Mystic Messenger: Parity

by RFA-Miyeon (Noiryn)

Summary

Inspired by the addictive game by Cheritz...

Ko Miyeon (MC) after the death of her father finds herself entangled in a web of danger, drama, and romance. While reclaiming herself, she must also navigate the affections and friendships within the mysterious RFA in order to uncover painful truths long since hidden. Machinations wind the smoldering threads of fate together, with her as a sacrificial lamb atop the pyre...

In short, this will be trash that follows the main story with liberties. Please support the original publisher and game. :3
Mystic Messenger: Parity Chapter 1

Dust particles lazily hung to the crimson light of sunset, drifting down slowly in the thick silence that permeated Miyeon’s room. She felt numb and heavy, acutely aware of the weight of the atmosphere above her and the pull of gravity drawing her deeper into the Earth. Yet the girl floated just along the surface tension of reality, like a satellite whose propulsion had long since run out of fuel. Weightless, but bound to a force she couldn’t quite shake… Her momentum was gone.

It’d been at least three months of silent days in the Ko family home, but only a month since her father’s long battle with illness had ended. Three months of college life had been replaced with daily hospital visits with a few hours at home to organize bills, sleep, and the occasional fruitless attempt to contact her estranged mother.

It wasn’t that her father wanted to see the former Ms. Ko; it was only a courtesy to let her know that her ex-husband had been in poor health, although part of Miyeon was almost willing to risk her mother trying to weasel out some inheritance just for some maternal advice. Even if she was legally an adult, there were just sometimes when one needed a parent… The girl had only the nurses and her father, who was less himself as the days passed. Every day was an increasing struggle of getting him to eat, then keep food down… It would’ve been cruel to talk about gloomy things with him when he was already hurting so badly. Towards the end he was too confused to recognize her, let alone himself. Miyeon knew who he was though, and because she knew, she had to continue being the same daughter she’d always been… That way when he was aware enough to know who she was, he could know that he wasn’t alone.

The last thing he’d uttered was, “It... hurts...” Afterwards, he was put on a respirator.

There had been no beautiful last words or gentle passing for him… Movies had portrayed death as something quick, beautiful, dignified… The reality was much less serene. After a series of cardiac arrests on an idle Thursday morning, her father was on a rapid terminal decline. She was helpless and silent as the crash team would run in to stabilize him, while someone ushered her out into the hall. Quietly Miyeon would wait in the lobby, until they brought her back in to see him. Every time he was much paler, clearly in pain, and reeked of ammonia as his organs failed… For two days he suffered in that state… It would’ve been much more merciful to take him off the life support and let nature run its course, but he said he wanted to try to remain alive as long as possible. She had to respect it, but it was agonizing to witness. Gradually it chipped away larger chunks until Miyeon was raw. In the span of hours she went from worried, to angry at the hospital, to resenting him for making her endure it alone, and eventually loathing herself for thinking such awful things. When his heart finally stopped, a weight had lifted from her only to be replaced by new fears.

If there had been any good to come of the horrible affair, it was the sight of just how compassionate other humans could be… Many of the nurses had come to know her on a first name basis. The older ones were often kind enough to bring her home made meals and would sit with her before and after their long shifts. Those last few days, they had been so kind to her…

She wanted to apologize to them for not showing her appreciation more and to beg her father for forgiveness for making him suffer for so long… At his funeral, the girl told him, but it brought her no comfort.

That first night back in the family home, Miyeon found herself crying over every little thing that reminded her of him. The once happy memories of the man who had raised her were replaced with a reel of his final days, writhing and jerking as his body desperately fought a losing battle. She thought about her own mortality a lot too. The thought of dying alone and in pain terrified her.
Eventually, even that lost its power over her. Nothing brought her peace except sleep. Only in the dreamless void behind closed eyes, she was incapable of holding sorrow.

Her father had always said she was his “starry sky after the storm”, but Miyeon didn’t exactly feel as bright these days. There was a super dense black hole monster just nibbling away at her, turning her vibrant universe into a palette of grays. Miyeon had become a little smudge of grey on a vivid painting of beautiful people doing fun things. She stopped all social media, stopped answering calls, and went out only when it was necessary…

The topic of her father’s health and “what are you going to do” always came up… She was tired of thinking and talking about it, so she’d change the subject… Yet it tainted her every social interaction. Miyeon didn’t even have to be present for the conversations; the things her peers weren’t brave enough to ask her became a source of speculation. Rumors got around, messages were public – despite being “private”, and there was no hiding the look of pity in their eyes or the uncomfortable frowns that’d cross their faces when she’d greet them. Rather than being happy to hear from her, they always sounded reluctant… It felt like she had been the one sick… Being “out of sight, out of mind” only increased the distance. She was too numb to really feel hurt by it, which made it easier to rationalize her solitude as an act of mercy rather than exile. Without her, they could all be happy and think about the things young college students were supposed to… They were in different worlds now.

Maybe she was a princess, cast out into space so that humanity could be spared from the life stealing black hole within her heart…

If her life were an anime or a game, some team of super powered heroes would rush in to save her, but this was reality. There weren’t candy colored soldiers to fight off the troubles for her, although if there were, she desperately wanted to pilot a mecha suit too … maybe a purple and pink one with kitty ears and a bell.

Nestling into her pillow, Miyeon lay day dreaming about it until the glow of sunset was all but an aura of flame in her room. Sadly, the temperature didn’t match the warmth of the tones… In order to conserve money, she’d turned off any sort of climate control in the house. Though her father had left her a decent inheritance, it’d have to last her through the next few years of her schooling. It might be enough if she conserved it… She couldn’t just start taking classes again as it was already midterm, and any job she might apply for would likely skim over her application knowing that she would eventually return to school. The girl was in limbo…

Lazily she reached for her phone: no missed messages… The clock showed that it was nearly 6:00 PM. Her stomach growled to affirm an entire day of missed meals; her bladder also gave an uncomfortable twinge which eventually grew too great to ignore. With reluctance, she finally rolled out of bed. Grabbing some clothes to replace the lavender sheep print pajamas she’d been rolling around in and taking her phone along, Miyeon retreated to the bathroom with the phone full blast on a streaming music station to distract her from how dark the rest of the house was. The voices on the radio made it seem as though she wasn’t alone. As long as there was sound and light, she wasn’t afraid…

As the list switched to a new song, she found herself swaying with the rhythm and softly singing chorus. The artist playing was the rising sensation known as Zen. Miyeon had never been one to worship idols, but her best friend and a few girls in her class had been fans of his. A sad smile cross her lips as she recalled Eun-Ji bellowing out the words to “Within, Without You, Darling” in her deepest “man” voice. Granted, she was doing that now… It wasn’t that she was bad at singing, but there was a reason someone like Zen was famous and why someone like her was crooning the chorus in her shower.
The follow up song lost her interest, which let her focus more on the topic of what she was going to do about food. It was too late to cook a proper meal, not that she had anything in the kitchen worth preparing aside from microwavable “lonely girl” meals. Miyeon thought to treat herself, but then the question became budget and calories. Being less active meant she had less than both, although her lack of eating the rest of the day meant that she could splurge on one big unhealthy meal. Somewhere there was a place where she could get an American style bacon cheese burger on a ramen bun with cucumber and avocado sushi on the side and a pint of her beloved chocolate covered potato chip ice cream dripping with hot fudge and salted caramel, but that wasn’t anywhere in the cosmos she inhabited. In an alternate universe her other self was enjoying such a meal in a house full of people… If multiverse theory was real there had to be infinite realities where that was happening… Why wasn’t she in that one?

Miyeon took her time getting ready while the ache in her belly worsened. If there was any advantage to being in mourning and poverty, her clothes were much looser but a lot of her wardrobe was conservative to begin with. There were a few cute outfits, professional attire, and skirts, but most of her closet was long sleeve shirts, sweaters, and more than a few cartoon and game related shirts. Many of them held sentimental value, as they had belonged to her older brother… Among the most notorious of the items was a lilac colored tabby cat hoodie. Eun-Ji teased her relentlessly for it, but that never stopped her from wearing it and the matching paw themed gloves. Wearing it made her feel a little more like herself. Slipping it on, the girl began to make her way out, turning the flashlight on her phone and flipping on every light on the way out so that the house would look occupied for when she got home.

Her heart pounded with anticipation of seeing something she ought not before she hit the switch in each room on the way to the front door. Rationally, she knew she wouldn’t find anyone in the dark, but it was hard to shake the anxiety. When her father and elder brother were home, there was comfort in knowing she could cry out for help or could blame them for any strange noises… Not anymore. Yet, she caught herself calling out to them from habit as she opened the front door.

“I’m going... out,” she announced, her voice trailing off.

