok still didn't budge an inch, his eyes grew significantly wider as he caught a glimpse of the gun from the corner of his eyes. Luhan was rooted to the spot in utter shock. What was going on? Was Yixing not on their side? They shouldn't have trusted him this easily.

"Don't make me hurt you, Minseok," Yixing asked ridiculously politely before addressing Siwon, "I don't think it'll be long before people come to check up on this room, so I advise you to speak quickly."
The man looked hopeful and hurried to comply. "It's not meant to mindlessly harm people, definitely not! This substance has been developed in order to lower the rate of recidivists. It's simply a method to keep criminals locked up and clear the system! I don't know what your friend is talking about, but I've never seen him before, he must be imagining things. You should know better than to trust someone who isn't mentally stable!" he exclaimed, voice dripping with desperation. Luhan stared at him skeptically - he fully trusted Minseok - but Yixing appeared much more receptive.

"But how would that clear the system? What's there to clear?" he asked, looking a little interested, despite his overall reluctance.

Siwon belted out a short laugh that bordered on madness. "What's there to clear? It's a mess! Everything's a mess!"

Luhan's eyes flew between the three people, unsure what he was supposed to do. He had no weapon to threaten Yixing and make him leave Minseok alone.

"Have people tested and let them ascend with downwards compatibility? What's the goddamn point if there exist people who are smart enough to live on Blue, but choose to use their wits to rob the gullible people on Orange? How could anyone ever have a proper overview? How?" Siwon burst out and Luhan could clearly see the vein pulsing on his neck. Every ounce of respectability was gone - he was getting hysterical.

"But there will always be crimes, no matter whether we have an overview or not..." Yixing threw in slowly, probably thinking about Baekhyun, "after all, they're criminals anyway, so there's no way to stop them."

"Exactly!" Siwon fell in loudly and the translator flinched at the volume. Surely, he'd attract attention and soon there would be nurses flooding the room. This was so, so bad. He stared at Minseok, but the latter wouldn't look at him for even a second. Everything about this situation was weird and he tried to imagine what Jongdae would've done in his place. But Jongdae knew Minseok inside out, unlike him. Luhan willed himself to stay put and only jump to action if Minseok gave him a sign, however tiny it may be.

"Except you have a little panacea, which we might have found and you stuffed into your backpack." Siwon explained almost conspiratorially in the meantime.

"But if you use it as a punishment on criminals, how does it change the system?" Yixing asked, now openly confused. Luhan saw the politician's mouth twitch into a forced grin Luhan had already experienced in many facets. This guy loathed the doctor but tried to appeal to him desperately, in order to save his head.

"Think about it. If you can take out structures selectively and make people stay where they are, the whole system becomes much more save. We're in a time of change, and the government is too slow to adapt. Technology is spreading like wildfire while the white Layer is still struggling with organizing colonization. At the moment, only the blue Layer has an actual magnetic, fool-proof coordinate system, but in the near future, everyone will have it and that basically encourages criminals to go wild! This has to be prevented in advance!"

"I- I don't know..." Yixing mumbled, not entirely convinced.

"Doctor, please be reasonable! There are too many unpredictable variables - just think about all the anomalies out there! They could decide to break all of our society's rules at any second, they're the biggest threat of them all!" Siwon rambled and it seemed like he was getting exasperated over Yixing's attitude.

"I think... I get it." Yixing began tentatively, followed by an eager 'Yes?' of Siwon. Luhan held his breath. The doctor shot him a thin smile that didn't quite reach his eyes and pulled the trigger on his gun. It merely clicked.

"You should really get yourself checked up on for obsessive compulsive disorder." Yixing stated without batting an eyelash. Siwon's expression fell. "Your desire for orderliness is quite unsettling. Regarding the fact that it's strong enough to make you disregard the dignity and freedom of equals, it's safe to say you've also developed sociopathic tendencies."
Yixing lowered the obviously useless gun.  
"I'd see a doctor about that." he ended with an earnest nod.  
Minseok's lips twitched into a lopsided grin.  
"You bastard." he said in a mix of amusement and actual annoyance. Siwon cried out in anger at the unexpected turn of events.  
"No! You're destroying years worth of research!"

Yixing's expression grew hard in an instant, all pretense gone.  
"No, by aiming to lock up and eventually destroying anomalies, as you call them, you are the one destroying years worth of research material. Humans ought to be more advanced than to burn all the bridges they have. We ought to move forwards, not backwards. Your motivation isn't tolerable from a scientist's point of view."

While Yixing held his lecture, Luhan's eyes kept flitting between Minseok and Siwon. During their talk, the politician had slightly shifted, enabling Luhan to see his profile; and the way he was currently standing all hunched, even the wide lab coat couldn't hide the suspicious silhouette. Luhan had a vague idea of what he might be hiding; a weapon, possibly a communication device. At this rate, neither of the parties would get out of this unharmed. He had to do something. He blinked, calling other Layers into focus one by one. There was his home Layer, but there were so many people around and they'd attempt to catch him in an instant. Still, this was the only one he knew and had access to. Luhan took a deep breath. He just had to do it like Jongin. Flawlessly. Fluently. Forget about the nurses telling him his body was too weak for permanent shifting. Forget about his own mind and pulsing head telling him the same. There was only one shot. The floor beneath his feet broke away and the air shifted into a familiar scent of incense sticks. He took the half meter of height loss in stride and bolted ahead even before people around him began to scream.

Jongin had one day told him that to him, shifting wasn't unlike dancing. Grasping the structures was like performing a move. Knowing the movements alone wasn't enough - you had to execute them with perfected tension, had to really be in control over all the fibers in your body. Instead of only feeling the structures and exerting his mind, Luhan tried to also incorporate his body and with trained graze, he avoided the first attacker and jumped into the air, the shocked faces around him disappearing in a blur and turning into a blinding white. Before Siwon had a chance to realize it, Luhan was landing on the ground behind him, using his right hand to twist one of the politician's behind his back, tackling him to the ground in one swift motion. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Minseok immediately lowering his weapon and heard both of them gasp. His flexibility was severely limited with the cast around his other arm, but he ruthlessly slammed it into the other's back, holding him in place as well as he could while he roughly pulled at the lab coat to reveal two objects fixed on his belt. He ripped off what looked like a communication device and threw it towards Minseok, where it skidded over the floor to land beneath Minseok's heels, who crushed it without hesitation. Luhan reached for the gun next, and it shocked him how quick and routinely his fingers felt for the tiny switches, noting with delight that it was one of the modern ones, with a stun function. Two clicks and one test shot later, he slammed the metal into the back of the struggling man's neck and sent the tiny, sedating dart deep into his skin. Siwon was much broader than him, but he'd had the element of surprise on his side and the whole ordeal had gone down in no more than ten seconds. The struggles died off almost immediately and Minseok whistled lowly.  
"Sometimes, you're so frightening, Lu."

"Did you just shift midair, in your condition?!" Yixing inquired strictly, and Luhan laughed, the adrenaline rushing through his veins noisily.  
This was good, actually. Better than being bed-ridden. There was a faint buzz clouding his head, last remnants of medicaments, a piercing pain in his arm and across the strained lines of stitches, but he was free again. He felt alive and good. Without further ado, Luhan jumped to his feet, ignoring Yixing's reprimands to 'mind the splint' and with the flat palm of his hand, he mashed about all the buttons on the forgotten machinery, causing it to go haywire and start buzzing loudly.  
"He's surely called enforcements, we gotta get out of here!" he called towards the other two and
bolted for the door. Someone would probably check up on this room soon now. He was still smiling as he ran down the corridor, closely followed by Minseok and Yixing.

"Did you bastard just use me for your doctor role playing game?!!" Minseok called over towards Yixing, just as people started to panic around them, pressing themselves into the wall or fleeing into rooms to avoid them.

"At least we know exactly what he is up to now!"

"Doesn't make you look like any less of an ass! What kind of a pseudo doctor are you?"

Luhan ignored his burning muscles and slammed the handle of his gun with all his might into the glass protecting a red button while passing by.

The effect was immediate and shrill sirens howled through the building.

"Getting quite destructive, are we? Are you getting too friendly with Kyungsoo?" Minseok called over the deafening sound, and Luhan only snorted.

"Nah - I'm just being noisy, inspired by Chanyeol!"

The commotion was growing with every second and Luhan took a right turn with confidence.

"Do we know where we're going?" Yixing asked in mild interest between harsh huffs, and Minseok laughed.

"I don't know - can we count on your eyes, Luhan?"

Luhan blinked, watching the different films of colors rush by and grinned.

"You bet you can."
The minute had barely passed when the sky turned so dark it appeared black, ripping Jongdae out of his reverie.

"Do you see that?" he asked Chanyeol, who turned his head and made an unhappy noise.

"Clearly. This place is so fucked up, it's creeping me out-"

"It's not only the place. There's someone on this Layer, and this person is the reason for all of it." Jongdae explained while getting to his feet.

"You said you lost Jongin somewhere around here? Well, I'm sure Kyungsoo is with him and something tells me they won't be far from the commotion over there."

"Which person? What are you talking about?" Chanyeol asked quizzically, padding after Jongdae like a faithful puppy. Jongdae shot him a cool look over his shoulder.

"Well, you might have found out if you stayed - relax, I'm kidding, I'll tell you." he cut himself off halfway at the sight of hurt on Chanyeol's face. Jongdae wasn't too put off by Chanyeol's display of insecurity. After all, they hadn't been together for long - in due time, the overly careful boy would surely develop more faith in him and see a joke for what it is. As they trailed down the streets, trying to avoid entering buildings as much as possible, Jongdae explained everything they knew about Krystal. It wasn't much, but Chanyeol soaked up the information without questioning it, even filling a few of their blanks in between, whenever he got too overwhelmed by the realization.

"I've met her before," he cut in at one point, "Krystal and Chaerin were in their teens when they waltzed into the red Layer and began to take over. I've spent quite some time on Red when I was taking my tests, so I saw her when she was about our age? Where Chaerin is this unpredictable, hot-headed mafia boss, Krystal was always the cold business woman, all suits and heels and unimpressed stares. I never talked to her though... even I don't have to get into all the trouble I can find." he ended half-joking.

"While I can hardly agree to this statement, considering our current predicament, it's good to know you've seen her with your own eyes. That means she actually exists and considering how she's not with Chaerin anymore, she could be here."

"And if she's really as powerful as you make her out to be," Chanyeol mused on with one hand loosely draped around Jongdae's shoulder, "then I'm starting to understand what's wrong with this place. Luhan saw the same thing you saw at night, didn't he? I have no idea how she's doing it, but if she has the ability to manipulate things on such a grand scale... could it be possible that the Layer is getting porose?"

"Porose? How could the world become porose?" Jongdae asked right back, "there are no holes here, right?"

"Maybe porose is not the right term. Unstable? Imagine ripping out parts of a big knit work. You patch them up right after, sure, but you keep ripping out other big parts again and again. At some point, the yarn must get more sensitive, more worn out. I'm just speculating here."

It wasn't a stupid train train of thoughts. It definitely explained the flimsy texture of some objects. For a moment, he wondered whether Chanyeol and Sehun weren't doing the exact same thing, but it felt different. If you took away the heat from some place, it would cool off temporarily, but go back to normal soon after and there was barely any damage done. A volcano would hardly miss a patch of heat and Chanyeol didn't ever take more than that. Sehun, on the other hand, took a lot more, judging by the stories of the villagers swooning over the boy who brought endless streams of wind. Just like heat, wind was nothing but air though. Surely Sehun could cause permanent damage to the environment if he wanted to, but he wasn't ripping at the structures themselves.

Krystal, on the other hand, was doing just that. By taking what looked like buildings from the lavender Layer, she'd taken actual, solid objects. What was left on the lavender Layer now? Was there just a gaping hole in the middle of the city with nothing but flat earth? You can't just add something if there's no space, too, so did she switch both the areas? And if you repeated the process,
pushing the pieces of other Layers back and forth like a puzzle game, the mess was indeed inevitable. It could only be a matter of time before the Layers she so graciously helped herself from would frazzle at the seams as well. Not to mention the people that she'd harm eventually. Lavender may be evacuated for now, but that didn't say anything about the near future. Chanyeol agreed immediately when he voiced out his thoughts.

"There's so much about the world we don't get, it's frustrating!" Jongdae whined, swaying a bit due to the hand still resting around his shoulders.

"I feel like we really do have the lower hand, even though we're more people."

"No! No, don't say that, don't even think that, Jongdae." Chanyeol quickly fell in and halted, waiting until Jongdae looked up at him with hopelessness flickering over his features.

"All of this is about mind games; it's a question of attitude. You need to be confident. Whatever you want to do, you can. And unlike this woman, you don't need drugs to coax your mind into actually believing it. Got it?"

Jongdae nodded, mostly to comfort Chanyeol, who let it slide. Still, he was definitely right. He had his unpredictable power over thunder and the infamous phoenix at his side; and then there was this ominous substance in his back pocket. They had a chance, Jongdae just couldn't falter-

"Aww, deep in thought?"

He froze in his tracks, just as Chanyeol went into a defensive stance. *No, I'm not ready, definitely not,* Jongdae thought frantically, but put on a brave front nonetheless, lifting his gaze to finally, for the first time, see Krystal. She was sitting in one of the opened windows on the second story of a nearby building, bare feet dangling in the air. His first thought was that Kyungsoo's description had been very accurate. From where he stood, her skin was so white it reminded him of snow, whereas nothing natural came to mind as a comparison to the sheer vibrancy of her hair color.