Locking up, she checked her phone with no change aside from the time. Miyeon moved to retrieve her earbuds from her pocket, but opted to remain attentive to her surroundings… Her heart was still pounding in her ears from the anxiety of walking through the darkened house, now that she was out on the street, her fears only multiplied. The girl felt like a quivering bunny, pink ears pricked and listening on all fronts for a potential attack. Her pace was brisk as she made her way towards the bus stop. Normally she tried to go out much earlier in the day, but thanks to her increasingly chaotic sleep schedule, the girl was now faced with going out into the darkness for food. Her inner adult chided her to “work on it”, but until she re-entered university that was not likely to happen… If there was anything good to come of it, the sky was rather lovely and the air was much fresher in the evening.

There was a small group waiting at the bus stop and an older couple who fusses at each other, which made her feel a little better, but the combined scent of sweat and perfume threatened to overpower her senses. Rather than try to make small talk, she withdrew her phone and poked around on it purposefully to distract herself. Even once the bus pulled up and the girl took a seat towards the front, her eyes didn’t leave the screen. On a whim she was looking for any sort of program that mimicked the appearance of an active chat. It wasn’t that the embarrassment of being alone was unbearable; Miyeon was more concerned with the sort of attention a lone girl would invite. She was all too aware of the dangers she could face now that there wasn’t a group of friends around her. If she could at least look as though there were people who would notice her gone, that might be enough of a deterrent.
An app that appeared to be a game matching her need was on the “Recommended for You” list, although there weren’t any downloads of it yet. Maybe it was a ported title from another country? Rather than doing her usual research into reviews and screenshots, Miyeon hastily hit the download button. After a minute, the progress bar didn’t seem to move at all. Maybe it was just her eagerness to have some sort of decoy for human contact that made her so focused on the slow speed. By the time she reached her stop, it was only at 18%. Rather than obsess over the sluggish progress, she turned the Wi-Fi off and on again in hopes of finding a better connection and closed her case, opting to let it finish downloading while handling the business of dinner.

Only after finishing her sandwich did she realize that the app had finished loading and that her phone was incredibly warm. Though concerning, it didn’t stop her from clicking the icon to test the download.

Everything went black.

Her heart froze with terror at the thought of having to replace such an expensive item on an already tight budget. In a panic she began to poke at the screen and try the power buttons. Finally lines of code in bright lime began to fill up the screen, at least the hardware at least showed some functionality. While computer sciences weren’t her thing, the girl knew enough to know that she was looking at a very basic BIOS level script, which didn’t comfort her. For a moment she merely watched the process. The camera light came on, flashed, then everything was idle for a moment before the default OS for the phone seemed to awaken just enough to show a chat window.

Her curiosity was piqued. Maybe it was a really immersive game? She’d played horror survival games and a few stealth action games that’d used such gimmicks.

A burning sensation filled her lungs as her breath was held.

Unknown: …Hello…?

Miyeon waited a moment, expecting there to be a prompt, but only her normal keypad was visible. More curious than cautious, her finger gingerly pressed the buttons to reply. The only thing that seemed appropriate was:

“?”.

Unknown: Can you see this?

Taking another sip of the sweet, spicy tea, Miyeon tried writing out a slightly more complex reply. Maybe this was a chatbot of some type?

“Yes. Who are you, exactly? O_o”

There was a moment delay which allowed her to fully appreciate the faceless white and yellow icon designating where an identifying picture ought to have been. Most artificial chat A.I. had some sort of mascot.

Unknown: I’m sure you’re surprised.

Unknown: It’s not every day you get to talk to a stranger.

The last sentence made her feel a little uneasy. Blowing a few bubbles back into her tea, she assured herself that this was just a program comment that was meant to unnerve her for the sake of immersion. Her competitive nature wouldn’t let it get the better of her… Before she could even think of a reply to test the subroutines, it sent another “message”.
Unknown: I’m a bit flustered myself. I found this phone at a subway station, and all it had on it was this app.

Unknown: I wanted to find the owner, but there isn’t any contact info or records.

Unknown: I’ve been sending messages but there’s been no other replies.

Unknown: All I see is an address and some important looking numbers saved in the notepad.

Her head tilted with the possibility that this wasn’t just an A.I.

“Please don’t take this question the wrong way, but you’re like… A flesh and blood human, right? @_@”

Unknown: I am.

A few seconds passed before a picture was sent through of a fairly normal looking young man with dark hair and kind, green eyes was looking back at her.

Unknown: This is me.

Unknown: I’m from Korea, but I’m currently studying abroad.

Unknown: I’d like to return this phone to its owner. I would be very grateful if you could help me.

“I’d be happy to… But couldn’t you turn it into the lost and found at the station? If they’re abroad too, there’s not much I can do on this end… Or if you have the address, you could always mail it back to them. :/”

Unknown: As a devout person of faith, I feel it’s important to make use of any possibility in order to do a good deed when providence allows. Besides, I don’t think the people here are fluent in Korean.; I’m worried that they’ll just let it set in lost and found, and there’s no telling how long it’ll be before the original owner realizes it’s gone.

Unknown: The owner must be very stressed...

“Yeah. You’re very kind. I wish there was more I could do… It’d be nice if we had more options.”

Unknown: We do.

Within a moment he’d sent the full street address. Miyeon recognized the location as being an area for those of a higher income bracket than herself. Whoever originally owned the phone probably did have a job that would take them overseas often if they lived in such a trendy location. Truthfully it wasn’t that far, only a few blocks walk away.

Unknown: I remember the area; it’s a fairly nice neighborhood. If you are nervous, I could help.

Unknown: If it isn’t too far…

“It’s not that far, but if they’re abroad, the best I can do is leave a note they may not even see till they get back. >_<”
Unknown: It’s worth a check… Right?

Blowing a few more bubbles into her tea, she pondered it a moment more. She was already uncomfortable being out on her own. For all she knew it could be some sort of strange set up. As she weighed the options, another message came up.

Unknown: Please… How often do you get an opportunity to help others?

Her heart sank at that… She was pretty useless these days.

“Okay… But I’m leaving if I get any weird vibes; I’ve got people waiting on me at home.”

It was a small lie…

Unknown: Thank you!

Unknown: Let me know when you get there!

For several minutes she looked back over the conversation. Her phone wasn’t exactly letting her access anything else aside from the chat window and the link to the address in her “Maps” app. Part of her wondered if it was part of some sort of strange geocaching group or a Cicada 3301 trial. They did strange, international puzzles like this to recruit potential code breakers and stuff, right? Maybe it was some sort of Square’d-chan prank? The curiosity was overpowering her sense of self preservation, and after throwing her trash away, Miyeon set out. Her phone was close to her ear as she pretended to be talking to a friend, just to reinforce the, “People are waiting for me” part of her story. Maybe it was her imagination, but it was almost as if someone were on the other end…

The apartment building itself was relatively new and sported a distinctly modern design. Merely walking in made Miyeon feel strangely out of place, as the people in the lobby were clearly young and middle aged professionals of various trendy styles. Most were getting home after a long day of work and were dressed to the 9’s. She, on the other hand, was in a purple cat hoodie, skirt, and leggings. There were more than a few raised brows in her direction. Nerd chic wasn’t exactly in style at the moment…

On the elevator ride up, she was surrounded by the scent of high quality perfume dripping off of a woman who had clearly had plastic surgery done to retain her youthful appeal. It wouldn’t have been noticeable except for the stiff way her lips moved while they made small talk. Miyeon listened good naturedly until reaching the floor with the apartment in question, only to find the woman stepping out on the 12th floor… She was supposed to go to the 14th. When the elevator door slid open, the girl practically bolted into the hall despite the protests of her rational mind.

This was stupid… This was very stupid…

Checking her phone again, she verified the apartment number before making her way towards what seemed to be the right direction. It wasn’t a long trip; in fact, the apartment was just to the right and opposite the elevator. There weren’t any corners for an ambush, and the lush tropical plant behind her wasn’t exactly the sort of thing someone could hide behind.

There was one very important difference from the other apartment doors as she stood in front of it; there was a heavy duty looking number lock. Below the keypad was a logo of some kind and a card reader. Her eyes caught a series CCTV cameras down the hall.

“…Couldn’t splurge for the retinal scan too, huh?” she quipped, leaning down a
little to get a better look before pulling her phone back out.

Waiting for her was a message from the good Samaritan.

Unknown: Are you there yet? Hope there’s nothing strange.

“I’m here. ^-^” Her fingers zipped out the follow up. “Going to try knocking… There’s a number pad here though.”

Unknown: Oh.

Unknown: Good idea.

Miyeon pressed the doorbell before gently wrapping on the door with about a minute in between attempts, but after a second round there was still no reply. Either whoever was inside didn’t want to be bothered, or there was no one inside. If they were abroad, that made sense. A glance back down at her vibrating phone revealed a link with a rather long string of numbers.

Unknown: Found that in the notes.

Unknown: I think it might be the code for the door.

Unknown: Maybe you can give it a try?

The entire situation screamed “wrong” now. Maybe she could go to the apartment management office to let them know what was going on? Before that, maybe she should at least see what the person on the other end was up to in order to have a more complete report to the authorities…

After pressing the last number, the handle turned smoothly, allowing the door to glide open. The lights turned on automatically. Her senses were immediately hit with the scent of dust, stale cherry blossom perfume, and paper … Clearly no one had been in there for awhile.

“The door’s opened,” she texted, before putting her head into the room just a little. “Hello…?”

Unknown: Why don’t you go inside?

“… Pretty sure it’s not legal for me to enter a stranger’s house. ;/ We’re already skirting breaking and entering,” the girl replied, her senses were on high alert. Even the CCTV camera unnerved her now. Was he somehow watching her?

Unknown: You’re just leaving a note with my info. Besides, you have this chat log if anyone has questions.

Still feeling uneasy, Miyeon pulled the plant near the window in front of the door to prop it open before carefully toeing inside. This was quite possibly the stupidest thing she’d ever done... Her entire body felt hot and tingly in the worst sort of way.

“Hello…?” she called out again before feeling her phone vibrate.

Unknown: Th

Unknown: ank

Unknown: you…
Before Miyeon could even fully finish reading the message, her screen was back to the scrolling green scripting. An awkward mewl of fear escaped her as her body pressed into the wall. She was prepared to run to fight... Ready to:

Yoosung*: failed my midterms fml T_T

A quivering breath returned as she watched an animated emoticon emerge of a blonde boy crying. Her phone filled the apartment with the mournful sound of him whimpering.

707: Cuz you played LOLOL all night lol.

Jumin Han: If you want to work for our company, you should take care of your GPA.

Miyeon had edged her way back to the doorframe. Confused at what she was seeing between nervous glances to make sure no one was going to spring out at her.

The chat taking place looked fairly normal and mundane. Maybe it was still just a game with triggered events? Either way, she was still probably going to notify the apartment management office about the messages that had lead her there. If the people in the chat were real, maybe they knew something. There was apparently a big fan of Zen arguing with someone who had an avatar picture of a wealthy business man. The face was vaguely familiar from magazines she’d seen in convenience stores, but the name eluded her. Perhaps it was a really lame dating simulator game with pop icons of the day? It could always be role playing group’s private OOC chat...

707: Think someone entered the chatroom;;

That observation lead to a cascade of comments... One message stood out.

Jaehee Kang: But no one can enter this private chat without installing the private app... It appears someone must've downloaded it.

Yoosung*: I thought Seven only let us download it?

Maybe it was a game with a really involved script? If so, maybe she could try testing the A.I.

“Hello...?” she texted in cautiously.

Yoosung*: GAHHH! It’s talking!

Zen: So it’s not two smartphones.

There were questions from the other users between each other, and asking who “it” was now directed towards her.

707: I traced the IP…

707: It’s from Rika’s apartment.

The letters were large and the box highlighted. Miyeon’s heart stopped again. Was she going to have a whole group of this lady’s friend’s dragging her to the police station for breaking in?


Zen: Would you voluntarily confess if it were you?
Jaehee Kang: No… But it’s good to ask.

707: lol

Jumin Han: Enough… Miyeon, who are you?

Jumin Han: Reveal yourself, or you will pay.

Zen: Stranger, you will pay? Lmfao

Zen: omg ~*so scary*~

Zen: It might be a girl

Part of her wanted to reply to confirm as such and apologize, but before she could move her stiffened thumb…

707: That’s sexist lol. U should watch what u say now ur a famous actor.

The girl slipped down the wall as the entire group in the chatroom seemed to be distracted by “Zen”. What if it really was him? She shook her head… This was just another part of an elaborate prank. It had to be. There could totally be a camera crew waiting to catch her and have her sign a release. Part of her took comfort in that until the more forceful member, with his blue chat box, reminded them to stay focused on her.

Jumin Han: Who are you? Reveal yourself right now.

Yoosung*: Yeees! Who r u!?

Zen: Use proper language, please.

707: If it doesn’t say anything I’ll hack in and find out.

Zen. Maybe, one of my fans?

Miyeon steadied her phone to text a reply, albeit intimidated by the angry, personalized image of “Jumin Han”. She owed them some sort of explanation, but before there was one thing she had to know first…

“You’re humans, right…?”

707: Lol so awkward

707: Maybe it’s computer talking?

707: *_* Are you self aware?!

707: ( There was a gasping emoticon of a red haired, bespectacled man).

Her head tilted at that. To be fair, she sort of earned it.

“My name is Ko Miyeon. My sincerest apologies! I didn’t mean to intrude” Like lightning she sent a follow-up, “! I thought I downloaded a game… but somehow it redirected me here. @_@”

Zen: Seems more normal than I thought.
Yoosung*: What were you thinking?

Zen: Nothing~nothing...

Before she could manage any more explanation, the group seemed already off on a round of introductions and banter. Zen affirmed himself to be the artist, or was a very committed fan, as a selfie was quickly shared with the group. There was no denying that he was a very attractive man, even in bad lighting. It wasn’t a picture she’d seen of him before... “Yoosung*” was quick to follow suit with a picture of a fresh faced youth with large, expressive violet eyes, and a bright teal hoodie. She could see the appeal. He was apparently a college student like she’d been. 707 noted his age, and when Zen asked if he wanted to share a picture too:

707: Nothing recent

707: Oh and also!

707: Jumin’s the heir of a pretty famous corporation and Jaehee is his assistant. 27 and 26 yrs old respectively.

707: Have a better sense of who we are, Miyeon?

Jumin Han: Why did you say that?

707: Doubted u’d do it urself.

707: Oh fyi, Jumin has the CUTEST cat!

Before Jumin could fuss too much, there was already a picture of the same rather stoic looking man beside a rather luxuriously coated white cat. She couldn’t help but smile at that; it was an adorable kitty. The owner didn’t seem so happy to have “Elizabeth the 3rd” being revealed judging by the avalanche of discourse. A picture then flashed of a slender man with messy hair and glasses holding the cat up by the paws was presented as evidence of 707 being a “cat abuser”. She couldn’t make out his face very well.

“This isn’t a role play chat… Is it? @_@”

No one answered that question as they were too engrossed in the discussion of the cat until Jaehee, seemingly the voice of reason brought attention back on her.

Zen: True. Miyeon, how did you get in here?

“Well the long version : I downloaded what I thought was a game from the app store… It connected me to someone who claimed to have found a lost phone, and he wanted me to help him return it to the owner. The username was “Unknown” (?) Know him…? Anyway I came to this apartment, trying to help. I was about to get his information to leave a note when then chat redirected me here. @_@ Needless to say, I’m a little creeped out.”

Zen: That was rather naive of you.

“_;_; I just wanted to do my good deed of the day.”

Zen: So cute.

There was a little more discussion before another question came. Knowing that these were real people, who seemed nice relaxed her some. Although she still wanted to leave the apartment
before they called the cops…

707: Hey, Miyeon. So he told you the password for the door lock?

“Yes. He said it was in the notes of the phone… Sadly I didn’t get a chance to save it, but be sent me a picture. I’d recognize the face if I saw it again. I’m sorry I’m not more helpful. ;;”

Jumin Han: I see.

Jumin Han: So that “Unknown” person dragged you into this.

Yoosung*: But how did u end up chatting with that person?

Jaehee Kang: Precisely where did you download this messenger app?

“It was from the Joystore app – specifically. Honestly, I just thought this was a game. @_@”

Yoosung*: You like games too!?

Yoosung*: I love games.

Yoosung*: Do you know a game called LOLOL?

Zen: Dude. A girl won’t play that game;;

Zen: Don’t ask stupid questions.

Yoosung*: T_T

“^-^; Actually I have a 73 light spec cleric on Moonbow server,” Miyeon clarified, feeling a need to defend her fellow student and gamer.

Yoosung*: Im on shootinsrat

Yoosung*: *shooting star!

Yoosung*: U should transfer!

Yoosung*: (An personalized emoticon of him smiling emerged).

707: Anyways.

707: I should trace the person who distributed the app.

A flurry of activity followed as plans to manage the situation were discussed. The police weren’t going to be called, but someone named “V” was.

707: Sorry callingvandtypingwithonehand

Yoosung*: Type after you finish the call

707: lookedintotheownerofthedevide

707: she’scutelol
Miyeon felt her cheeks blush. Her thumb reflexively covered the camera on her phone before she made sure she was out of view of the CCTV.

Yoosung*: So Miyeon is really a girl!? Did you do a background check?

“@_@ Are you like spying on me right now?”

Zen: He IS a hacker. But to be honest, he probably just looked up your FB page.

707: nothereyet

707: iwillfineneedtholol

Jumin: What? So it’s really a girl?

“Is that really that important…? Totally not weirded out now. ;-;”

Zen: We are just curious; I know it’s scary. Maybe you’ll feel better if you share a picture? J

Yoosung*: Yes! I wanna see!

“…I’d rather not… Maybe once we figure this out.”

Zen: Seven, show us the photo.

707: Nope~

707: How dare you try to violate someone’s privacy like that.

For a moment, she felt safe until the screen brought up an image. Her heart stopped with panic, until realizing that the picture wasn’t of her at all. Rather it was a rather professional woman in shades. It had to be the secretary who was threatening to call the cops on her. Even if he was a hacker, he seemed at least a little respectful, in his way…

Jumin Han: ?