"You should talk to us on eye level, don't you think?" Chanyeol challenged her, and in the blink of an eye, she was gone. Jongdae looked around warily, unsure of what his defensive pose would even look like, when lithe fingers suddenly danced across his shoulders from behind and then she was so close that Jongdae could've counted her freckles out of the corner of his eye.

"Right, this is kind of a first for me too. My, you're really as lovely as you always looked." she crooned, poking his cheek.

He instinctively swatted at her, jumping away and towards Chanyeol.

"Don't touch me- you're the one who's been messing with me, aren't you?" Jongdae barked in a fit of anger, rubbing over his cheek with the back of his hand.

The girl's expression turned slightly sour, and her eyes narrowed.

"That's certainly rude. You've never been taught how to be grateful, have you?" she accused him with crossed arms. Chanyeol's left hand was curled around his upper arm while the right was raised protectively, ready to strike.

"I don't see why I should be grateful to you for anything."

She laughed in exasperation.

"Of course you don't see it. You never saw me, either. Still, after all I've taught you and all the hardships I went through, you won't even acknowledge me?"

Jongdae hesitated.

"You've been manipulating my dreams and expect me to thank you for that?"

"Manipulating... I was *waking your powers,*" she argued, taking a step forward, "without me giving you incentives, you would've never discovered your potential!"

"So you've been messing with my dreams, hoping I would show a reaction?" Jongdae asked incredulously, and Chanyeol spoke up at this.

"How did you do that? Have you been giving him drugs?"

Krystal merely rolled her eyes at Chanyeol.

"God, you're so stupid. You really think medicaments work like magic potions, do you? How would that make me able to *control dreams?*" she stated with an emphasis telling them how ridiculous the whole ordeal seemed to her, "Do I look like a super scientist to you? No one can control dreams!"

"But how..." Chanyeol began, and Jongdae cut him off with disturbance written all over his face.
"Wait. I've never been dreaming, have I? I was awake, all the time..."

Krystal shot them a deeply pleased smile.

"And that's why you're my talented little kitten and not that doofus next to you!"

His mind was wiped blank, an endless white canvas where single thoughts desperately searched for the spread out dots to connect them. He'd been awake all the time. That was the reason he'd always seen Chanyeol sleeping, because he'd been doing just that.

"But..." he began slowly, tentatively even, like a hesitant student in class, "why didn't I see anyone else around me?"

"You were seeing people?" Krystal asked right back at him with a ticked off expression. Clearly, it hadn't been part of her intention, to leave him the anchor that was Chanyeol. Except for that one time, where he'd fake-dreamed about a snake biting Chanyeol and oh, he could see now how this was supposed to tickle a reaction out of him. The thought made his stomach churn in anger and disgust alike, but his brain was holding him back, still busy to make sense of everything.

"But why did nobody see me? Wait, they were asleep... except for Luhan that one time..." Jongdae mused, and Chanyeol groaned in frustration.

"Damn, I bet Kyungsoo saw it all the time!" he claimed, shaking his head, "he even mentioned a red-haired girl, why did we never think of asking him?!"

So Chanyeol remembered that, too. Jongdae definitely noticed the shadow flickering across her face at the mention of Kyungsoo.

"You didn't know he saw you? So you haven't been around all the time, huh?" he prodded, observing her closely. She huffed haughtily.

"Oh please. Of course I know he saw me. I mean, the exciting part was to let it all crumble before someone noticed, but that boy doesn't quite count."

Yes, there was definitely something going on between the lines.

"You don't... know him though. Wait, have you met him before? Talked to him?" Jongdae guessed blindly and the girl was a terrible liar, showing it in the way she blinked rapidly and turned away from them ever so slightly.

"That boy is not of importance."

"So what makes me so important? What in the world would you want from me? You do realize you're not only the creepiest stalker I've ever seen, but also tried to fucking kill me? What's wrong with you?" Jongdae burst out in an openly distraught manner. Chanyeol subtly pressed them closer, silently reassuring him and yes, he really needed that.

"I never tried to kill you, excuse me?" she retorted, looking extremely offended, "you're talking about that one time on Yellow? It's called life-saving, you ungrateful brat! There was at least one weapon pointed at your face. Another second later and they would've blown your head off!"

It startled Jongdae, since if it was true, he was the sole reason for all the other people dying. He shouldn't think about that. Not now.

"Yeah but what's it to you?!" he yelled in frustration, throwing his hands up.

"What do you want from me?!

The question seemed to puzzle her.

"Huh? Nothing in particular, I guess." she said, having the actual nerve to shrug.

"Excuse me?"

How could this girl be so completely nonchalant about this? How could all of this be some sort of joke to her?

"Well, at first I was just kind of playing with your little friend. You know, he was pretty cute and totally tripping out, so why not?"

The way she called Minseok cute made him sick. His poor friend had been suffering and she... what did she even do? Confuse him even more? Talked to him? Touched him? Jongdae wasn't even sure he wanted to know.

"He was pretty inspiring, too, you know? Such a strong, unbending mind. He sure has some potential, I thought to myself."

"But how did you even find him? Were you in on that sick experiment?!"
She actually chuckled at that.
"Oh, please," she began with an impressive eye roll, "as if Choi Siwon could get that stick out of his ass for long enough to actually cooperate with anyone who might be smarter than him. Though his idea wasn't entirely stupid - your friend is the living proof. After all, he could see me, even though I was only lingering between the structures. Not even you were able to spot me, but he could - though his talent was obviously dimmed when his body began to reject those active components in his blood."

Jongdae tried to keep a poker face, but the gears in his head were turning restlessly. Yixing had once told them that even regular shifting substances were essentially filtered drugs - in case of the dark Layers, they weren't even filtered. Were they all drug addicts, in a way, meaning that it wasn't even that morally questionable to enhance your skills with them? No, Jongdae thought vigorously, no, that wasn't right. Because real drugs were supposed to be addictive, and shifting substances very rarely caused an addiction and certainly not a painful one like Minseok had suffered from.

"Anyway... some little stimulants alone won't do it," Krystal continued calmly, tilting her head from side to side, looking way too casual considering the circumstances, "you need a few nudges into the right direction. Someone to give you ideas. I found this idea quite interesting nonetheless and sent my personal stimulants provider to try it for me. On a grand scale, obviously, cause there won't be much potential in a few forgotten criminals trapped in a blank cage."

"You're talking about Yixing." Jongdae stated warily, and he felt Chanyeol shifting restlessly, trying to connect the dots.

"I guess him seeking shelter with your group was the smartest thing I've ever seen him do." she lilted with a carefree shrug.

"Yixing didn't purposefully come to us. He didn't know. He's not using us." Jongdae argued firmly and the girl sighed, while Chanyeol spoke up impatiently.

"What are you talking about?"

"That explosion on Cyan was caused by her marionette. And I guess the stolen substances were part of the stuff used to corrupt the water and cause the epidemic on Lavender." Jongdae curtly explained, ignoring Chanyeol's gasp as his eyes remained trained on Krystal, who looked more smug than sorry.

"That's why the symptoms were so odd!" the phoenix exclaimed as realization hit him, "the news tried to be low-key, but it was essentially about disturbed perception, which is a very alarming symptom- you made all those people sick!" he barked in disbelief. An emotion that Jongdae would likely share, if he wasn't so stunned at the ridiculousness of it all.

"I made them sick... I opened their eyes, you selfish prick!" Krystal hissed, patience wearing thin, "get used to not being the most special snowflake in the world anymore! Besides, I gotta admit that I somewhat neglected that project in favor of you."

Her mood took a sharp 180 degree turn in the eery way only unstable people managed to, as her voice got sickeningly sweet during the last syllable that was directed at Jongdae.

"What about me?" he asked defensively.

"You have three times the potential, at least! Think about all the things you could do...!" she muttered, utter fascination lacing her voice. Jongdae took another step away from her.

"Like what? I already found my skill, it's about the weather, what else would there be?" Jongdae asked, genuinely confused. The girl laughed deprecatingly.

"Really? Just because others are lacking the mental strength to handle more than one measly little power, you think that's the end of the line? Come on, how else would I be able to do this?"

On cue, she moved her arm in a wide movement, and the polished stones forming the buildings turned to rough and fissured ones before Jongdae could do as much as blink. The shape remained the same, yet the structure reminded him of something you'd find in an underwater cave. It was ghostly and she didn't stop there, fluently turning the movement into a downward one, conducting the world around her. A deep, vibrant blue color followed her movement, bleeding down from the top of the buildings around them and seeping into the ground. Her hand moved up again, as if throwing an invisible ball into the air and Jongdae followed the movement with his eyes. Like an invisible
firework exploding, streaks and dots of light were strewn across the clear, deeply lilac sky, just to stay there, forming constellations and galaxies in a way he'd never seen them before. Whatever wouldn't stick to the sky, rained down on them, coating everything in white, glittering powder. Jongdae stared at the tiny crystals Chanyeol had caught on the palm of his hand. They looked like white sand. Sugar, maybe?
"You're damaging all the other Layers with those little magic tricks, stop it!" Chanyeol yelled, and this time, Krystal glared at him. With a sharp shooshing motion of her hand, the ground beneath him did something Jongdae couldn't see and it resulted in Chanyeol stumbling backwards, landing flat on his back. Jongdae protectively jumped between them in an instant, now glaring at Krystal himself. She groaned.
"Oh my god, what's with you guys and all this lovey dovey bullshit? Can't anyone look past this hormonal nonsense and focus on the things that matter?!" she hissed angrily with crossed arms but Jongdae didn't falter, tackling anger the way he always did - with stoic calm.
"If people come first in my book, there's nothing you can do against that." he stated, not budging an inch.
"But what about the bigger picture? How can your mind be so small that it's fully drunk on something this basic? There is so much more to discover, so many things we might achieve!" she insisted and Jongdae felt Chanyeol forcing himself against his side, unwilling to hide. It was his presence that lit something in Jongdae.
"You're... you're just like those scientists," he uttered in disbelief, "you're exactly the same! You keep pushing the borders, which isn't even bad in itself, but you're exploiting these skills in disregard of other living beings and even the whole world around you - you think doing this is okay, just because you can? This is the type of behavior that prevents actual research! You're spreading nothing but fear and chaos in the long run! Just thinking about all the people who already died from your little games makes me sick!"
"Who cares about minor sacrifices?!" she argued right back, not even faltering in her stance. Jongdae thought back to his parents. To Yifan, who was content with his simple life, to the maids that had pampered them on the yellow Layer and to all the people dancing and singing on Red.
"I care. Those people you call minor and inferior? I've met them. They all deserve to live their lives. I fucking care and I wouldn't even dream of joining you. The mere idea disgusts me." Jongdae spat with all the resent he could muster. Krystal looked deeply offended, as if he'd slapped her across the face. Her expression closed off into one of a challenging smirk, and Jongdae felt an immediate shudder running down his back.
"I see. Well, I don't beg. I could just drop you. But if you care oh so much for all your friends that it clouds your vision, I could just as well take them all out to test whether you'll see clear, then." she ended with a lighthearted smile, and Chanyeol roughly pulled him backwards just in time as the ground crumbled away. Jongdae clearly noticed he wouldn't have been harmed with the hole stretching over the part Chanyeol was standing on and since she was trying not to harm Jongdae, he did the first thing coming to mind - staying as close to his lover as possible, mashing his back into Chanyeol's chest with his hands lifted in defense. Before he could do as much as think of his next step, Krystal had vanished out of sight and reappeared behind Chanyeol, a silver knife gripped tightly with both hands as she aimed for his neck. Not missing a beat, Chanyeol twisted backwards to catch her hand in the process and Jongdae gave him room to move his other hand as well, which reached for the blunt side of the knife without hesitation and the metal melted with a sharp hiss. Krystal only cried out and let go of it when her skin started to blister. So she didn't feel the heat but it clearly affected her body. Jongdae felt utterly useless. He could do nothing but observe, wait for a weakness to show up and let Chanyeol know - after all, he couldn't fight. He couldn't strike her with lightning, she was too close. He couldn't risk hitting Chanyeol, there was no way he'd recover from instant heart failure through electrocution.
With a furious yell, she jumped back and flailed both her arms in a wide motion, clapping them together. Jongdae instinctively wanted to back away from the girl, but Chanyeol was much more quick witted, pulling him towards her and avoiding the avalanche of stones closing in out of
nowhere. She vanished again, and this time it was Jongdae tugging at Chanyeol. "She can't teleport, she's just invisible; the time periods she needs to get anywhere vary - we gotta keep in motion!" he belted, but it was easier said than done, moving unpredictably together. Still, Jongdae refused to let go of Chanyeol, and they aimlessly tumbled away from where they'd last seen her. Before they could attempt to seek shelter in one of the nearby buildings, there was water flooding out of every window, bursting through doors, and he whirled around to see Krystal standing there, grinning delightedly as she lifted both hands with palms facing upwards. Just like that, the water was there, rising up quicker than physics could react to it, pressing down on him, and he felt his feet losing contact with the ground. At first instinct, he held his breath and looked up, water burning in his open eyes. He could see the surface dimly glowing in the distance, but if they swam up now and she'd will the water away, they'd fall. Next to him, Chanyeol had both hands firmly clasped over his mouth and nose, eyes squeezed shut and in front of them floated Krystal, looking completely fine and eyeing the struggling phoenix with cruel amusement. Right. If she could survive like this, so could they, Jongdae thought. This Layer was porose anyway, meaning it should be additionally easy to keep his body functioning. His confidence took a blow when the first inhale through his nose left him spluttering, but it also added a certain lack of fear due to desperation. He pressed his palms over his nose as an additional protection from the water and the second inhale was clean, much needed air. Just like the one he was used to, yes. He could do this. It cost his utmost concentration to calm his hammering heart and when he drifted over to Chanyeol, the latter was still fighting the battle against oxygen, flailing uncontrollably with one arm when he decided to swim upwards. Jongdae pulled at his shirt and Chanyeol stared at him fearfully, intertwining their fingers. Clearly, he was panicking, and this added to Jongdae's determination as he made a show of removing the hand he'd clasped over his own face, flashing him a soothing grin as he inhaled deeply, just to exhale bubbles. He repeated the gesture, supported by hand movements, coaxing Chanyeol into following him. It was incredibly easy, now that he was acting confident for Chanyeol. Every inhale prove just how easy and natural it was, but Chanyeol struggled and his first attempt resulted in violent coughing, making him lose even more of the precious oxygen in his lungs. Through the burst of bubbles, Jongdae saw Krystal's lips twitch into a smile as she patiently waited for Chanyeol to simply drown, her eyes not straying from Jongdae, gauging him with satisfaction written all over her face. Jongdae steadied his shoulders and without thinking much, wrenched Chanyeol's hand off his face to replace it with his own, pressing the inside of his wrist to Chanyeol's lips, all but demanding a kiss. Just like the first time, and the many times after that. He saw Chanyeol's breath hitching in surprise, his brain too startled to remind him of the water and saw his chance. With his lips repeatedly brushing against his birthmark, he closed his eyes and gradually relaxed, pouring all his focus into this task alone. Small, necessary inhales through his nose evened out slowly, and Jongdae watched over his shoulder to observe Krystal, who looked extremely ticked off and the way her hair billowed around her head made her appear even more surreal. He had to understand her capabilities and limits, but so far, he barely knew anything other than the fact that she was using movements as an outlet to strengthen her focus, not unlike Chanyeol. If only they could stop her somehow, but even though Jongdae had the syringe, he couldn't get close enough to use it. Maybe with a gun would do the trick? Still, they were underwater and wherever Jongdae's bag had floated off to, it was out of reach and he lacked the skill to call forth something as complex as a gun. Chanyeol might be able to do it though, considering that he actually understood the mechanics and knew the little parts like that back of his hand. Before he could finish this thought, Krystal moved her hand in a slow, downward motion and Jongdae felt the water's pressure increasing and Chanyeol clawing into his arm as he tried to stay unaffected. No, Chanyeol was out of it, Jongdae had to do something, now. 