Zen: Is that Miyeon!?

Yoosung*: omg I thought it was her privacy?

Jaehee Kang: ;;;;

Jaehee Kang: That is a photo of me.

Yoosung*: Oh right! Sorry I was too excited;;

Zen: So. Sorry for not recognizing you.

“Wow. It exudes an aura of warm steel. Fierce! O.O So cool."

Jaehee Kang: Thank you…? Um… Mr.Han, you can’t recognize me either?

Jumin Han: …

Jumin Han: Now what are we going to do?
707: V’s coming here soon. He just hung up.

V: I’m already logged in.

The girl remained quiet, opting to observe while sitting on the floor of the apartment. Though the chat log went by quickly, she had no trouble keeping up. Firstly the app was custom made for the purposes of their organization by 707, whose real name apparently was Luciel. The group apparently engaged fundraising for charities by staging events every few years. While everyone in the chat was a member, V and Rika were in charge. It was Rika who primarily lived and worked in the apartment despite it being in her boyfriend’s name. She was the one who did the lion’s share of organizing the parties and contacting guests. As a result the apartment had high security to protect the privacy of past attendees, who ranged from charity representatives to statesmen. On top of the physical and electronic security systems, no one else in the group knew the password for the door — aside from V, Rika, and 707… And now apparently whoever had given her the code and herself. Considering how friendly everyone seemed, that struck Miyeon as odd. Then again, nothing about what was happening was normal.

Someone had hacked them, and she, had apparently downloaded an app that was likely probing their system for weaknesses. There was a little guilt there, but even moreso, why would someone go through all that trouble? Did they just want information? Why go through such an elaborate set up? It was just… Weird…

Her eyes drifted up to the actual room. Before, the girl had been too focused on looking for movement and people to jump out at her to really take it in. Despite the clear signs of abandonment, there was a sense of compulsive cleaning and organizing by the former owner. The room was filled with filing cabinets, lockers, and containers of documentation that appeared to be meticulously labeled. Rika had apparently been a very studious and busy woman, seemingly to a frightening degree.

A peek back down at the phone showed that the conversation had shifted from “What was going on?” to the “Why” and “How” of the situation. V seemed to be of the opinion that whoever had sent her to the apartment did so on Rika’s behalf. The former organizer, apparently was no longer among the living. Since her death, there hadn’t been no attempt to continue her work by the other members. They all seemed to be mourning her in their own way… Miyeon knew that feeling quite well.

There was some debate as to how she ended up there, but V asserted that perhaps his former lover had arranged it so that someone would take her place. She seemed the sort with foresight… Perhaps the phone act was just to test someone’s willingness to perform an act of kindness? These were just guesses. Many of the other members had misgivings about the hypothesis; frankly, she agreed with them. It seemed unlikely… Her father had tried making plans before his own death, but nothing quite on the scale of finding a random person to carry on his legacy through such a longwinded scheme. It was either genius or idiotic. As she pondered it, one set of messages stood out…

V: Miyeon, it’s probably best not to touch anything in the apartment.

V: It won’t be good if the alarm rings.

He made a point to bold and underline that warning. The sarcastic part of her was like, “What’s the worst that could happen? The building explodes?” but the more responsible part of her respected the fact it was likely for liability in the event the confidential information leaked. Not to mention the alarm system was likely going to result in an even more chaotic situation… Likely one that resulted with her taking a trip in chain linked silver bracelets to a nice cold prison cell.
Before she could even ask V any questions, he was already gone, and everyone in the room was already discussing a plan forward… Specifically, V seemed to think it was best to invite her to take over Rika’s role as the party coordinator. There was opposition, but some playful support of it that seemed to snowball into sincere interest, mainly driven by nostalgia. The allure of throwing a party again had them all on the same page and not bickering. Rich, beautiful people were really easily won over…

No one had exactly asked her opinion on the matter.

Maybe she could just delete the app, lock the door, and go back home…

These people had no idea who she was or if she could even do what was being asked. While the girl could imagine what the tasks involved were, enacting them was entirely different. Furthermore, if the former organizer had somehow scouted her out, exactly had she gone about it? Miyeon had done community service time with a number of animal rescue related charities, so maybe someone had recommended her? Or it was just nonsense…

They all seemed so happy at the thought… They wanted to remember and honor the memory of their friend. Clearly they didn’t have the ability or time to organize it themselves. It wasn’t like she had anything better to do.

A sense of purpose sparked to life within her, allowing her to gradually steady herself back on two feet. Her mind was already buzzing with the possible groups they could benefit and a theme. If she needed a practical reason, it helped that helping to organize a charity event would probably look nice on a resume. Even more selfishly, Miyeon wanted to talk to the people more… The members of the group seemed really nice, and the part of her that desperately ached for human contact was greedily lapping up the attention.

What would her father have wanted her to do?

He certainly didn’t want her to waste away her life, alone in her bed.

A strangled sob escaped through the smile on her lips as she thought of his voice and what he might say to her now. Would he be disappointed at how she’d just given up for the past month? Would he chide her for stupidly listening to a stranger’s text message? Now that there was an opportunity, she had to take it right? The prospect of agreeing to it and failing terrified her, but the thought of regretting a missed opportunity bore a deeper sense of emptiness. These people didn’t appear to be lying…

How many times had her father encouraged her to try new things and helped her laugh when she failed? Perhaps he was guiding her in his way again? Maybe Rika was disappointed in everyone for not carrying on her work without her too… Miyeon could imagine the two of them orchestrating the whole thing from beyond.

The girl tried to wipe the stinging from her eyes as a pained chuckle escaped her. It was superstitious and stupid, but she wanted to believe it. Desperately they all seemed to want a miracle… Maybe Unknown was an angel in plain clothes? His true good intention was for her to help them… That had to be it, right? Besides, what was the worst that could happen? She’d fail, get laughed at, and sink back into the life of an obscure peasant with a funny story to tell. The girl could probably sell a book about how to own one’s failure and then tour the country talking about how to accept one’s role as a NEET loser. Merely the thought made her let out a sniffling laugh.

Jumin Han: Miyeon
Jumin Han: Our organization has done a lot of good so far.

Jumin Han: …You will never regret joining.

Yoosung*: I thought you were against her. Why the change?

Jumin Han: I am only honoring V’s decision.

Zen: If you join the organization, we’ll be able to talk more. Not every day we meet a pretty girl.

A chortle escaped her at the sight of that comment. There was nothing pretty about a geek girl with unkempt bangs crying in a dead woman’s apartment. Her face was probably all puffy, and her nose running. That wasn’t exactly “foxy”… Then again… Rule 34…

707: Uhm. How do you know she’s pretty? I didn’t even send the photo.

Hadn’t he called her cute earlier? Maybe she was like, pug cute…

Zen: SEND THE PHOTO

Quietly she prayed, “Please don’t send a picture of me to a pop star… I’m a potato!”

707: No.

Aloud she sighed a thank you, before wondering if perhaps he was keeping the photo to himself because he liked what he saw or maybe he was trying to spare her humiliation. It wasn’t like there was any proof he actually had found a picture of her. She didn’t exactly take selfies and the pictures on her social media accounts generally were limited to memes, crafts she’d worked on, and adorable animals. Her head started to ache as she pondered the possibilities of the camera on her phone and the CCTV cameras in the hall…

Zen: Damn.

Jumin Han: Men will be men.

Zen: And you’re not a man?

707: Heard somewhere that Jumin’s gay.

And boys would be boys…

Zen: omg...

Zen: Go away. You scare me. P_P

So much for making a sincere, professional declaration of acceptance of the proposal. A little debate stirred back up until the benevolent voice of reason, Jaehee, came forth again in an attempt to deescalate and passively redirect the topic back to something productive. Even though she didn’t know them all well, there was enough for her to form an impression. The chat was like a sled ride with a pack of rowdy dogs all wanting to go in different directions and Jaehee was the lone human trying to get them all to pull the same finish line, but they just dragged her by the ankle. The RFA Sled Team:

Yoosung, probably something cute and playful like a Yorkshire terrier or Maltese, who just wanted to play fetch.
Zen, a large, majestic Husky purposefully bred, but who was more interested in being seen and petted than running. Unless maybe there was a good reason.

707… A corgi… Clever, but not above entertaining himself by nipping his sled mates on the paws before aptly tucking and rolling aside as though nothing happened at all.

That left Jumin: a dominant minded Doberman who found the entire race pointless. As a result, he sat bottom firmly in the snow until feeling the whim to get on with it, at which point he’d bark and everyone else would get in line. They’d make progress for a few feet, before descending back into chaos.

V was like a wolf… Mysterious and hard to find judging by the comments made about how long it’d been since anyone’d seen him.

They were a pack without a leader and no clear destination. They knew it too… They were just as desperate for someone to fill the void left by Rika as she was for human contact. It was pathetic, but then again, so was she.

Jumin Han: Miyeon, will you join the RFA.

Restraining herself from typing back, “woof”…

“Could be fun! I’m in. Let’s give it our best!”

That didn’t seem desperate or forced, right? Her stomach tightened as she thought of all the other things she could’ve said instead. Too late to take it back now, the replies were already scrolling up her screen.

Yoosung*: That’s a fast decision..

Jumin Han: Ha, I like it.

Jaehee Kang: I wonder if you’ve thought this through.

Zen: Welcome, Miyeon! Oi! Seven, register her info ASAP.

707: Ya, I have to register before she changes her mind.

Yoosung*: She must be a positive person, making her mind up so quickly!

Jaehee Kang: I wonder if WE’VE thought this through.

Miyeon felt a little hurt by that, but she understood where it came from. Before she could even offer an assurance…

Jumin Han: Assistant Kang, is there something you do not like about her?

Yoosung*: Yeah. Jaehee, don’t be like that.

Jaehee Kang: It is not that.

“You know anything about what sort of person I am or my background… Jaehee is simply trying to look out for everyone.”

Jaehee Kang: Exactly.
Yoosung*: … I’m glad we have a girl now! It was a hopeless sausage fest until now lol

A cringe ran up her spine at that. Something told her that Jaehee felt it too.

Yoosung*: Miyeon, if you have any questions, I can answer them!

Yoosung*: Ask anything you need!

Yoosung*: No need to worry about anything ^^

Was it desperation or eagerness to help that he excluded? She just couldn’t get the mental image out of her head of the blonde boy bounding up and down like an excitable little terrier. It was adorable in a way. Maybe a little disturbing.

707: Good. I’ve registered her as a member! Oh. We don’t really need ur signature.

707: ^^… Since it’s a verbal contract.

Perhaps she’d signed a pact with the devil himself…

Yoosung*: You’re going to collect all the info so she can’t run away, right?

Okay… Maybe the puppy of a boy was very disturbing. In her mind flashed a scene from Diary of the Future, with the gender roles reversed.

Zen:… Don’t collect anything without Miyeon’s permission.

A smile formed on her lips. If it really was the pop star, he seemed quite grounded and reasonable, like a kind big brother. Eun Ji was going to love hearing all about this! Maybe she could ask for an autograph once they got to know each other better? In a flash the conversation was back to a little debate on 707’s employment and earnings. Exhibit 1 from Yoosung was a screen cap from the hacker’s tripter supposedly of a new car. It was a sleek, sporty number in white, but Miyeon found herself studying the small portrait in the corner. A pair of boldly striped glasses sat perched above a clever, infectious smiling red head.

Was everyone in the group so attractive? Her stomach lurched at just how out classed she was. She was a potato in soil full of gems… At least Miyeon could be the best root vegetable she could be, after all, kindness made someone beautiful too, right? She shifted her hips uncomfortably as standing in the cool apartment was starting to make her legs ache.

The group was already saying their goodbyes as it appeared to be decided… It was already past 10:00 PM. Two of the people clearly had work the next day, one of them was already working, one had school, and one likely had some sort of interview… She on the other hand, needed to get ready to become a magical girl capable of fulfilling everyone’s wish for a good party.

Walking to the front door, Miyeon used her sleeve to fully wipe the lingering dampness and salt of her tears aside, yet she found herself grinning. It had been a good, but weird day.
Chapter Summary

707: Hellooooo??

Ko Mi-Yeon, age 21 with her best friend and two classmates, whose position suggested that the camera man had hidden behind them in order to sneak the shot. It had been posted by a friend of hers a little over four months ago between semesters. Everyone laughing and beaming in an amusement park, and there in the “tagged” box was a pale princess with a blue smile on full pink lips, long Ph.D Pepper colored hair, and exquisite, honey colored eyes… Her attention was off camera; totally unaware…

The comments below read:

<3Eun Ji<3 : “Proof that the mysterious hermit maiden exists! Any takers? ~^-^

My grl needs a man!”

xXJojoVonHojunsteinXx: “:O she kno you put this up lolololol”

<3Eun Ji <3 : “My bf managed 2 sneak the shot. :3”

Kyun<3Eun: “:* so when do I get my prize?”

xXJojoVonHojunsteinXx: XD meow’s gonna kill both u lolol

Then only a few days ago…

xXJojoVonHojunsteinXx: “been awhile. we should go again”

<3 Eun Ji <3 : “…ya. mehbe one day ;;, miss that grl”

There was a story behind every story, including the story that preceded the story that preceded it… For now all he needed to know was her name, criminal background, and proof that the new member was a real person with no aliases or ties to a shadow organization. If this were a paid job, he could probably get her medical records and sizes by looking up past transactions on any credit cards… His experience in disguises told him she was likely a B cup… As this was pro bono for V, because it always was, he’d only checked to make sure her friends weren’t sock accounts. They were real people, which was encouraging. The subject in question hadn’t been very active on her own accounts in months though.

“Plants” weren’t common outside of espionage, but they weren’t unheard of, so he had to be thorough. This could all be a roundabout way to get to him rather than the RFA information… That was by no means a statement of vanity, rather a reality that he’d settled into… While he would know the results of his other lines of inquiry regarding the girl within a few hours, right now, he leaned towards her being clean…

He hoped she was…
How long had it been since everyone had been so lively? It was good to see everyone getting along for just a little awhile again, although there was no telling how long that’d last. Men were men, after all... Zen flirted with just about any woman, but his five year dry spell was adding an urgency to it. Yoosung who wanted to feel his first love was practically throwing himself at her in his awkward way. And Jumin, the corporate heir, could win any woman over with his combination of wealth, looks, and iron will – if he wanted… Regarding Miyeon, she seemed nice enough; that was all most men needed... “Nice enough” and cute… She exuded “girl next door”. Zen looking for comfort and admiration would find that appealing. Yoosung wanting a bubbly romance like what he read about in his shojou mangas was already diving in for it… Jumin maybe would find her minimalist make up a sign of sincerity and the symmetry of her face was quite pleasing… Personally it wasn’t something he could afford to get involved in…

Things got ugly when people caught “the feels”…

Releasing her picture would only increase and speed up affections developing, which could lead to jealousy and fights. They could be anything from small tiffs to the sort of thing that could make members leave… Frankly he wanted to protect them all from that sort of drama, which is why 707 purged the post so none of them would find it…

It was better for everyone this way…

Yeah, it was sneaky, but sometimes one had to play dirty to protect what was important… He tried to balance out his good and bad; the intention were what mattered. God knew he meant well. 707 was honest enough to confess to being selfish too... It an excuse to see everyone again… He wanted to have fun; slip his chain. All of it had been for freedom to begin with, yet much like the two empty cans before him, it was a very hollow concept to him now. His mind could wonder wherever it wanted, as long as part of it did what it was told.

Right now, the CCTV showed a petite girl rubbing her sleeve against her cheeks wearing a brighter sort of grin. Had she been crying? The feed wasn’t high enough quality to tell, plus her bangs had grown out considerably since the picture, hiding her eyes. By the way the fabric fell, he could tell she hadn’t stolen anything.

After a wringing of her hands, the girl set every ounce of her diminutive frame to the task of moving a potted rubber plant back near the window. The long, bangled tail attached to the hoodie trailed behind her.

He crunched a stale chip between his teeth…

*Get your shit together…*

The pile of requests from the agency sat glowering at him in the dim glow of the screen. Those were what he needed to be focused on… All of the documents had deadlines - literally… As in, if they weren’t crossed out with a line by the requested time, he would be dead. No pressure. Also on the immediate to do list: tracking and trapping the hacker who had infiltrated the RFA, beefing up security, finding a way to monitor the new member to ensure her innocence / protection, and a whole nebula of other related concerns that sparked along his neurons in no particular pattern. The schedule for success was somewhere in the depths of his grey matter, but he was intentionally avoiding thinking about it on a conscious level now. His rational mind was focused on grand pattern of numbers before him... There was a rhythm, it was just a matter of looking for the discordant notes… He’d heard his perception of such things called synesthesia and genius… To him it was just his brain CPU being awesome, as always. He had his own private numbers station with a kickin’ beat.
Lifting a can next to him, 707 found it to be full of possibility but no substance… There was probably an allegory there, but he didn’t want to think about it too much… The whimsical part of him was already asking why weren’t bottomless cans with a pocket dimension holding a universe of Ph.D. Pepper on the other side a thing? He shook the container as though the molecular friction might make any residual essence condense into something drinkable… It was moments like this, he could be sure time travel didn’t exist. If it did, he would’ve already brought the technology of infinite soda from an alternate reality back to himself to avoid this tragedy. That was unless future 707 had damned him to the lonely trek to the fridge for another can with only a few drops of lukewarm syrup to sustain him. That sadistic bastard, he knew the perfect revenge though… Future 707’d have to work without sleep and go out for more soda later from the store… That’d teach him. Farther in the future 707’d also get to spend some time with his babies on the trip to the store though…

Vanderwood would probably fuss at 5 minutes from now 707…

At least V picked up for 707 from 10 minutes ago…

Truthfully, he wasn’t angry by the amount of work that the whole incident had created. It was an eventuality – people tested his skills all the time. Including future him… This was one of the rare times that someone had gotten the better of him, but it was only luck… They’d caught him being complacent. It stoked the competitive sadist in him. Thing is, the stakes were higher than that…

He didn’t want to think about it.