In mere seconds, all the odd scenarios Krystal had made him see flashed before his eyes. Stars falling like snowflakes, Oceans made of foam, an upside down world. He tried it with a hand motion, tried to imitate the girl, but nothing happened and she looked at him with an expression of open mock. Jongdae extinguished the last little flame of doubt sparked by her looking down on him and rested
his hand on Chanyeol's shoulder instead. There was no need to copy her, if he could just do it. His senses prickled as his conscious spread through the masses of water and he flipped the world. A surprisingly gentle pull surrounded them as all the water was flooding upwards, pushed by foreign gravity as if the sky were to take back endless hours of rain. The world darkened as the sky turned into an ocean. And just like that time in the clock tower, Jongdae looked up at the world that had turned upside down, disregarding him - and the boy he was half-embracing from the side, taking in greedy breaths of dry air. The expression on Krystal's face was a mix of fascination and disbelief and suddenly, Jongdae knew what he had to do.

"What, you're surprised? I thought you could do everything?" he called out tauntingly, purposefully cocking an eyebrow in a manner he knew infuriated short-tempered people. He had to chip at her confidence, had to make her lose control and gain the upper hand. It was easier for him - after all, he had an anchor, right beside him. She was all alone; no one protected her mind from consuming itself.

"Baekhyun would cut her hands off-" Chanyeol mumbled between harsh breaths, but Jongdae only squeezed his shoulder in response.

"Don't think I didn't notice the way you talked about Kyungsoo," he continued with a very casual grin, "the way you complained about our lovey dovey bullshit, as you called it, together with that darkened sky earlier made it very obvious, you know?"

She looked furious and ready to yell at him, but Jongdae didn't let himself be interrupted, merely raising his voice in retaliation.

"He rejected you as well, didn't he? Kyungsoo didn't take shit from you. I bet he kicked your ass, didn't he?"

"Shut up!" she screeched hysterically and the world around them flickered. Jongdae just kept smiling, though it grew more condescending.

"You dared to lay a finger on Jongin - of course he'd fuck you up. You're lucky you're alive. Sucks to be put into your place, huh?"

With a snarl, she jumped forwards but Jongdae had expected this and reacted in a flash.

Seize the opportunity, Chanyeol rushed forward to attack her, ignoring Jongdae's shocked cry.

"No, don't go near her-"

He saw anger contorting her features into a snarl and while Chanyeol was quick, he wasn't naturally ruthless, unlike her. Jongdae could only watch as the two engaged in hand to hand combat that consisted less of precise techniques and more of bitter despair. He could see the air jitter and from the way the girl hissed angrily, he assumed Chanyeol's body was too hot for her to hurt him with bare hands, but that didn't stop her from aiming for his face. The moment Chanyeol managed to grasp her wrists, a nasty hissing sound told Jongdae that he'd do good on his earlier suggestion of severing them. With a yelp, the girl disappeared again, using her invisible state to land a kick against the side of Chanyeol's knee and though the phoenix was determined not to let go, another sudden impact sent him tumbling, one hand flying to his bloody face. His back collided with a net of thick vines that hadn't been there a second before and Jongdae only managed one step towards the mess, mind already thinking about getting rid of the fleshy ropes, when they moved and Chanyeol was caught mid-air, strung up and kept in place. The plants already began to sizzle where they wrapped around him, but he was lifted higher and higher, too high to just take a fall.

"Wait! Don't burn them!" Jongdae yelled up at him and the other actually stopped, holding onto the
vines with all his might as his eyes darted around for a solution. Krystal became visible again, standing in the air in front of him, lifting a heavy, broken brick with both of her shaking hands. The following sound was nasty, followed by a scream and Jongdae swore he felt a warm drop hitting his face from above. He was getting frantic, panicked even and a second muffled scream followed before Jongdae called out to him, all trace of calm control gone.

"Burn them anyway! Come down here, Chanyeol!"

It took a second longer than it should have cost an unblemished Chanyeol and this mere second alone froze all the blood in Jongdae's body. Still, he fell eventually and Jongdae heard Krystal scream in frustration, throwing the heavy stone after him and missing, thankfully. Jongdae called forth the water from earlier, playing it safe with a sensation that was deeply embedded in his mind as he reached for the vivid memory of that time where he'd shifted and landed in water to really imagine its depth. In an instant, the water was back, enveloping Jongdae all around and soothing Chanyeol's fall, who emerged with a stream of bubbles, sinking almost all the way down to the ground. Jongdae's mind was strong and resolute; it caused no trouble at all, to have this ridiculous amount of water sink into the ground as if he was watering an especially thirsty plant. It just happened at his will and he really was getting the hang of this. Jongdae was already approaching Chanyeol before the ground had dried properly, but the other looked completely unscathed as he met him halfway. Jongdae was overcome by relief at his clean face and self-assured grin.

"Worrying about the phoenix again? Have some faith!" he exclaimed, and Jongdae grinned weakly and went back to searching for Krystal. While he was able to sort of keep up with her, this had to end as soon as possible - the girl was being cornered and got more and more out of control.

"Chanyeol? I need a stun gun, hell, I'll take a regular one as well! Can you get one?" he asked without sparing him a glance.

"Get? I don't think-"

"Don't think, then," he cut him off in a quick, but not aggressive way, "I know you can, you know those things by heart and the structures of this Layer are super porose, you said it yourself - look at all the things I've been able to do! Just try, okay?"

"O-okay." Chanyeol stammered, and Jongdae took a couple steps ahead, to get a good overview on the buildings surrounding him, eyes darting especially between the windows, somehow expecting to find her leisurely sitting there. But she was furious now. Furious and scared. Jongdae didn't have a real plan, he just wanted to distract her until Chanyeol could get his hands on a weapon that was too quick and precise for her to avoid. There was always the possibility of striking her with lightning and quite frankly, Jongdae wouldn't hesitate a second at this point, but she was still invisible.

"You really just use your abilities for him, don't you?" a shrill voice sounded from somewhere around him, thankfully not remotely close to Chanyeol, who had closed his eyes, brows knitted in concentration.

"So what?!" he retorted, mostly to keep her talking and pinpoint her location. "He's not even real!" she claimed in exasperation.

"Your mind games are lost on me!" Jongdae said, and he meant it. It was like having someone doubt your existence, it did nothing to him.

"You're just delusional!" she claimed from somewhere, and Jongdae had the nerve to laugh.

"You should be the last person to tell me that!" he argued right back despite everything and then he finally got it.

She was delusional because she was high. That meant...

"So you think we're both delusional?" she asked and broke into a giggle.

"That means we're both the same? So funny. You think you're all that and that's why you excel at this game, but you have no idea-"

Jongdae looked back at Chanyeol, who hadn't moved an inch, eyes still closed tightly.

"Stay like this, do not open your eyes." he whispered, which went overheard by the hysterical woman.

"because at the end of the day, we're the same! Your blood is already corrupted, like mine!"

Jongdae covered his own eyes with one hand, while the other reached into his back pocket, getting a tight hold of the syringe Yixing had given him.
"You've opened your eyes once and you'll never be able to take it back!"
Jongdae pictured the lightning across the black canvas he was seeing. Not the dimmed down lightning that was easy on his eyes, but pure, powerful, blinding white. He didn't even need to see it, he just knew it was happening. Multiple streaks of light crashed down around him with a sound so deafening that it drowned out any other noise, assaulting his ears like a wave, and Jongdae swayed lightly, mostly from surprise. Still, the thunder was his. They were one and that also included the noise he all but soaked up in order to hear the shrill scream as blinding light hit Krystal's sensitive, dilated pupils. He opened his eyes to see a crumpled bundle lying on the ground nearby and jumped towards her. She was crying, cursing intelligibly while holding both hands over her eyes. She may be able to blur out pain, but her body still remained human and so she was momentarily blinded, unable to put up notable resistance as Jongdae pressed her down with one hand and roughly forced the syringe into the side of her neck without further ado. At first, she didn't even flinch, probably didn't even feel the prick of the needle or substance coursing through her veins. In a matter of seconds though, she started screaming in true agony, and Jongdae jumped away from the convulsing body.
Would this kill her?
Seeing a body being wrecked by pain of this level without visible injuries was horrifying. Gasping, gurgling noises were chased by pathetic whimpers as she attempted to scratch open her own throat desperately. He was starting to actually consider ending her suffering when she passed out from the pain, crumpling together in a twitching mass of muscles. The shock froze him in place, and for a few seconds, he did nothing but listen to his own, ragged breathing. Then he turned around to face Chanyeol, to tell him they did it, to ask him for a hug, to see his face - but he wasn't there. Jongdae blinked rapidly, taking shaky steps in the direction he'd last seen Chanyeol in. There was no one.
Turning in circles, Jongdae scoped out the area. He'd been right there, trying to get a gun, maybe he'd left for another Layer, maybe-

*He's not even real!*

His heart stopped for a second. That mad woman had been right. Chanyeol wasn't here. *You're just delusional!*

He had been imagining Chanyeol to fight with him this whole time. She'd been right. All his confidence was forcefully stripped away when he realized that he had actually become the victim of his own mind. In order to feel confident, he'd made it all up. How could he ever trust himself again? Then he saw him, a bundle of limbs lying forgotten at the far end of the open area. Dismissing his worries, Jongdae ran towards him, crouching in the dust without hesitation. There was blood everywhere, so much that it formed a puddle, and it was impossible to tell its exact source. Scratches and bruises littered his face, and his breathing was shallow, but there was no doubt about his identity.

"Chanyeol!" he exclaimed in open panic, shaking his shoulder carefully, but his own hand was trembling so hard that he was probably being way too rough. The boy was unconscious, and even like that, the blood kept seeping out of his wounds. Silently, deadly. Jongdae saw the heavy, bloody stone lying nearby and cursed. The point where reality had slipped through his fingers - it must've been around the time Chanyeol got hurt. He'd probably hit something on the way down, causing him to lose conscious, and Jongdae's brain had refused to handle it.

"Get up, Chanyeol. Come on, wake up! We gotta leave this place!"

It was no use. He carded his shaky fingers through the other's bloody hair, patted his cheeks, pushed at his shoulder, never stopped calling out to him. He had to wake up to heal himself, if he stayed unconscious like this, he'd just... In a fit of panic, Jongdae gave him a small zap of static by touching his hand, and the muscles twitched in reaction. Jongdae even heard his breath hitch. He was still alive.

"Chanyeol, come on. We have to get Soo and Jongin, remember?" he babbled, carefully giving him another one. Was that a twitch of his eyebrow?

"And I wanna kiss you, so get. Up."

A last one, and finally, Chanyeol's face scrunched up in discomfort, and he groaned. Jongdae wanted to weep with joy. Or maybe he was crying already, there was no time to properly assess this. He could see how the pain kicked in, and Chanyeol sat up far too quickly, with wide eyes roaming his own injuries.

"Fuck." he muttered, touching the wound across his chest with his open palm and flinching away violently.

"Do you think it's possible to feel your lungs?" he asked in an unnaturally high pitch, and the mere use of his voice had him suppressing a cough, the palm pressed over the bloody mess on his upper body. Jongdae shushed him, one hand going back to pet his sticky locks.