Though he couldn’t be entirely sure of when, somewhere he’d learned to deal with that little voice inside his head with the martial art of “ball that anxiety up and throw it away”… By simply ignoring that little voice, he was able to focus when the pressure was on, provided he didn’t think about the mountain of angst behind him. His subconscious didn’t have a Vanderwood to pick up after it… Maybe that was why he kept looking towards the CCTV… Or maybe it was because he was expecting something… Something wonderful… Something like…

Miyeon tripping on her own tail…

She popped back up, smoothed her skirt back down, and gave the CCTV camera a coy wave before she disappeared in a hurry. His fingers curled meekly; he hadn’t imagined it, right? More code… Was the picture still pulled up?

That sad smile…

A normal, pretty girl should never have to wear such face.

She seemed nice…

He hated it…

Maybe it was worth hacking that boy’s phone just to make sure no one would have to see it again… While he was at it, he could remove her entire digital footprint and any debt…

He let a chuckle slip at the thought but cleared his throat after – best pretend it’s a cough. The hacker made a show of rubbing his nose to keep the act up… Even his fingers smelled like Honey Budda Chips. Considering how many of them he ate, it was likely a good deal of the carbon in his body came from them… He probably tasted like them too… If they actually had the party, would she sense the vibrations of his poor life choices? The salt and starch of the potatoes wove the atoms of his current being together… Chief slave to V – hacker extraordinaire of the “forever alone” club with a certification in cowardice and being a liar… Formerly meticulous, now just a fucking
loser, rather a **well-paid** loser… There was no way to compete with Zen’s pheromone. That’d keep her safe and away from him… Would she really be safer with someone like Zen though? … Probably… Yoosung would probably go yandere on her…

For a flash he thought of Jaehee and Miyeon in an embrace; definitely one of the weirder things to cross his mind. Madam Assistant was definitely seme…

He code in front of him was beating out it’s rhythm…

Bum, tiss…

Barrum, jingle…

ERROR

“Ouu…” he smirked, loser atomic binding potato chip hanging out the side of his mouth.

Only half a page of script later to confirm, and he found himself looking down at his phone… There were questions burning a hole through his organic processing unit. Where was Meow-on’s home? It was late at night and definitely not safe for a tiny girl like that to just go around unguarded. Cute little girls like her went for a lot in the less savory parts of the web… He didn’t have the time to crawl the deep web looking to buy her for bing-coins… She’d already demonstrated a predilection to naivety… Maybe the hacker was waiting for her at the bottom of the elevator and would follow her on her way home? Somewhere her little paws could be pawing at the back of a getaway car… Why hadn’t he hacked the other cameras? Why couldn’t she just stay at the apartment? He could at least keep an eye on for her own sake as well as to make sure she wasn’t a “plant”.

His fingers tapped out a furious percussion on his mouse, despite the fact his eyes were locked on the past algorithms. The Morse code being hammered out along the plastic matched a number, then two numbers, then a whole string of them associated with voices and faces until finally there was no restraining it.

Popping open the fresh can, the hacker tilted his head back and guzzled the contents quickly. The bubbles burned his throat and tickled his tongue, but it kept the doubts drowning in a sea of sticky sweet denial. Right where they belonged… Fizzle fizzle… It was the perfect fission reactor: caffeine, sugar, and apprehension. He set the can down with enough force to cause the agency pile to cascade over onto the floor…

He wasn’t worried…

707 was only excited because they could maybe use her as bait! Whoever had lead her there clearly would come back for her! The perpetrator always returned to the scene of the crime, after all…!’ The announcer voice in his head was always right!

There was a 0.000089% chance that he was afraid something would happen to the naive girl with the bittersweet smile because he had gotten lazy with switching out the algorithms on the RFA’s security protocols.

Luciel needed to make a call… or two… maybe three and a half… 707 needed to make one too; then, he could focus on doing agency work so he wasn’t killed, which would let him live long enough to do work for the RFA, so he could then get back to work for the agency, that way he could get back to the RFA problem, before the agency… Ad infinitum…

`std::abort`
Chapter 3:

Miyeon’s progress out of the apartment complex and on the way home was cautious to say the least. She left the building with a group and flagged down a taxi rather than wait for the bus. Once in the vehicle, the request was made to the driver to take a roundabout way back to her house. Her story had been that her friend’s ex-boyfriend was following her, and that it was best if they took as many turns and side roads as possible to make sure he wasn’t tailing them. To the older cab driver, this story seemed plausible enough as he nodded, before uttering about how “reckless” young people were getting. He even asked if her parents knew… There was no pleasure in lying, but who knows, maybe Rika did have a guy on the side who was orchestrating the whole thing. It “could” be real, right? Were it not for the fact that she held onto some legitimate fear, it might’ve been fun. It as if she were involved in some sort of international intrigue.

While she tried to make a little small talk with the driver, Miyeon politely asked if she could check her phone in order to “follow up” with her friend. Her cabby didn’t seem to mind, emphasizing that safety was the most important; there was agreement there.

Practical things ran through her mind, along with lamentations over what sort of stickiness was on the seat below her that kept tugging on her stockings. What exactly did a NEET potato like her know about parties for rich, beautiful, and talented people? There would need to be a venue, a date, and guests at the very least. The information for at least one of those things apparently was back at the apartment, but “V” had told her not to touch anything. That left researching a venue; Miyeon wasn’t exactly the type to hang out with trendy people, so that would take some digging… The date was something that everyone would likely need to agree upon. Something told her scheduling the lot of them would be like herding cats.

Everything was so interlinked though that even contacting new guests posed an issue. There was no time or place to give them to consider. Thinking about it made her head ache.

Popping the app back open, the girl was a little surprised to see messages waiting for her already. Her heart stopped at seeing that the bottom of the pile was “Unknown”… Quickly she screen capped it showing in the box, before opening the message and taking a snap of it as well. 707 had already sent her a message:

“Miyeon, it’s me Seven. Tell me if you know anything more about the hacker. I report things to V. Welcome to the RFA~*.”

She wasted no time in replying with the images attached.

“Not sure if you can see these in my box, but here’s pictures to prove I’m not crazy! Also, if I’m going to be helping you guys, I’ll likely need to talk with V directly.”

A moment’d scarcely passed before there was a reply.

“Sry V’s always busy. U’ll just have to leave that to me! Lolol Thx 4 the pics!”

Part of her wanted to explain why, but the realization hit her that he must be really busy with everything that had gone on that evening. He probably didn’t have time to spare.

“I get the feeling you’ll be busy all night because of me... I’m so sorry. Here’s
hoping you catch the culprit soon and have a good sleep after! I’ll be cheering for you! Good luck! ^_^”

After hitting “Send”, she set about answering the rest of the group’s messages. Yoosung’s practically leapt off the screen with it’s exuberance in welcoming her. Zen’s was polite. Jaehee was already offering help… Jumin and V hadn’t sent anything.

Seeing that someone was back in the chat made her flip over to it again, only to find Yoosung online.

“Hi, Yoosung! Studying late? O.o”
Yoosung*: HAHA! ^-^ nope ;;
Yoosung*: I usually play games around this time, but since u joined I can’t focus!
“;; Am I that scary?”
Yoosung*: Ur not scary! Seven says ur okay!
Yoosung*: Since ur a member now, why don’t we talk about ourselves?
“So you like playing LOLOL too, right? :D”
Yoosung*:Haha, yes! I’m actually in the top 100!
“WOW! :O Your gear must be freakin’ mythic!”
Yoosung*: J
Yoosung*: I didn’t want to talk about myself though. So like, I wanted to know more about u.
Yoosung*: Like what ur interests are… What u do…
“Well… I’m a student too, but I’m taking a break between semesters.”
Yoosung*: X_X Jelly. Wish I could take a break… ;;

Miyeon felt her throat tighten. There was no way for him to know, so it wasn’t anything personal against her. She wrote out a brief explanation as to why there was a pause in her education, but she deleted it. If everyone knew, they’d treat her like her old friends had. The one thing she didn’t want was people to constantly remind her of her loss.

“Life sort of happened, so I had to take some time off. ;_; Brightside, I’ll have plenty of time to help with this! Is it weird that I’m sort of looking forward to it? It’s like that feeling you get randomized into a raid that’s a guild was just short a person! :3”
Yoosung*: XD Ya
Yoosung*: Good to see ur pumped!
Yoosung*: Everyone is probably thinking whether u can do what Rika did or not.
“^_^ Only way to know is to find out what ya’ll need. Apparently V is a ghost, so I guess I need to maybe check with Jumin and Jaehee? I’m open to any intel so I can get a jump
Yoosung*: It shouldn’t be too hard. It’s like, sending e-mails and dealing with people. So I guess it can be a lot of work. Rika would manage to find people from all over. Like REALLY important people would come, but also people who were sort of outcast and needed help were invited too.