"Don't worry. You're a phoenix. You can heal that." he claimed shakily, eyes still inevitably drawn in by the wound and trying not to puke at the sight of glistening flesh and other things he refused to identify. A few seconds passed, and Chanyeol suppressed another cough that had him retching. Jongdae's arm was splattered with stray blood, and Chanyeol was shaking so violently that it was impossible to keep him still. His free hand was repeatedly running up his own neck in a jumpy fashion, as if searching for something, and Jongdae immediately connected the dots. He was reminded of that time he got shot. On top of the current stress, the incident had triggered him, causing
the traumatic past event to resurface. At this rate, he'd spiral deeper into panic, and without his focus, he'd lose control over his healing ability.
"Don't." Jongdae almost yelled, both hands cupping Chanyeol's face, almost squishing him as he forced the other to look his way. His eyes were wide and full of fear - nothing but raw, primal fear. "Don't look at it. Don't even think about it. Do you remember our first kiss?"
Chanyeol was shaking, lips parting but no sound escaping. Jongdae added more vigor to his words. "Our first kiss, Park Chanyeol. You better fucking remember!"
He looked helpless with his eyes turning glassy, but replied nonetheless with slurry, barely audible words. "'n the forest?"
Jongdae shook his head.
"That one doesn't count. On the lips, a real kiss. Do you remember or not?!" he asked, no, demanded, and Chanyeol clawed at his upper arms, making an indiscernible sound in the back of his throat. Jongdae didn't let him off this easily, voice stern and slow.
"Words, Chanyeol. Do you remember?"
"Y-yes." Chanyeol croaked, and at this, Jongdae's gaze finally softened. He was with him, at least a little.
"Good. Baekhyun always praised you for being such a great actor, so I think I can ask this of you." he proposed this with his thumbs rubbing slow circles into the other's bloody skin.
"Let's stage a play, let's re-enact our first kiss, okay?"
Chanyeol looked confused and his breath was still shallow, but if Jongdae wasn't completely mistaken, one of the minor cuts on his face had already healed, simply because his brain had forgotten to keep track of it with all the other injuries and Jongdae demanding his attention, resulting in the skin turning to the default state Chanyeol usually perceived it.
"I'm just not happy with my reply, I wanna have a do-over. You wouldn't deny me that, right?"
Chanyeol nodded ever so slightly and leaned in, but Jongdae stopped him as gently as he could.
"Nu-uh. I wanna have a perfect performance, okay? It has to be exactly the same. You got me? Exactly the same. So let me give you the cue and take this seriously, will you?" Jongdae demanded, eyes seeking Chanyeol's, who blinked but followed his instructions, even though it obviously cost him everything to focus and not break down.
Jongdae cleared his throat and recalled the memory he'd surely never, ever forget.
"Can we maybe take it slow?" he began, his own voice slightly shaky as he tried to act his part, "See where it goes?"
The way Chanyeol looked at him was flustering Jongdae even now, of all times. It certainly was there, beneath the hazy film of delirium - a hint of the warm, intense look of genuine wonder and adoration that made Jongdae feel like he was worth much more than he could ever see in himself.
"I-I can't promise you anything right of the bat but still... Yeah. I do like you." Jongdae proposed, his voice breaking off into a whisper towards the end, their gazes never breaking.
And alright, there was no denying Chanyeol's nice acting abilities any longer. There was no way he really felt the same relief, no way that the second proposal would make him smile like this again, but he did just that, before leaning in to kiss him. A part of Jongdae's brain was actually mourning over the fact that this time, as well, he had no mind to just sink into it and enjoy his second first kiss, because there was everything at stake. Chanyeol's life was at stake, but at the same time he really mustn't let him know. In no way could Jongdae show the slightest insecurity; if this was supposed to work, he had to play it off well, get Chanyeol into it. He'd once told him that healing worked like the pull, that it was a mind thing. So if Chanyeol really, really re-lived those times where he'd been healthy... it could work, his body would adapt, and that's why Jongdae had to give his all and forced himself not to move his lips immediately, staying awkwardly still instead, trying to ignore the wet feeling of his chest getting drenched in blood. He actually sighed in relief when Chanyeol picked up on it, nipping at his lips just like he'd done back then. Maybe it was good that Jongdae was trying so hard to recreate the scenario and was therefore probably coming across as rather unresponsive - after all, the familiarity of kissing Chanyeol could hardly be taken away. Jongdae placed his palm on
Chanyeol's cheek and although he was late, the way his own hand snaked up to rest in Jongdae's neck wasn't forced. They went through all of it, from gentle presses of lips to awkward attempts at kissing with tongue with Jongdae being purposefully clumsy and spurring Chanyeol on by pressing his hand between the other's shoulder blades. In retrospect, Jongdae kinda got how this particular move had been misinterpreted, but the way the other retaliated by kissing him harder, upper body pressing up against the nearest wall, was still very much worth it. The position was slightly uncomfortable, seeing as they were still seated on the ground. The moment Chanyeol attempted to make himself room by prying Jongdae's legs open, Jongdae could state with utter certainty that the noises leaving their lips weren't faked at all.

Just in time, he remembered pushing him away around this point and that's what he did. With both palms placed on Chanyeol's shoulders, he pushed the other off and though reluctantly, he complied with a dazed expression that lingered on Jongdae's wet lips. Jongdae, on the other hand, was perfectly focused on trailing a single finger across Chanyeol's slightly sweaty throat, over his clavicle and lower, dipping into the hole in his bloody shirt. He slowly traced a whole circle across the perfectly smooth skin before his heart dared to jump in glee, lips twitching into a smile. The muscles twitched beneath the tip of his finger, and he saw Chanyeol's eyes flitting down to see what he was up to. With every blink, the haze was lifted as he stepped out of his role and back to reality bit by bit.

Their gazes met and ultimately, not a lot had changed in Chanyeol's expression. The Park Chanyeol whose life had just been saved was looking at him the exact same way the Chanyeol receiving a flimsy proposal and permission for a kiss had done, just a few weeks ago. It would be a lie to say it was the first time Jongdae felt this right, but it was still an amazing observation. Meanwhile, Chanyeol's expression changed into one of mirth as he tilted his head, waiting for... oh. Waiting for Jongdae to re-phrase his initial reaction.

Instead of withdrawing his probing finger, Jongdae snaked his whole palm through the fabric hole and across his chest. The shirt was still drenched in blood and downright disgusting, but Jongdae's relief over the pumping heart beneath his warm skin pushed everything else aside. His voice dropped to a whisper, eyes playfully flitting up to Chanyeol's.

"Why did we stop again?"

And just like that, they both grinned. Grins turned to chuckles and hugs, hugs to another kiss. "God, I love you so much." Chanyeol breathed into his hair, and Jongdae felt his insides twist from feeling overwhelmed, flustered and happy all at once. He hugged him harder, hiding his face in his neck as he put up his best whiny voice. "What's with you? You can't be like this, you've already confessed first, you ought to wait for me to say it!"

"Hmm... you took too long." Chanyeol hummed back in content, attempting to snuggle even closer, though that was hardly possible. With the shadow of a smile still lingering on his lips, Jongdae pried him off and gathered every scrap of courage he had, looking him firmly in the eyes. This wasn't a joke, he wouldn't laugh out his reply, hiding away. He had to do it right.

"I-"

Jongin! I'm glad you're alright!"

Jongdae flinched and raised his head to see Jongin approaching from a nearby building, Kyungsoo in tow. Instantly, he jumped to his feet and crossed the distance to draw the shifter into a firm hug under the crinkling eyes of Chanyeol, who was more fond than exasperated over how quickly Jongdae had dropped him.

"Jongin! It's so good to have you back, did you get hurt?" Jongdae asked in genuine worry, hands roaming his back as if searching for a wound without actually letting him go. The shifter mumbled something along the lines of getting squished and when Jongdae did draw away, he looked puzzled and slightly overwhelmed.

"I... have no idea what this was all about, but it was pretty nice, actually." he mumbled with a shy smile tugging at his lips. In response to Jongdae's puzzled look, Chanyeol piped up, explaining about
the shifter's memory loss. As a result, Jongdae only coddled him harder, attempting to make up for lost time. All the while, he made eye contact with Kyungsoo, and they shared a smile of mutual understanding. The moment Chanyeol approached the shorter, Kyungsoo kept him at distance by poking through the hole in his shirt.

"Ow- I guess you're angry with me, huh?" Chanyeol laughed sheepishly, but the other tilted his head, blank stare only bothering to fixate on him for a split-second as he crossed his arms.

"No. You saved Jongin. I'm not angry..." he trailed off, tilting his head a little more, and Chanyeol self-consciously looked down at his bloodied garment.

Before he could say anything, Kyungsoo beat him to it.

"I think I can see your nipple."

"What?! Can you not say that in such a deadpan voice?!" Chanyeol whined, tugging at his shirt and looking thoroughly flustered. "What am I even supposed to do with this information?!"

Kyungsoo had the nerve to grin, and Jongdae couldn't contain his traitorous smile either, causing Chanyeol to complain even louder. The sound was drowned out by nearby noise, and Jongdae's eyes immediately sought out Krystal, who was still lying on the ground, unmoving. Everyone else tensed up as well, unconsciously stepping closer towards each other.

"And I'm telling you guys, I heard them, we should go this way!" a very familiar voice bickered from a close distance.

"There are so many buildings, let's search for a vantage point-"

Jongdae folded both hands to his mouth and yelled into the vague direction the voices came from.

"Suck it up, Min! You can't always be right!"

If Jongdae thought he was feeling ecstatic, the other three quickly prove him wrong. They all looked disheveled and out-of-breath, but brimming with energy. Luhan was grinning from ear to ear as he showed Jongin what a truly squishing hug looked like - despite wearing a splint - and even Minseok looked completely relaxed, no trace of tension or worry to be found as he nodded appreciatively into the round.

"I see you're coping alright?" he casually asked Jongdae, who shrugged, mimicking his mood.

"Obviously. You think I can't get anything done by myself? Kidding, man. I'm just fucking glad we're all back together. I didn't know you were planning to escort us? What are you guys up to?"

Minseok only raised a brow and shrugged.

"Oh, you know. The usual. Fleeing from a manic politician trying to overthrow the system and aiming for world domination in the long run."

"Well, if you phrase it like that, it sounds even more ridiculous." Yixing added amicably, looking unfazed by the statement and in overall high spirits.

"I think the correct response to this would be 'lol.," Luhan piped up from behind, "but then again, that's basically Baekhyun's default response, so I can't be too sure."

Jongdae did smile at this. Funny, how perpetual danger ended up making him so blissfully ignorant about it. His gaze followed Yixing, who strolled away and towards the passed out girl. He decided to keep him company, leaving the happy chatter behind, and Chanyeol followed him silently, unwilling to separate and remove his hand from his waist. Jongdae didn't complain. He stopped next to the doctor, who was crouched on the ground, reluctant to measure her blood pressure. Yixing should naturally loathe her for all she'd done, but despite not knowing him too well, Jongdae suspected he was more complex than that. For a few seconds, they all looked down at the sleeping girl, who was twitching from time to time.

"Too thin." Yixing finally mumbled, carefully turning her lower arm to expose the inside that was littered with little bruises.

"Extremely obvious indication of excessive use of syringes including bruises and scars. I don't think there's a need to inspect her eyes for dilated or constricted pupils."

His diagnosis came out calm and collected, no audible hate hiding in between the lines. At the very best subtle bitterness. Jongdae hummed.

"Dilated." he added a moment later. Yixing replied with an acknowledging 'ah', and silence fell upon them once more, playful banter making for a dull background noise.
Jongdae wasn't sure what to make of this whole situation. They had taken her ability to shift, probably forever. The punishment was harsh, but there was no doubt she not only deserved it - it was probably for the better. Jongdae could just kill her, too. She messed with him for the sake of entertainment and killed an unknown number of people. Still, there was no denying that she had saved his life. She didn't exactly do it for him, so Jongdae told himself he was also not doing this for her. By sparing her life, he was merely keeping his conscience pure. The true reason for the heavy feeling in his stomach lay elsewhere.

_Think about all the things you could do._

It was both amazing and shocking what kind of skills humans could not only develop, but acquire with the help of medicaments. Was it exciting, to think about the possibilities, to perpetually be able to shape the world around you, to wander between the structures and discover even more abilities? Yes. Exhilarating, actually. Jongdae would be a fool to deny it. At the moment, everything was very restricted with very few seers and shifters. People feared those who could do as much as shift to more than five Layers. There was so much they could show the world, so much good they could do... but at what cost?

Jongdae sighed soundlessly, the earlier confrontation fresh on his mind and yet surreal beyond words. He knew the price already, had experienced it first hand - the enhanced abilities demanded your sanity, ate away at it bit by bit. It was a dangerous game and losing could come so very easily. It was terrifying. One moment, Jongdae thought he had it all under control, the next his mind had taken the decisive step over a cliff of no return.

Jongdae's hand absently wandered to cover Chanyeol's on his waist. Krystal had looked down on Chanyeol. She'd depicted him as weak for his limited range of skills. Jongdae disagreed. He believed Chanyeol was strong, stronger than Krystal and certainly stronger than him at this point. His mind was flexible but he didn't get lost. He knew how to keep focused and had mastered a fixed set of skills, unlike Jongdae, who had been swept away by the ocean of possibilities. Throughout the whole ordeal, Chanyeol had never once doubted what was real. He hadn't doubted Jongdae, the world or himself. This, Jongdae respected deeply. He may not know the words for it now, but he planned to thank the other as soon as this changed. For being there for him, for being his anchor.

"So... what now?" Minseok asked in a surprisingly quiet voice, and Jongdae wondered when the others had stopped chatting, for when he turned around they were all there, looking at him with expectant eyes. When had they come over, how long had they been standing there?

"You're asking *me* that?" he countered, quite dumbfounded.

Minseok smiled dimly, but sincerely nonetheless.

"Yeah."

Jongdae blinked, gaze seeking everyone's expressions. Each of them seemed genuinely willing to let Jongdae decide. He looked at Luhan's confident smile, the slightly bloody scars across his face long forgotten. At the stoic, but patiently waiting Kyungsoo, and Jongin, who was tucked against his side, still slightly bedazzled and staring at him in naive adoration. Down at Yixing, who remained crouched on the floor, smiling neutrally. Up, to see Chanyeol's reassuring grin and back to his best friend, who had shaken off the rush of adrenaline in favor of fresh determination.

"I think... I know what to do." Jongdae said slowly, looking over at Luhan.

"Can you tell me which Layers you see?"

Luhan told him.

Jongdae found the perfect one among them.
"Are you ready?"
Cheers sprinkled over the sound of a pumping bass. The idols did their best to stick to the choreography in the blinding sunlight for the crowd of energetic people pressing up to each other in the crowded stadium, sharing both the thrill and exertion.
"I said are you ready?!!"
Jongdae's first impression was pure, scorching sunlight and a wave of noise. It was amazing, how the air itself could speak of life. Now that the scents of summer, sweat and hot metal were invading his senses, Jongdae realized how dead Krystal's Layer had been.
It took surprisingly long, though a few startled screams did immediately reach him, as they appeared in the back of the stage, openly on display - seven people appearing out of nowhere, two of them bloodied from head to toe and another carrying a passed out girl. It was bound to cause a disaster. Still, it took the startled reaction of the idols themselves to ignite actual panic. The backtrack stopped as the stars jumped away from them, though they could only back away towards the stage's front.
Jongdae could hear the security yelling, but he stayed perfectly calm, shooting a patient glance towards Minseok. Said one roughly dragged Luhan with him as he stepped towards the front, presenting him to the whole crowd and pressing a gun to his head. Judging by the level of screams, Luhan was playing his part as gullible victim well enough. Whatever the security was planning, they now had to tread carefully, assuming Luhan's life was on the line. Not to mention that Yixing was aiming a completely useless gun at them. Kyungsoo just kept an eye on the passed out Krystal, who had been laid on the ground, before Jongin took a hesitant step away from her.
Minseok stretched out his free hand, impatiently gesturing for one of the idols to hand over the microphone.
A brunette girl gave in, handing him the object with trembling fingers. He fired a shot into the air and it was shocking how casually Minseok pulled it off.
"The next person who moves is gonna regret it!" he called into the mic.
This put an abrupt hold on the movement in the crowd and while they were still terrified, they at least stopped trampling each other.
"And will you shut up?!" Minseok added quite aggressively and the last murmurs died down.
Jongdae extended an expectant hand towards the closest idol, a young man with partly bleached hair. He complied fearfully, one arm slung around his fellow band member protectively. Jongdae fumbled for the switch on the microphone, tapping it twice and almost flinching at the volume. Not from sheer nerves; just because he hadn't expected it. Jongdae was eerily calm, after all. He stepped towards the center of the stage, lifting the microphone to his lips.
"We're not intending to hurt anyone," he proclaimed first, "if you just let us do this small announcement, we'll be gone before you know it."
Clearly, this wasn't enough to put the panicked people at ease, but it was something.
"You may not know me, scratch that, you certainly don't know me. I'm basically a nobody. Who you might know instead-" Jongdae began, turning to pull Chanyeol next to him by his upper arm, ",-is this person."
Again, it took a while until the collective had gotten the general idea. Jongdae still voiced it out loud.
"Yes, it's the phoenix. The big, bad, evil phoenix who you all thought was dead. See the blood? You think he attacked someone? Wrong. He was attacked. By whom? Well, this time it was a mad criminal, but it could just as well have been an official. A police officer, a scientist, a casual citizen. It could have been anyone, because there is neither place nor peace for someone like him - no matter how hard he tries to hide and cower away from a world that doesn't want him. Does he look scary to you? Cause if the cameras are still on close up, you could see how much he's shaking."
It wasn't a lie. Chanyeol looked deeply distressed by all the attention, all wide eyes and tense fingers buried in the back of Jongdae's shirt. It looked like he was subtly trying to hide himself behind Jongdae, which was obviously a ridiculous attempt.
"Today, someone who is very close to me almost died." Jongdae continued with firm determination.
"Yes, he was not 'normal'. He can shift to more Layers than the day has hours, he can make metal melt purely with touch and heal his own wounds. Monstrous, huh? But you see this?"
He raised his hand to present the dried blood on his palm and fingers, eliciting more murmurs, a whisper of the wind that was hundreds of lips.

"It looks just like my blood. You can't tell it's from him, can you? Because he's exactly like us. No matter how many damn colors we inject, our blood is still red at the end of the day. None of you have actively harmed him, I get that. But we've all spent the last weeks running and hiding. We've been pushed to commit crimes to survive. Crimes we would love to be punished for, but can't. Because the ones pushing us are waiting in every corner. Don't think I'm too afraid to call names, cause they're all after us anyway and let me tell you: I'm done being tossed around by important people webbing their nets. I'm sick of this."

Jongdae all but spat the last part, letting his bitterness shine through for a moment, before Chanyeol's nervous grasp on his back tethered him again.

"I'm talking about unions like 2-1 on Red that enslave others and I'm talking about nameless people merrily hosting human trafficking rings, where prisoners are forced to live like dogs, polishing little tricks and bend over whenever their owner feels like it. But I'm also talking about Lee Seungri, who collected people like the phoenix, experimented on them and sent them to face death, trying to make them their toys."

Jongdae inhaled deeply, raising his voice over the growing commotion, unwilling to stop at this point.

"I am addressing Choi Siwon, whose cruel experiments on so-called anomalies sought a medication to cripple not only his subject's, but everyone's wings. And it doesn't even end there! Unofficial head hunters, special departments focused on hunting down anyone showing 'suspicious' behavior and goddamn official police officers - the corruption has reached such a high level that it's gotten hard to tell those apart! And instead of getting ahold of this A-list criminal who caused the epidemic on Lavender and is a danger to both herself and the rest of the world, they keep chasing after a scared little shifter, wielding guns in our faces! I mean, what kind of a sick joke is this?!” Jongdae burst out, and he could see a few of his friends looking at him with surprise, not expecting such an emotional speech at all.

"And while none of you might feel responsible for this, you should! You, too, are responsible! Every single one of you who's scared of people who are different. All of you who think it's suspicious if your peers can see more than you, if they can handle more Layers or whatever. I don't care whether you feel inferior, threatened or just nervous - all of your efforts together create a world in which gruesome human experiments are overlooked. You make this corruption possible!" he proclaimed, looking around the sea of scared faces, and his voice turned softer.

"I realize that you're scared. You've heard of a so-called scary monster Oh Sehun killing people and of the evil phoenix burning down buildings. You may not believe the press, you may be smarter than that. You believe in your own experiences. But you have none. And those with special abilities are forced to hide them by sheer social pressure. It's a vicious cycle, right? And yet I'm standing here, talking to you. We are willing to break this cycle. And yes, we are willing to contribute to research, too - we, too, would like to know how all of this works. Why can Chanyeol here heal himself? Could others learn this, too? Why wouldn't we want to possibly help advance medicine and knowledge about our world and the human body? We are not willing to be exploited or tortured, but that should be fucking obvious, right?"

He inhaled deeply, purposefully seeking the cameras he knew were recording.

"To the higher ups but also whoever feels addressed, I'll keep it sweet and simple: We are here. We are willing. Come find us, when you get your shit together."

He heard Minseok chuckle all the way from where he stood and with an overly polite smile, Jongdae bowed once for the dumbstruck audience.

"Sorry for the inconveniences, but it had to be said and I'm pretty sure this has been livestreamed, so yeah. And get that girl treated and locked up, please. In that order." he ended like an afterthought, lowered the mic and turned to see Yixing keeping the security in check with a pointed look over the muzzle of his weapon.

"Time to go, I guess?" he stated cluelessly and it barely echoed into the crowd, though there were
enough microphones turned on to transport the noise. Chanyeol chose this moment to speak up, holding his pager, all shaky voice and smile.
"I just got a message. It says nothing but 'Dinner's ready. Come home'."
Jongdae smiled.
"That's settled then."
They all stepped together, including Minseok, who still pretended to threaten Luhan and the latter played along surprisingly well, eyes glossy from actual tears.
"Alright. Then... let's go..." Jongdae mumbled with so much hesitation that heads turned and he fidgeted, finally giving in with a groan.
"Alright! I can't resist, okay?!"
With this, he whirled around to cross the stage and stop in front of the guy with partly bleached hair.
"Can I get an autograph, pretty please? I've been a big fan of White Heart forever and you're my bias and I'm so, so sorry we interrupted your concert. You're just so awesome. Pretty please?"
The guy looked shell-shocked, eyes flickering to his bandmates, his fans, the pointed look on the face of the guy wielding the gun at the innocent blond and back to Jongdae.
"Uh... do you have a pen?" he asked very slowly, moving nothing but his lips, and Jongdae froze.
"Guys. Do you have a pen?"
Heads were shaken and even Luhan dropped the whole pretense to shrug.
"No!"
"Jongdae, I think we should really go-"
"NO!"
"Dae, come on-"
"Noo...! This is unfair!"

Two weeks later, Jongdae rang the bell of Baekhyun's house. Chanyeol and Minseok had spent a fun afternoon constructing and integrating the mechanism, with obvious success. Barely five seconds had passed when the door was opened, and he had an overly enthusiastic Jongin all up in his face. Now that he'd gotten most of his memories back, the shifter was determined to remind Jongdae that he was his favorite out of their odd group at every given opportunity.
"Jongdae! Finally! You've been away for far too long!"
"It was just a week, calm down." Jongdae chuckled good-naturedly, presenting him with a bag of snacks he'd bought earlier as he entered the house. The shifter openly displayed his glee, already rummaging through the paper bag for chocolate. The motion sent his pendant flying and-
"Hey, isn't that the green stone?" he wondered out aloud, and Jongin looked up, tilting his head.
"Huh? What about it?"
"You got it from Kyungsoo?" Jongdae prodded with a smile, and Jongin nodded casually, fingers wrapped around the intricate leather knots framing it.
"Pretty, huh?" Jongdae asked, and the other shrugged.
"Well. To be honest, it's nothing special. But Kyungsoo treasures it, and that makes it precious." Jongdae thought back to the way Kyungsoo had gazed at the stone, saying that it was only pretty because Jongin found it pretty. He snorted.
This was so obviously Kyungsoo's idea of a joke.
"What? Why are you laughing?"
"It's nothing. Let's go upstairs."
Jongin eyed him strangely, but ultimately shrugged it off and followed.
"So how are things going?" he asked as they took the stairs, Jongin padding ahead in his fluffy socks, moving with a casual grace that told everyone how comfortable he was moving around the house. A nice sight.
"Well, Baek is scoping out Layers again, Luhan has been preparing for his upcoming trip to Yellow, Minseok and Yixing are jobbing, and Kyungsoo and I are cooking."
This was mostly unsurprising, though Jongdae never ceased wondering how Minseok and Yixing got along so well while being so odd around each other at the same time. They weren't like fire and ice. More like fire and smoke. But he certainly wasn't complaining, and it was good to know someone capable was watching their back as they discreetly sold either Minseok's or Yixing's skills (not that Yixing was the type to ask for a high sum, or any money, for that matter). The only thing truly new was the part involving Kyungsoo in a kitchen, but the tacit boy would probably remain full of surprises for quite some more time.
"So where's Chanyeol? Wasn't this supposed to be your honeymoon?" Jongin piped up while Jongdae got rid off his shoes and shed his light jacket.
"Oh, he'll join us later, he sometimes accompanies Baekhyun, catching up and stuff. And don't you worry, our honeymoon is whenever we want it to be. Therefore it could be always."
"Cheesy."
"That's rich, coming from someone who currently enjoys the domestic life."
Jongin simply stuck out his tongue, and Jongdae left it at that, going to greet Kyungsoo.