Yoosung*: She was amazing! It must’ve been a LOT of work, but Rika always smiled.

Yoosung*: Anyway V’s a photographer… So they used to auction off his work to help raise money. Lots of charities would get to talk with people with money too. Everyone had fun…

Yoosung*: … I think everyone wants it to be like it was when Rika was still here… I wish you could’ve met her.

Yoosung*: But now ur here and we can have the parties again!

“Cheer up, Yoosung! I’ll do my best to make that wish come true. :3”

Yoosung*: Ur such a nice person... Just like Rika.

Yoosung*: I just realized how much pressure you probably feel with all of us expecting so much from you already! L ! We’re probably going to scare you off like this! Please don’t run away!

“I don’t scare easy. >:_D But it’s sweet you’re so worried. Thank you.”

Yoosung*: Aww! She thinks I’m sweet!

Yoosung*: Don’t let it get u down, okay? If it becomes hard, let me know! Jumin, Jaehee, and 707 are usually busy with work, and Zen might be able to help now and then. But I’m just a student… I mean, I should be studying, but it’ll be a chance for us to meet and hang out and do something good for the community!”

“XD I suppose if you’re looking for a distraction, being a hero of charity isn’t a bad way to go!”

Yoosung*: Ya! :D Being a hero! XD

“Maybe we can get you a cape too? Ouu! Actually, maybe we can talk on LOLOL later? It might be a good idea to have a backup form of communication just in case the hacker shows back up. I can send you my info.”

Yoosung*: OMG Rly!?

Yoosung*: Um…

Yoosung*: Tonight may not be a good time to chat though. @_@ Got a BIG match that counts towards rankings starting in a bit.

Yoosung*: ;_; But I am really curious to what you sound like.

“They usually stream the ranked matches on Twitcher, right? :D I’m on the way home, but I’ll pull it up on my computer when I get home to cheer you on! We can chat after the
match is over. I’ll probably be up for a while researching charities for us to maybe reach out to once we get our ducks in a row.”

Yoosung*: Wait… So you’ll be watching me play?!

“Yep. ^-^”

Yoosung*: OMG OMG OMG!!! :D I’m gonna have a fan!? AH! I feel so ready to RAGE!!!

“Now go forth and conquer, brave Yoosung! For the only pleasure in life is to see your enemies driven before you and to hear the lamentations of their women!”

Yoosung*: See ya!

“Good luck!”

Just like that, she was alone in the chat again.

“So… Um… Is your friend, okay?” the driver’s gruff voice called back to her.

“Yeah!” Miyeon answered, hearing the surprise in her own voice. Quickly she gathered herself. They weren’t far from her house now. “Thank you so much for everything.”

“You’re one paying the fare;” he chuckled.

She smiled good naturedly as the houses of her neighborhood came into view. Affirming her appreciation to the driver again, Miyeon left him a good tip before bowing respectfully. His wrinkled face lit up before he drove off, leaving her alone on the dark street. The scared little girl in her was already beating a hasty retreat to the front door, her physical body wasn’t far behind. Her pulse raced, even once she was inside. There was no telling who had snuck into her house while she was out. Maybe the hacker already knew where she lived?

For a moment, she listened attentively to her surroundings.

Deafening silence punctuated only by the ticking of a second hand and her own heart.

Just when a sigh of relief escaped her, Miyeon’s phone rang to life followed by a jump and squeak of terror. Clumsily she fumbled for her phone in her hoodie pocket before answering the call. Her hands shook, making swiping to accept a little difficult. Holding her chest, Miyeon tried to steady herself, but it was hard to mask the fear in her voice.

“H…Hello…?”

“Good evening, miss. Your bank account has been used for a fun prank. Were you aware of this?”

“N…No…?” she stammered breathlessly, before clearing her throat. The accent was very thick…

“Gullible customer, please calm down. Take a deep breath! Breathe in – breathe out. You must be collected at a time like this.”

A glance at the phone revealed that the Mystic Messenger app had been the one to route the call. “707” was listed as the caller… Strange, for some reason the voice didn’t seem to fit him. Her lips curled into a smirk as the realization hit her. Her previous actions that evening spoke against her
being the sort of person that a secretive organization with highly classified information should trust. This was perhaps a test?

The heavily accented voice began again, “Now, if you’ve taken a deep breath, we will require voice identification. Please go ahead and say, “Honey, I love you.” You like, like how the teddy bears say it!”

Miyeon felt herself smiling at the bold absurdity of the request, but after clearing her throat, she summoned the voice she used when singing along with her favorite cartoon opening theme songs. It was a rather childlike, sweet voice. “Hon~ey! I love you~!”

His laugh reminded her of a campfire: popping, crisp, bright. Somehow she felt much less afraid now…

“Good job. God… So cute! Now, I must confirm your phone number.”

“22 over 7.”

She heard something press over the phone before a sniffle signaled the receiver being cleared again.

“For proper verification, I will need the full number.”

“Hmm… I think it’s 3.1415_.”

“Stop!” The accent broke, and in its place was a voice that – if drawn- might’ve resembled a roller coaster: energetic, quick, and demanded attention. “So many scams going around like this right now. You passed this time, but earlier… With Rika’s apartment and everything… Tsk! Tsk!” He sighed dramatically. “You can’t fall for stupid things like this! Okay?”

Her throat tightened as she wasn’t sure if she was being chided, warned, or being given brotherly advice. He certainly didn’t sound angry… Years of being in school lead her reacting the only way a short girl could when being talked to by a figure of authority.

“Yes, s-sir!”

“Oh! Are you… scared…? Umm… Erm…” he almost sounded a little guilty, but more amused. “I’m not a scary hacker; I won’t take your money. Just checking to make sure we have the right number. But if you get any more calls like this or strange requests to download something: hang up, put down the phone – run far away – change your name! Or call me if you’re unsure. Even if I’m busy, I’ll check.”

A bitter little laugh escaped her. “Isn’t that what a bad hacker would say though? Besides, they might see how little I have and pity me enough to put some in.”

“Then someone else will lose their money, and you could end up in prison. Then you’d have to pay someone to break you out. I mean, I could do it, but then you’d have to pay me back. It’s an endless cycle of debt – rise above the system!”

“So being party planner for the RFA without pay doesn’t count towards a tab?” she asked hopefully.

“Nope! Pro bono here too. But nice negotiating! You’ll need all that feminine charm! Good news is that you may be able to get some perks, you know, aside from talking to a bunch of pretty boys. I mean, that is why you downloaded the app, right?”
Miyeon found her voice. “Actually…I was on the bus and didn’t want anyone to bother me…”

“Ah. So we were a shield to keep you from getting hit on. You prefer girls, maybe?” 707 pondered aloud, his voice growing more incredulous. “See that’s something someone who is cautious would do. I’d almost think you were a spy –except it was entirely too easy to look up your info. Finding a picture of you wasn’t easy by the way. Your bangs are MUCH longer now, like one of those little Scotty dogs.”

“So… You WERE watching me on the CCTV earlier…”

“Since I can tell we’ll be good friends, that’ll be our little secret,” he answered. Despite his casual tone, the girl could hear the smirk in his voice until a sigh echoed. “I said something weird didn’t I? Um… How can I put this. I’m in charge of security, which means I have access to that feed… Technically, you’re the creepy person here. With the help of an actual scary hacker, you broke into the apartment of a friend and had access highly classified information and valuable goods. Knowingly or not, you’d be legally culpable. If we wanted authorities involved, you’d already be in handcuffs --- and not in the way your search history implies you’d enjoy.” Miyeon felt her cheeks burning. “Thing is, you had all that opportunity to steal something, but you didn’t. So I feel pretty confident that you’re safe or too inept of a cat burglar to really be a threat.”

“Meow?”

“Ah…! God! So you are a cat burglar then! Then this next bit of news should make things easier then. V’s willing to let you stay in the apartment while you help organize the party! Yahoo!”

“…That’s very kind, but I don’t know if I’m comfortable with that. I feel bad enough causing you more work.”

“Ha! I live to work! And work to live! My house is MADE of requests because I’m the best! This – its fun! So don’t worry! But you would help me by accepting the offer. At the apartment, we have security measures in place. The passcode has been updated and security algorithm beefed up, and you know how to contact me. If something were to happen, I could get Jumin could send a bunch of hot body guards, plus the apartment has some security staffed already… If you’re back at your registered address, there’s not much we could really do to keep you safe. The apartment only has that one door in and out, your house has multiple potential breaches if the street view on Poogle Maps is accurate… I’ve already went through three cans of Ph.D Pepper trying to think of a way to secure that location as well as the route you need to take between there and the apartment on a regular basis. I haven’t even gotten into looking up routes to the convenience stores near you… My eyes are bleeding… Gah!”

“Is it really that dangerous…?”

“Don’t know. But you play LOLOL, right? – this is basically like having your buffs up. Consider these steps as casting Protectra, Shelldra, and Regen. A rare boss mob COULD spawn, or it could just be nothing.”