"Sooo... I called you all here today to discuss some important matters."
"They better be more important than you are. At least as important as you think you are, please."
"Shut up, Luhan! You're ruining it!" Baekhyun whined, dropping the dramatic act. The former translator looked unimpressed, fiddling with his freshly dyed, bordeaux hair as he reached for one of the snacks Jongdae had brought.
"It doesn't look like they're listening, anyway." Luhan nonchalantly added, and Baekhyun threw an exaggerated pout into the round, which was swiftly ignored by Jongdae (who was busy protecting Jongin from Chanyeol's enthusiastic cuddles), Yixing (who was discussing something with Minseok), and Kyungsoo (who was staring into space).
Baekhyun pouted harder, adding a few whiny noises when he got no reaction.
"Really now? Come on guys, don't ignore the host!"
"Kyungsoo cooked, so Kyungsoo's the host." Luhan retorted blankly, and Baekhyun snapped, slapping his palm on the table and raising his voice.
"Guys, we should form a union!"
They all looked at him now, though Jongdae was still half-tangled with both Jongin and Chanyeol.
"What exactly is a union?" Jongin asked curiously, and Baekhyun smiled brightly.
"I'm glad you asked. A union is like an organization, just more... important. Like a family!"
His eyes were sparkling, and Jongdae couldn't stop smiling at this. It didn't come as a surprise, quite the opposite even. Baekhyun was obviously eager to keep them all together and use everyone's potential to the fullest - after all, it was him who helped the others make some money selling their skills and easily opening the doors of his home to them.
It was heartwarming, to know that he felt they could be a union, just like the one he grew up in. Like something he defined as family.
The mere mention of the word 'family' had Jongin sold, though he tried not to look too eager. The rest looked open to the idea.
Luhan merely shrugged, picking at the raisins in his bread roll.
"Why not?"
Baekhyun groaned, pushing at the unfortunate person next to him, who was Chanyeol.
"You're all no fun, can't you be a bit more enthusiastic?!"
Minseok just chuckled at this.
"I thought we were something like this already?"
This shut Baekhyun up, who, for just a second, looked genuinely surprised, all the drama forgotten.
Chanyeol placed his head on his best friend's shoulder, giving him an easy smile.
"Sure we'll do that, Baekhyun. It's a great idea."
Quickly covering up his surprise, Baekhyun put up his 'stubborn kid' face.
"Well, we ought to make it official. With tattoos, rules and all!"
"Rules?" Luhan fell in, finally looking up from his food to shoot him an unhappy look, "who decides them? You?"
Baekhyun just shook his head, taking no offense at all as he gnawed on his lip in thought.
"No, no. All of us should make the rules together. After all, we're the founding members, right?"
Luhan looked satisfied with that, while Jongdae grinned mischievously.
"He's quiet now because he's perfectly certain he can sabotage the process for good."
"Hey! I am very capable of negotiating reasonably!"
"Haaah..." Minseok hummed, chin supported on both hands, throwing an amused smile into the round, "I think if we actually manage to compromise on a set of rules, that'd be a miracle in itself."
"So what kind of tattoo are we gonna have?" Jongdae asked, eager as always to skip the grating stuff and get to the fun part. Baekhyun immediately lit up again.
"Once more, I am glad you asked, cause I've prepared something."
"Of course you did." Jongdae mumbled with a fond grin.
"If it involves a heart or anchor-"
"Shuuuut up Luhan," Baekhyun singsonged merrily as he whipped out a piece of paper and placed it in the middle of the table, "there you go - our logo!"
Everyone leaned in curiously, silently resolving to handing the paper around since the drawing was pretty small.
"I originally wanted us to choose from multiple designs, and we can still do that, but I really think this one's perfect, so I'm super confident. It's simple, but we gotta have class, right?" Baekhyun babbled, while Jongdae and Chanyeol pressed their sides together to squint at the symbol. The drawing was rather simple and yet it took a second and third look for Jongdae to get that it depicted a three dimensional cube with one line missing, making it a rather mind-twisting image. Baekhyun had been right - it was chic, in a simple way, so he nodded in approval as he passed the sheet on.
"I'll have you know that Kyungsoo designed this. Though my clover was pretty cute, too, I can step back from my wonderful self on that case. I thought you might all prefer this one."
The revelation caused overall surprise and had heads turning towards Kyungsoo, who had obviously ignored all of it in favor of smiling at the way Jongin scrunched his brows and turned the paper upside down.
"So, Kyungsoo - does it have a meaning?" Jongdae asked with honest interest, and Jongin placed the paper back on the table.
"It's a box." Kyungsoo simply said, and it was so deadpan that Baekhyun snorted, clasping a palm over his mouth to silence himself - clearly, he knew where this was going, and his child-like glee was contagious.
"There's one line missing," Kyungsoo continued, finger ghosting over the spot it ought to be in, "because we can reach outside."
He looked at Jongdae while explaining it, but everyone else soaked up this information, showing different stages of understanding. Yixing smiled, and the resemblance of a doctor being proud of his patient was uncanny. Chanyeol hummed and retrieved the paper, as if the new outlook changed the design, while Luhan was still thinking about how to interpret this.
Jongdae liked it.
They all had the power to think outside the box, to reach for more, both in the mental and physical way.
"It's nice. It feels really right," he told Kyungsoo, lowering his upper body across the table, head comfortably steadied on his arms, "and look, if our union resembles the box, it's like a cozy home we
choose to be in, even though there's an opening and no one forces us to."
His playful interpretation was not only taken seriously by Kyungsoo, it even made him smile a tiny bit.
"That's really nice, too."
"So, shall we vote? I think you can guess that I'm all for it." Baekhyun eagerly said, lifting his hand with an encouraging expression.
"Shouldn't we decide on a name first?" Minseok asked, and Baekhyun lowered his hand again, back to his news-reporter face in no time.
"I'm-"
"Glad you asked." Jongdae and Chanyeol completed in unison, and Baekhyun gave them a quick, grateful nod before shifting the paper back into the middle.
"It's actually in the logo, look."

---

Junmyeon's sweaty palm hovered over his hair, insecurely poking at a few strands. This was way too difficult. He'd considered styling only the middle part up, but it seemed too immature. Gelling it all away would make him look too old and business-oriented though. He'd tried to go for the 'sexy bedhair' look, but it ended up looking like he'd crawled through some brushwood. After a thorough struggle, he'd created a mess so big that he had to wash his hair all over again and didn't touch it anymore afterwards. Clean and fluffy. *The natural style*, he told himself.

He inhaled deeply and clenched his fists mid air, trying to give himself a quick pep talk and go over his internal checklist for the upcoming operation.
*Clothes intact, clean and casual, but not sloppy? Check.*
*Right time, pager on silent mode? Check.*
*Courage and an actual plan? Err... check. Sort of.*
*Unattractively flushed face? Check, unfortunately.*

With a last huff, Junmyeon rounded the corner in what he hoped was a confident and casual way of walking (and god, if he already worried about his way of walking, this was bound to be a disaster) and only stopped in front of a closed office. He knocked politely, fleetingly checked the status of the collar of his crisp, white dress shirt and entered when a muffled voice allowed him to. Behind a semi-messy desk sat representative Amber, swinging in her chair from left to right, a pen stuck between her upper lip and nose like a fake mustache. Her face lit up in a friendly smile when she recognized her visitor.
"Junmyeon! Nice to see you around, feel free to have a seat." she immediately offered after taking the pen into her hand completely casually, not the least bit embarrassed over potentially making a fool out of herself. Junmyeon was so gone on this woman.
"Uh. Thanks." he claimed slowly, taking a few steps inside the office but ultimately hovering around awkwardly. He couldn't do this while sitting across her like someone having an appointment, right?
Amber decided against calling him out on it.
"I read about the latest attack on you in the papers. The number of assassination attempts on you is unsettling, you know?"
Junmyeon just dismissed her worry with a wave of his hand, leaving it to unsurely rest on her desk afterwards.
"Don't worry. My new bodyguards are excellent."
"So I've heard...?" she replied, trailing off questioningly as Junmyeon steadied the weight of his upper body on his hand, leaning forwards to catch her gaze on eye level. It might look like a position of power, if not for Junmyeon's big, nervous eyes that kept flickering to the table, settling on the
colorful mug that read 'Llama at work'.
His eyes finally settled on Amber's, and he licked his lips.
"You know--"
"Oooh, is that a tattoo I see?" Amber asked with a sly grin, and Junmyeon's free hand flew up to press his shirt to his chest, all but stumbling up into a standing position. The motion of leaning forward combined with the two opened buttons must have revealed the fact that he wasn't wearing a T-shirt below, like he usually did (it was hot enough already, and he'd used tons of deodorant, alright?) - that, and the small, black tattoo on his left collarbone. A little three dimensional box with one line missing.
"I'm not sure whether sexual harassment usually works this way."
"But really, a tattoo on you of all people. You're actually a wild one, aren't you?"
"Uh."
"Relax, I'm kidding. Tattoos are cool. Got a few myself, actually." she stated, showing the inside of her left arm, which didn't say a lot, seeing as it was covered in the sleeves of her blouse.
"Oh. That's good, then. I've grown quite fond of it." Junmyeon sighed in relief, happy to have found a tiny bit of common ground for now. Alright, time to do this before he'd completely melt into a puddle of dysfunctional goo.
"So, I actually came here to ask you ou... I mean. To ask whether you'd like to get dinner with me?"
"Not now, obviously," he added, laughing nervously and not giving her a chance to say anything at all in a desperate attempt to avoid her shooting him down too quickly, "but maybe when we're both free, though I basically work twenty four seven, so I can technically just take some hours off whenever I want to and... if you're looking behind me right now because your husband is standing there, I might literally die." he ended slowly, a strained smile on his face.
Instead of answering, Amber tilted her head a bit, squinting to see behind him, and Junmyeon slowly followed her gaze, expecting the worst, expecting-
"Tao! Sehun! Since when have you two been here?!" he demanded in exasperation, fully whirling around to face the two intruders.
Indeed, the tall duo stood in the doorway, squished together in order to make their gangly, way too long limbs fit, probably a result of no one wanting to stand behind the other. Sehun still somehow managed to look casual and bored out of his mind, arms crossed and the perpetual unimpressed expression in place, while Tao just looked like some earnest employee on his first day, patiently waiting for something to happen. Sehun didn't even bother with shrugging, merely rolling his eyes.
"For about an eternity."
"Don't. Sass me right now." Junmyeon stated as calm as possible, closing his eyes to keep it together.
"More important, what are you doing here?"
Tao's brows scrunched together, and he tilted his own head the slightest bit, indicating his confusion.
"Well, I'm keeping you safe." he stated as if it was really obvious. Junmyeon's eyes traveled to Sehun with a look that ought to be really accusing and make him feel bad for not holding Tao back. Blissfully misinterpreting it, Sehun raised a perfectly manicured brow and shook his head.
"Me? Oh. No, no. I'm just here to laugh at your duck tail." he drawled out, and Junmyeon blinked, causing him to slowly elaborate, with judgment dripping from every syllable.
"Your untucked shirt. You'll die as a virgin."
His eyes widened and both hands flew to his behind as he whirled around to face Amber, red face be damned.
Of course his shirt really was a mess and now that he'd turned to scold them, she had seen. Of course.
Indeed, Amber looked amused, lips pressed together to keep herself from laughing. Junmyeon wanted to die. In a fit of childishness, he pulled the rest of the shirt out as well, though it was probably severely wrinkled now.
"Can you please leave me alone for a bit?" he asked, eyes fixated on the llama cup, which was
currently the least threatening place to look at.
"Hm. I don't know. Not feeling it." Sehun mumbled, and Junmyeon just knew he was looking at his nails, because Sehun tended to be a little shit like that.
"Being alone means being vulnerable." Tao calmly said as if reciting some mandatory rule. Yes, Junmyeon might actually cry. To his surprise, Amber leaned in herself now, bright eyes twinkling up at him.
"Single father with two kids, huh?"
Junmyeon opened his mouth to protest because this definitely made him feel old, but Amber was faster.
"Hot."
"Excuse me?!" he squeaked, and oh god, he'd squeaked. With a smile, Amber got to her feet and offered her hand mock-seriously.
Junmyeon took it without hesitation, brain fully running on autopilot at this point.
"I'd be delighted to take you up on that offer," she began, dropping the professional act half-way through, "after all, I'm a firm supporter of the ‘Why not?’ policy."
"Yeah. Why not," he laughed awkwardly, "I'll definitely come alone next time though."
Amber chuckled, good-naturedly following Junmyeon's aimless handshaking.
"Without your chaperons? Fine by me - I'll play nice, then. I gotta ask Mochi when I'm free and let you know. You're alright with that?"
"More than alright."

After closing the door to her office in the most suave way possible, Junmyeon couldn't help silently fist pumping in the air, lips forming a barely audible 'yes!' as he directed his sudden excess energy into coddling Tao, who took it with a content purr, and linking arms with Sehun, ignoring the following eye roll.

"Oh, hold on a second, I think I got a message."
Chanyeol groaned and threw himself onto his back, legs dangling over the edge of the wooden balcony. He wasn't necessarily miffed over being interrupted during his tale about his terrific first day at work as a mechanic. Rather than that, it was his best friend's supposed lack of tact.
"I told Baekhyun not to bother us!" he whined, looking up at the thick tree crowns above their heads. Jongdae only hummed, preoccupied with reading said message.
"If it's not a matter of life or death, I swear he'll regret it!" he continued, but they both knew it was an empty threat.
"Nah, it's from Luhan." Jongdae sighed and stretched his arms before sinking onto the ground next to Chanyeol, their shoulders barely touching.
"Though to be fair, Luhan has a pretty distinct sense of tact unlike Baekhyun, so if you had told him, he might not have texted us. At least not at this time of the day."
Chanyeol hummed in lazy disbelief, and Jongdae turned his head to look up at the greenery as well. Admittedly, the view from the high, balcony-like structure was breathtaking, and the green Layer was one of the very few that tolerated Jongdae's and Chanyeol's presence, staying true to their reputation of being extremely open-minded. So unlike most of the other Layers they'd been to so far, they had gotten open access this time and there was no need for sneaking around. Instead, they'd been occupying this vantage point, an insider tip from some of the young villagers. Even after spending almost a week on the nature-friendly Layer whose population had adapted perfectly to the lush forest, Jongdae was far from bored by the sight of trees the size of skyscrapers. It was definitely
more impressive than the area they had traveled through before. Even after hiking for the better part of the afternoon, there was barely a scrap of sky to be seen above them, except for a few golden sun rays turning the green leaves into black silhouettes.

"He's had an audience at the palace today." Jongdae began, enjoying a light breeze that had all the leaves rustling softly.

"You know, now that his two former friends have officially been crowned emperor and empress. I think the coronation was earlier this week. Anyway. Do you remember that guy you saved during the incident at the camp?"

Chanyeol didn't reply immediately, unhappy about being reminded of that time and therefore unwilling to ask for Jongdae to elaborate. He picked up on it.

"Uhm, that yellow soldier who crashed into the house, fighting with one of them?"

"Turned out he survived and made his way back eventually. Now he's standing up for us, trying to spread the truth." Jongdae continued and now Chanyeol was turning his head to shoot him a pleasantly surprised look.

"Really? That's some good news. For Luhan, too, I guess?"

Jongdae ignored the prickling affection over how natural it came to Chanyeol, regarding the saved life over the resulting advantages - he had enough affection to last a lifetime, he was sure.

"Yeah, that's why he wrote the message. He asked whether you'd like to accompany him next time, as some sort of living proof. You know, building bridges and everything. He sounded pretty excited - there's even a smiley face, and that's saying something."

With a chuckle, Chanyeol attempted to snuggle into the crook of Jongdae's neck, only to end up wincing.

"It still hurts..." he pouted, carefully placing his right arm on his stomach to repeat the gesture, succeeding this time.

"You're such a baby," Jongdae complained half-heartedly, "just make the pain go away, then."

"No." Chanyeol stubbornly protested.

"That wouldn't be fair to you."

Jongdae raised his own right arm to inspect the inside of it. The sight of the reddened skin around the newest tattoo - a leaf in the color of the Layer they were on - made him feel strangely content.

"I bet this is the least creative motif so far." Chanyeol threw in teasingly, and Jongdae fluffed up his hair in retaliation.

"Your ideas aren't any better - if you had all the say in this, we'd have nothing but food on our arms!"

"Hey! It's not my fault good things always seem to happen when food is involved!"

Jongdae chuckled, leaving the fingers of his left hand to absently trail over Chanyeol's arm, his touch firm around the elbow and feathery over the sensitive patch of skin where the matching green leaf was. This was only their fourth tattoo (not counting his birthmark and their union's logo, which was positioned over his left pulse point), and Jongdae couldn't believe how there could be so much more to come.

Other than the leaf, they already had a small, lime-colored tattoo showing the wind chimes they'd crafted together in Sehun's hometown.

A little basketball in an electric shade of blue, as an eternal memory of the time they had played the game at a fancy indoor place Junmyeon had rented out completely, just to lose miserably alongside Jongdae.

A plum-colored key resembling their hotel room key and the other, very special first time they'd shared in there.

One day, if they only visited enough places, their whole right arm would be covered in tattoos of varying size and colors, and maybe Chanyeol would have a harder time remembering all the former marks below them. Jongdae looked forward to it, lips curling into a content smile at the thought. Exploring, discovering, adventuring. Until they both wore the full color spectrum on their arm.
The pager buzzed once more, and Chanyeol didn't even bother complaining, already half-asleep. "Hey." Jongdae spoke up, tapping a finger into Chanyeol's palm, who lazily intertwined their fingers in reply.

"Luhan texted again. Obviously he doesn't take very well to being ignored, who would've thought?" he said lightly, and Chanyeol snorted, "asked again whether you'll go with him or not. The smiley looks a little more unsettling, too, so maybe we should reply."

"Sure. Why not. You?" Chanyeol asked sleepily, nuzzling closer into Jongdae's neck, which proved itself to be quite distracting. Nonetheless, Jongdae dismissed him while typing back.

"Nah. I'll pass. There's something I gotta do in the meantime."

The last rays of sunlight bathed the deserted room in golden light, telling him that he had yet again stayed for far too long. He felt like the sound of his bones cracking was getting alarmingly loud lately. With a sigh, Wu Yifan heaved his bag off the desk, only to almost topple over at the sight of none other than Jongdae and a stranger, standing in the middle of the classroom. Was he hallucinating?

"Jongdae!"

The brunet hushed him with a playful finger on his own lips, and Yifan was so incredibly relieved to see him that he was too scared to move - as if it could destroy the moment and Jongdae would vanish, after all.

He looked healthy, a lively smile tugging at his lips and eyes twinkling just like they always had, whenever he was up to something.

"What are you doing here?!" Yifan whispered harshly, but he couldn't bring himself to sound accusing over the possible danger his friend was bringing them in.

Jongdae wore his infamous, brilliant smile as he leaned onto his companion's shoulder, who grinned shyly.

"I'm sure you could use a day off. Maybe two."

He only got a dumbfounded expression in return.

"What are you talking about?"

Jongdae had the nerve to wink.

"A little birdie told me we're going on vacation. Jongin will take you - where do you wanna go?"

Now the brilliant smile spread over Yifan's features as well, and as he hugged the living daylights out of Jongdae, he thought that this was such a Jongdae-thing to do. Spreading his positive feelings wherever he went.

Making people smile.

Chapter End Notes

...the end!
If you made it to this point, let me tell you that you are amazing. No matter whether you gave kudos or not, commented or not, all of you are exceptionally amazing for putting up with this super long story - one long, virtual hug from me ♥
I realize that there are a lot of things left unsaid, and that this universe has a lot more stories to tell, but I was working with a time limit here.

For this fic, I sort of had a key motif in mind: there is never just one single main character changing the world. Every member of the cast could have been the main character with a story of his own, and if you only took away one person, the plot would have never played out like this. I chose Jongdae to be the main character on purpose though, because I think the people acting as 'social glue' are usually overlooked, and I wanted to give them the credit they deserve.

Anyway, I'll say it one more time: Thank you so much for reading.

Love,
Sugar-and-Salt ♥

P.S.: I'll upload a little extra tomorrow, and psst, let me give you a little spoiler - it'll contain smut~
Jongdae's delighted moan was bordering on being sexual. "It's so warm! Let's stay here for a whole month!"
Chanyeol chuckled and placed their tray on the table, cutlery skidding across it precariously in the process. They were the first customers of the little outdoor café, and Jongdae had eagerly snatched a table that was touched by the glorious morning sun. One bite into the sponge-cake like bread had Jongdae nodding to himself gravely.
"Alright. It's settled. We gotta stay here until winter is over, sorry not sorry."
"You already said that yesterday," Chanyeol retorted around a mouthful of fried egg, "at the end of the day, you'll be the first one to crave seeing the others and we both know it."
"True."
Jongdae shot him an eye-crinkling smile and dove for the other's plate, always eager to try new food. He knew Chanyeol was playing it cool, when in reality, he was just as excited as Jongdae was. After celebrating New Year with the others, they had set off to explore a Layer Chanyeol had never been to. This was a first, and it consumed more substances, but they figured they could indulge themselves once in awhile, especially since all their other businesses had been going so well lately. And so far, it was very much worth it. Following an insider's tip, they'd gone for Apricot, a Layer off the rank with a very small population. While Baekhyun's home was freezing cold - like most places were, actually - this Layer appeared completely unfazed by the concept of winter. It wasn't the only warm place but since Jongdae and Chanyeol felt no need to play by the rules, they'd chosen a Layer that barely anyone had access to, since it was associated with one of the highest ranking Layers. Sure, Junmyeon was standing in for them with his name, but that didn't mean they had to provoke danger by openly mingling in highly populated places. Thus, they settled for Apricot. You had to have a permanent visa for the third Layer, Celadon, if you wanted to go there, and this was very uncommon indeed. This resulted in the two arriving in a completely tourist-free, dainty little town. With delicious food, apparently.
"So... any plans for today?" Jongdae asked lightly, and it was a nice change of pace. Usually, it would be Chanyeol asking this question. Chanyeol accommodating to his wishes, Chanyeol being his tour guide. This time around, they were both new to this, and the other licked his shiny lips, almost absently devouring his scrambled eggs.
"Hm... what about that lake the girl mentioned yesterday? Let's go there?" he suggested enthusiastically and Jongdae nodded to himself once more, all serious and understanding.
"I see. Of course you'd want to see me naked."
Chanyeol paused in his chewing motion, seriously considering this.
"That's not exactly a lie," he began slowly, "though I'd prefer if no one else saw you naked, so let's pack the swimming trunks, just in case, alright?"
Jongdae generously patted his shoulder in understanding, using the opportunity to snatch more of his food.
"Just for you, I'll cover myself up like the shy little schoolgirl I am."
Chanyeol grinned back playfully.
"You're going to weird places there, Jongdae. Anything you wanna tell me?"
"If I wanted to, I'd have done so already, wouldn't I?" Jongdae jabbed back, and it was little moments like these that were infinitely precious to him. Sure, he might not remember the details of it in a few months, maybe he'd even forget them in a week. But he'd remember being happy and carefree without any specific cause other than Chanyeol.
He'd probably keep the memory of them splashing around in the lake for longer. The way they'd hobbled over the hot stones, observing a lazy crab crawling into its home hidden beneath bigger rocks and envying it for its shadowy shelter. The way they'd combed through foreign plants until their fingers were covered in wet, green strings and how they'd dived beneath the shallow surface, finding a few flighty fishes and even an exotically colorful snail. How they'd tried to outdo each other in finding the prettiest stone to take home as a souvenir and ended up with three instead. How the sunlight had glistened on their wet skin, highlighting the tattoos sprinkled across their right arms, respectively. Jongdae was sure he'd remember all of this for quite a while, and if possible, he'd like to remember it forever. Would that be possible? Maybe he should start keeping a diary. Maybe then he'd be able to recall the unique, slightly salty smell mixed with the sweet sun lotion and the way he'd held his hand up against the cerulean sky, fingers wrinkly from being in the water for too long. The way Chanyeol's hand had joined his, much bigger and the perfect size to wrap around his and intertwine their fingers.

Another thing to add to the list of memorable feelings, rather than specific moments, would be the way Chanyeol's lips naturally found their way to his neck while he was attempting to open the door to their hotel room, a few late sun rays blinding him.

"Chanyeol," Jongdae whined, dragging out his name, as he wriggled a little in the other's grasp, "you're gonna scar the staff. Can't you hold back for, like, five more seconds?"

"But there's no one around..." the other mumbled into his neck, warm breath against his probably sweaty skin - not that Chanyeol was the type to mind details like that. While he was certain that the people on this Layer were very open-minded, considering how virtuous one had to be to live here, he'd never been a huge fan of publicly displaying their relationship. Sure, cuddling was completely fine, but Jongdae was a cuddler and touchy person in general. Still, whatever went beyond that, the way he really opened up for Chanyeol was supposed to be different. It was just... more than what others usually saw in him. So much more, that it felt only right to show this side to him alone.

"Alright, you wanna shower first?" Jongdae asked, already knowing the answer coming from the human koala clinging to him.

"Do I have to?"

"We're both very gross."

"Join me, then." Chanyeol mumbled into his ear, already peppering the surrounding area with kisses. Jongdae chuckled, but it was slightly breathy.

"You barely fit into this tiny shower alone."

"I can lift you up so we can save space."

"I can imagine. Now be good and go take a shower. You won't regret it." he ended, ruffling Chanyeol's damp locks, and with a pout the other complied, not without sharing a deep, heated kiss with him - a clear attempt at making Jongdae regret his rejection. He almost did.

It wasn't even that Jongdae was shy - he was merely private. He liked the comfortable way they could hang out with their friends and he was rather sure most of the people they'd come across on this Layer wouldn't even have pinpointed them as a couple in the first place. Others might call them bland or even unloving, but to Jongdae, it was everything but. Always ready to voice his thoughts - especially when it came to Chanyeol - he'd shared them one night, while they were lying next to each other in their room at home. Isn't it perfect like this?, he'd asked. Doesn't it show that we're comfortable?

Chanyeol, who'd always been a bit more clumsy with words, had simply stated that he liked the way they were. And added that they certainly didn't owe the world details about their love life, anyway. As always, Chanyeol kind of got to the core of things without really getting it, just following his emotions. People wanted to see others performing like a couple, simply because they assumed a
happy relationship ought to show. The next time someone asked Jongdae whether he and his lover were too afraid to show affection, Jongdae had sassed at him, telling him the only logical reason to be scared would be someone snatching Chanyeol away if he didn't perpetually stake his claim - which was ridiculous.

If others wanted to think that they both lacked a love life, they were free to do so. Jongdae certainly didn't need anyone's confirmation to know that their balance between friendship and love was just right.

Because the moment Jongdae stepped out of the shower a while later, the curtains had been pulled close, casting a warm shade of green over the room and Chanyeol's skin; Chanyeol jumped right into his vision, playful smile vanishing from Jongdae's sight as their lips met with fervor. He was quick to close his eyes and just fall into the sensation, back colliding with the wall almost comfortably, the impact dulled by the fluffy towel around his shoulders. Without wasting another second, Chanyeol closely aligned their bare, upper bodies, arms snaking around to rest on Jongdae's back, subtly pressing them together even more.

Being kept in place was something he strangely enjoyed, and Chanyeol was well aware of that, gladly using his height to his advantage in order to make him feel small. Even through the intense scent of shampoo, Jongdae felt like he still smelled of salt water, or maybe he just imagined it, fueled by the wet strands of hair brushing against his cheek while warm lips traced out the curve of his neck almost hungrily.

"I've been looking forward to this-" Chanyeol hummed into his skin between moist kisses. Jongdae felt him playfully tugging at his skin (Chanyeol had always been a biter), and it made his breath hitch, one hand flying up to bury itself in the wet curls.

Without warning, he pushed at Chanyeol's shoulder, flipping them around and looking up at the startled brunette with triumphant eyes, a small smirk tugging at his lips.

"Never heard of the saying good things come to those who wait?" he asked, one hand already firmly wandering across his chest and down his sides. Chanyeol quirked a brow at this, leaning in until his lips brushed over Jongdae's ear.

"I waited; are you the good thing coming to me?" he huskily muttered, leaning in until his lips brushed over Jongdae's ear. Jongdae murmured against his throat, one hand already traveling down, dancing across the skin with the airiness of a child holding on to a railing. Chanyeol shuddered.

It was true. They rarely had sex on the first day they arrived somewhere, being both way too exhausted from exploring and too stuffed with food - if simply rolling into bed felt like an exercise already, both of them would sure as hell refuse to go through more trouble. Besides, why make it an uncomfortable experience, if they were in no rush at all? Sure, if the circumstances were unfavorable, such as being out and about with the others for a few days, or staying at home and knowing very well that Luhan occupied the room next door, they'd tone it down a bit. Not that they didn't act upon getting in the mood, but it all had to happen in silence - and so far, no one had ever caught them with any more evidence than a flushed face and shining eyes, which Jongin probably misinterpreted up to
this day. Because even if Jongdae and Chanyeol were obnoxiously loud during the day, they could be very quiet, too. Especially Chanyeol and this, too, was something Jongdae was unwilling to share with anyone. The other might be wordy, but not loud. He once told him that real men didn’t moan, and Jongdae had pinched his side in retaliation. And proved him wrong some time later. "Jongdae, wait-" Chanyeol began weakly, breaking off into a deep, ragged moan. If his lips weren't so stretched at the moment, Jongdae would grin. As it was, he hummed in response, finding deep satisfaction in the way Chanyeol's thighs quivered and how his fingers sought support in his hair. Maybe, on another occasion, Chanyeol would push him a little, putting some force into his hold, but today he clearly got the memo not to. Jongdae rarely was in the mood for that, and if he was, he'd have let him know by now. He could find something akin to enjoyment in blowing his boyfriend, though deep-throating itself wasn't pleasurable, no matter how one looked at it. He still did it occasionally, since it was part of the act he was perfecting every time he performed it - and seeing the way it wrecked Chanyeol was more than worth it. There really wasn't a lot he could do to coax a few moans out of him -not that Chanyeol was holding back on purpose- and Jongdae had made it into a long-term-challenge of his.

"Too much- too much, please, Jongdae-"

Showing mercy on him, he gave in to his pleas eventually and drew away, wiping his slick lips with the back of his hand. He was tempted to lick a stripe along his length, just to fuck with him some more, but Chanyeol's fingers resorted to lightly scratching into his nape as he looked down at Jongdae. "Come up here." he demanded silently, but the faint rasp to his voice was undeniable, his eyes hooded, and Jongdae loved it.

Crawling up, he pliantly let Chanyeol devour him in a deep and languid kiss that conveyed his never-ceasing gratitude over Jongdae going this far and catching him when he was cracking at the seams. Somewhere along the way, his hand had found its way to the back of Jongdae's thighs, fingertips pressing into the sensitive skin on the inside. Jongdae twitched and it was devilishly tempting, since while he was definitely giving the better blowjobs due to his higher pain tolerance (which was quite ridiculous, considering Chanyeol was the phoenix out of the two), Chanyeol had very, very clever fingers. But today, Jongdae wouldn't give in to them and pried his hand away, placing it on Chanyeol's own thigh before reaching for the lube he'd wisely placed on the bedside table before.

He lifted himself into a sitting position, effectively pinning one of Chanyeol's thighs beneath him, while lifting the other up into an angled position and proceeding to support himself on Chanyeol's knee as he opened the bottle almost casually, looking down at the dazed brunette. "Wanna make yourself useful?" he asked lowly, extending his hand in an expectant fashion, waiting for Chanyeol to comply and offer his hand. He didn't have to wait long. The cool liquid was spread over his two awaiting fingers, and Jongdae even smeared it himself, generously coating them with his own fingers. Chanyeol searched his gaze while reaching down to push them inside with caution. With one hand holding the angled leg up and even spreading it open a little, Jongdae's eyes traveled between his blown pupils and wet fingers, patiently ignoring his own arousal for now. His other hand fleetingly brushed through Chanyeol's hair, before skidding down Chanyeol's unoccupied arm that was loosely lying by his side. The brunet had closed his eyes by now, but the uncomfortable twitch of a second finger joining the first was unmistakable, and Jongdae seized the moment to get a hold of his free wrist, harshly pressing it into the mattress and eliciting a surprised gasp from Chanyeol.

Because if there was something Jongdae had discovered throughout the six months they'd been together, it was that Chanyeol, too, liked to feel small.

"You're doing good." he hummed almost soothingly, voice still slightly croaky from his previous activities, and he saw the other's erection twitch pitifully. Jongdae knew that people would laugh at them, would pity them for both being bottoms - and Jongdae would in turn pity them for thinking it was that easy, for sometimes the question of who was on the receiving end could be secondary - this would just as well work the other way around.
He'd only discovered it recently, since Chanyeol was always incredibly eager to please him, always ready to adapt to Jongdae's preferences. Or maybe he simply hadn't been aware of it himself, hadn't ever considered this to be a possibility. Jongdae still noticed, because he was observant like that, and curious enough to push it in order to test the waters.

Yes, Chanyeol liked to feel small once in awhile, but not in the way Jongdae did. Still, just because he wasn't craving the occasional rough push and pull treatment, didn't mean he had no needs. Just because Jongdae was lacking the physical advantage, didn't mean he couldn't find a way around it.

"Up with you." he murmured not unkindly, and Chanyeol followed, fingers absently wiping on his own thighs. Jongdae moved until his own back met the wall, absently cushioning himself with their blanket and accepting the way Chanyeol easily settled on his thighs, legs spread to rest on both sides. This time, Chanyeol's fingers weren't all that eager anymore, carefully running up Jongdae's thighs, their gazes locked as he curled his much bigger hand around Jongdae's length, as if afraid Jongdae might swat him away again. But Jongdae let him. Let him drag his fingers up and down again, firm and slow, and Jongdae's hips were following the movement almost leisurely, giving in to the torturously slow, but intense pace. Still, the hand he had placed on Chanyeol's shoulder wasn't clinging for support - it was a display of him having the upper hand, and it kept the other on edge. It didn't take long to get Jongdae fully hard, not with the way Chanyeol licked his lips, almost ginger motions coupled with a very firm grasp. A light touch on Chanyeol's wrist was enough to make him stop immediately. When he attempted to get the lube, Jongdae was quicker, holding it out of reach with a small smirk flashing across his lips. He made a turning motion with his fingers, and the flicker of anticipation was all-too noticeable in Chanyeol's eyes. Only when he'd followed his demand, did Jongdae embrace him from behind, momentarily ignoring the bottle of lube and the way his own arousal was pressed up against Chanyeol. He felt him sigh and ran his hands all over his upper body, rubbing over his shoulders and down his upper arms, chasing away the cold that had inevitably gotten to his skin during preparation. Kissed down his nape and rocked up his hips to hear his breath hitch. In a way, it was a reward, and Jongdae knew the other felt it.

He proceeded to lube himself up with one hand, the other still roaming Chanyeol's chest distractedly. He felt Chanyeol's fingers caressing his arm; in moments like these, his phoenix was surprisingly uneager to touch himself, reluctant to come to an end too quickly and instead holding on to the moment of indulgence.

His whole body jumped when Jongdae thumbed at his rim, making sure he really was sufficiently stretched, and he knew it was good to have Chanyeol facing away. Not seeing what was awaiting him definitely heightened his sensitivity, and with a smirk, Jongdae took advantage of this by twisting his wet hand until he could draw a sudden, cool line from around his rim down to his balls. Chanyeol all but whimpered.

"Come on, Jongdae..." he breathed out, the slightest plea written between the lines.

"Fine," Jongdae relented, purposefully murmuring into his ear to revel in the shudder, "come here." Again, Chanyeol obeyed, lifting himself up and trusting Jongdae's hands to guide him as he lowered himself, slowly. It really was good that Chanyeol didn't see him, because Jongdae was biting his lip, face scrunched up in an incredible effort not to speed the process up or voice out how good it felt, sinking into the tight, warm heat. It had been months, but every time they did this, he'd feel grateful for having them tested all over again. It was so much better without having to use protection. As always, he wasn't disappointed by Chanyeol, who was never sloppy during preparation and therefore barely needed time to adjust. Jongdae didn't even have to do as much as move his hips - at this point, Chanyeol did all the work, exerting the muscles in his legs into slow, filthy grinding motions. Jongdae slung an arm around his upper body, supporting him and feeling the muscles work under his skin. He knew Chanyeol had both hands orderly placed on his own thighs. It forced him to put even more energy in his movements and that was precisely why he did it. Because Chanyeol genuinely liked to exert himself. To push and push, until his muscles were aching, and he could barely lift himself up anymore. And then, when his usually so tall body had gone all weak and pliant, he was the one feeling small and a little helpless for once. Jongdae's fingers teased along Chanyeol's length, edging him on even further. Yes, Jongdae was gradually really getting the inner workings of his
lover and planned on going all the way today, so he carded one hand through his still damp curls in an almost patronizing manner.

"That's the way to go. You're doing well," he hummed into his ear, pressing him as close as he could, without disturbing Chanyeol's efforts to gain much needed friction. Chanyeol might be wordy and he might be good at dirty talk. But what Jongdae did didn't exactly qualify as dirty talk.

"Just how I like it."

The sound escaping Chanyeol was a mix between a needy moan and exhausted groan. Jongdae knew he liked it, felt it in the way he ground down even harder, coaxing a moan out of Jongdae this time.

"Like that-" he encouraged Chanyeol, fingers still gently petting his hair while the other had a deceivingly tight grip on his waist. Because Chanyeol was a people pleaser and naturally loved to be encouraged. It hadn't taken Jongdae long to realize that, but the effect it had in bed had caught him by surprise, pleasantly so.

"I-it's good-" Chanyeol exhaled, thighs already shaking slightly.

"Yeah?" Jongdae asked, unable to resist the urge to buck up his hips and cause the other to hiss at the sudden pleasure. He hummed in response, going back to riding him almost diligently. He kept going until Jongdae could feel his thighs quiver beneath his probing hand, movements slowing and the lewd sound of skin on skin, slick from lube and sweat, was becoming less aggressive. Jongdae took it as a sign that Chanyeol was wrecked enough by now. He could push him a little further, he was sure of that, but Jongdae was really close himself from the sweet suction pulling him in.

"Alright, you've done really well. Let me take over, okay?" he asked into the other's neck, using the same sweet, patronizing voice that made his lover feel so safe while baring himself like this.

"Okay," he whispered, and Jongdae folded his legs so he could finally move his own hips in earnest, rocking up to deeply drive into him, hands on his waist moving him along. Even though he was tall and boneless, Chanyeol was rather light and both of them had been teetering around the edge for long enough already - Jongdae didn't need to keep this up for long.

He reveled in the tiny, cut-off groans Chanyeol made whenever their thighs were mashed together for a split second.

"It's okay. I've got you now." Jongdae muttered, switching from moving him along to firmly keeping him in place, thrusting up just that much harder. Chanyeol actually keened this time, one hand scrabbling to get a hold on one of Jongdae's hands, while reaching down to finally touch himself.

Jongdae stopped thinking after that, just pushing Chanyeol without a care - he could take it. The last thing he knew was that he'd had one hand reaching up to palm the other's throat, applying a barely there pressure, just how he himself liked it. Something he hadn't done before, something pushing their little game. It did the trick and brought Chanyeol over the edge, inevitably pulling Jongdae along with the way his muscles fluttered around him. Chanyeol made the tiniest sound at the feeling of warmth filling him, but instead of pulling away, he merely collapsed against Jongdae's chest, who took it with a quiet grunt.

For a moment, they both did nothing but breath heavily, fingers naturally intertwining over Chanyeol's stomach and Jongdae's chin resting on his shoulder.

"That last move was new." Chanyeol finally huffed, voice coming out throaty since he'd thrown his head back.

"Bad new?" Jongdae murmured, nosing around his sweaty neck.

"No. I just never thought it'd be appealing." Chanyeol murmured honestly.

Jongdae didn't reply, but took a mental note, labeling it as one of those things to be careful with for now.

"What did I do to deserve this?" Chanyeol finally asked, weakly pawing at Jongdae's hands, and the other couldn't help grinning. He'd meant to make this as special as possible, seeing as this was the first time they explored a new place together. Judging by Chanyeol's current state of placid goo, he'd succeeded.

"What has become of us, if you're thanking me for offering your pretty behind? I don't think it usually goes that way." he joked lightly and felt Chanyeol muscles contract around him as he
chuckled.
"We go that way." he stated with content certainty, and maybe it wasn't the right moment to feel sentimental, considering he was getting uncomfortable from feeling his own cum inside Chanyeol, but he still silently smiled to himself like a fool. Smiled about the incredible amount of trust Chanyeol had for him. Trusting him to always put him together, right after picking him apart.
"So..." Chanyeol began tentatively, head turning towards Jongdae to mouth around his temple, "how do you feel about heat? Temperature play? Ever considered it?"
Jongdae hummed, not even attempting to look ashamed over the way he twitched inside Chanyeol.
"I'm doing it right now."
A whole lot of trust, downed over just as much playfulness.
Yes, Jongdae was sure they wouldn't become bored any time soon.

When he awoke the next day, it was to a tiny strip of sunlight filtering into the room and a hazy revelation twirling through his befuddled brain. He really didn't need a diary to remember. After all, he was going to have a tattoo, a memory permanently etched into his skin. And if everything failed, he could read it all in Chanyeol's deep, expressive orbs.
He realized how cheesy this was when he was fully awake later.

He still tickled Chanyeol awake to test it.

Chapter End Notes

You might think this was fully self-indulgent... and this is true!
Though I don't really indulge myself by writing smut - I merely wanted to shed a bit of light on the relationship of ChenYeol, since they unfortunately lacked leisure time and overall moments where they weren't chased around or pushed together by mutual fear. Those two are actually a pretty playful, easygoing couple.
Besides, I'm no supporter of the mystic, eternally-whiny-bottom Chen, or all-too fixed top/bottom dynamics whatsoever. I could probably add an alarming amount of smut sequels, since those two probably try just about anything in bed. But I won't. Or rather, I'll try not to.

Love,
Sugar_and_Salt ♥

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!