“I want to trust you,” she murmured.

“You don’t feel safe where you are, right?” His voice was rather flat as he said that before he cleared his throat and did an imitation of her voice, exaggerating the quivering in it. “…Seven-senpai, I’m all alone! It’s dark and scary! Save me!”
“How do you…?”

“...Special Spy Technique Lesson Time: When given a question like that by a stranger- lie,” he answered in an almost joking tone. “Say: I’m having a huge party! I only stepped outside because everyone was being too loud!” He then mimicked yelling out for someone to quiet down, before clearing his throat. “…I don’t know you, Miyeon. But I do know a lot about you by only doing some very basic stuff. That means whoever made that fake download link could know it too. Actually, they probably do… You’re really vulnerable, you know? There are really bad people in the world who do very bad things to good people… Which is why I became the Defender of Justice! You can talk with everyone before you make the call, but know that we will never force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. You could even delete the app but even then you’d be under surveillance for a while. You know too much. Right now~, my concern is for the safety of the RFA.” There was a moment. “…That’s what a responsible, cool person would say. For reals though, I’m just a lazy string bean and don’t want to have to try and secure your house and set up the hardware. It’s a pain in the rear - literally. Have you ever climbed a telephone pole? The splinters get all in your pants, makes ‘em itchy - you can get all sorts of scary diseases. And the bugs…. Ugh…”

“That’d be pretty funny to watch, actually,” she quipped. “You’d probably have to crab walk after.”

He chuckled. “Right?!– divine retribution because I’m not a good man. But I’d really prefer not to have to do creepy things like that more than I already have to. Which speaking of which, I really need to get back to my job… Gaahahd… I would appreciate it if you’d at least consider the offer. Maybe if I say:” his voice lightened to boyish: “Pwetty pwease with a cherry on top, Meeooow-on?”

The girl bit her lip. “Only because I don’t want your eyes to bleed anymore – I will acquiesce to considering your request. I mean, cleaning the blood up will keep you from working.”

“Mistress is gracious! Good thing I’m wearing red! Anyway - enjoy sleeping in that big, spooky, possibly haunted house all by yourself! Ciao!”

And like a tornado, there was only stillness and confusion in his wake.
Chapter 4:

What exactly makes a person who they are? While one could easily argue from a practical, physical composition argument – a case could easily be made for the incorporeal aspects of a person and qualia. Though one could form an opinion about someone based upon the information available about them, which would still be only a fraction of their experience as a human being. Being born in the Information Age meant that just about anyone could know so much about one’s presented public image as well as others opinions of said person with a basic search.

For Miyeon, her digital footprint had been limited to under a decade of her thoughts of school, images she found funny, pictures of cute animals she’d helped rescue, and things she’d cooked, roughly ending around the time her father’s illness became her world… Even that had been set on a private profile that one had to be a “friend” to access… Granted those security settings meant very little to a person who likely hacked government databases for the “lol”s. It was for those very reasons that she was always careful not to post her location or personal information. Miyeon never posted pictures of herself for reasons that ranged from her parents denying it, insecurity, and eventually fear of being noticed by the wrong types of people.

It made her wonder if 707 was bluffing about having a picture of her, or if he did find one, exactly where did he get it? Perhaps one of the clubs or rescue organizations she had been a member of?

What sort of person she seem like to him…?

There was so much about her that only those close to the family had known. Although they say nothing really disappears on the internet, somethings were never posted. And in the case of her older brother, a great deal of it had been removed with the help of a company specializing in “cleaning” someone’s digital records… Maybe the bad hacker and 707 knew about the gloomy things that made her routine trek from the refrigerator back to her room longer. The empty rooms before her…

She hated the quiet…

She hated being alone…

Without 707’s voice, the house was still aside from the creak of the wood under her feet… At least with him on the phone, she wasn’t as afraid. For someone who was a self-proclaimed, “bad man”, he seemed rather honest and plainspoken about her situation. Seven’d given her the illusion of choice, but made no effort to hide how one option would inconvenience him. It was honest, and his surprisingly effervescent presentation did make the increasingly harsh reality of her situation a little easier to process.

He probably could be very threating if he wanted to be… Like a sphynx: mysterious and deadly… But instead, he was being fizzy pop and sour gummies about it.

How things would’ve been different if all of this happened years ago…

The house would’ve been full of the sort of heated conversations and yelling that made her hide in the closet with her favorite stuffed animal. The clothes would muffle the sounds of arguing,
but it wouldn’t block it out entirely. She’d stay there until her big brother would come sit with her, lock the door, and plop his headphones over her ears so she could focus on her homework. His thin arms covered in “cat scratches” and “zombie bites” would wrap around her, the scent of his “Consecrated Soil” cologne would fill her lungs, and the familiar pressure of his pale cheek against her shoulder would soothe her. Jun would say it was so he could, “hear the music too”.

She knew better now...

Swallowing hard, Miyeon forced herself to retreat to her own room, locking the door tight. It was very easy to fall into her routine from there, except she had made a promise to Yoosung. The feed of the match was easy enough to find, although she had absolutely no idea who she was supposed to be cheering for. She kept the feed up in a little window and logged on to LOLOL just to start the transfer process. It’d likely take overnight to get her cleric moved over due to the amount of traffic being caused by the match. She e-mailed the blonde to let him know:

“Match will be over by the time you get this ( Username – ZhilaohuMD ) --- I hope you won! If not, we can theorycraft out a spec swap to give you an edge! Ticket says it’ll probably be tomorrow afternoon before my character is on Shooting Star server. Have a good day at school tomorrow!”

While the announcer detailed the action, her attention waxed to the search for charities. Finding people wanting money was easy enough, finding organizations who were based in Korea, and ones that matched the “Charity Grade” was even harder. To her surprise, Miyeon found herself making a spreadsheet in Excelled to categorize the ones that stood out to her most along with their contact information. She spent hours, yet only felt like she’d scratched the surface.

A glance down at her phone showed it to be 4:00 AM.

Out of curiosity, the girl opened the app again to find that Zen was online and a message from 707. Before entering the chat, she checked the PM first, anticipating an update on his progress catching the hacker. Instead there was a picture of a crab with one of his personalized emoticons shopped in along with a top hat and a monocle with the text:

“Prep for my crab walk. Like the duds? 8D”

Miyeon let out a little snort. “Looks good! You’re just missing a pat of butter. Hope you can find a shade that matches!”

Part of her was a little worried he was already outside trying to set things up, but a glance out her window revealed no one in sight.

That spark of anxiety was enough to make her question the whole thing again. Miyeon considered going to bed, but the ID listed as “Zen” was still online. The temptation for a distraction and getting a positive ID proved too great for her. After a deep breath, she popped into the chat.

“Good morning, Zen!”

Zen: What’s such a pretty lady doing up this late?

Zen: Couldn’t fall asleep either?

Zen: Well I mean, to be honest, my heart’s been racing since you joined!

“You’re very kind. ^^;;”
Zen: Is that emoji your polite way of saying I’m making you uncomfortable?
Zen: I’ll tone it back. It’s just that you’re new, and I’m curious.
Zen: Men get playful no matter how old they are.
Zen: Oh!
Zen: That doesn’t mean I’m old! Not at all!
Zen: Now that you’ve joined, I feel rather relieved. Although, you must be all sorts of shook up. Here…

- Zen has left the room

Miyeon tilted her head, not sure whether to be insulted or not until she heard the phone ring.

Zen was calling HER.

“H-hello…?”

“Well hello, princess,” replied a voice that wrapped her very being in warm, silk. There was no dying the owner of the voice… Her mouth hung agape as her heart bounded.

“Zen!” she caught herself, “It’s… Hey! Hi!”

Even his laughter was gorgeous. “Aww, precious… Take it you’re a fan?”

“Of y-your music, yes.”

“You have good taste! Seven gave us all your number so we can help you with the party; I just had to hear what our new girl sounded like… This isn’t a problem calling you this late, is it?”

“Not at all! It’s fine! Actually I was working on stuff for the group anyway. I was a little surprised to see you on,” she answered, her cheeks hurting from grinning. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Moi? Nah! I’m a bit of a night owl. How about you?”

“Same. It’s easier for me to focus on things in the evening… Although, I admit to being afraid of the dark.”

“Aww… So cute…” he affectionately chuckled. “For someone who came into our app under such weird circumstances, you sound really normal – well, adorable – and normal… Not going to lie, when I first called, I thought Seven was going to answer and reveal this was all a set up.”

“So can I be sure you’re actually, you know, you?” Miyeon asked, cautiously.

“Well, for one, if I was that weirdo, I probably would’ve said something really strange by now. I mean, he probably called you already, right? And you saw how he is in chat…”

“He seems… Lively?”

There was another laugh whose beauty would be lost to the ages. “That’s a tactful way of putting it. To be honest, I wish he’d let me call you first; having a normal person, let alone a cute girl,
trying to translate all of that is just… Pft…” he sighed. “You know, he still won’t send us a picture of you?”

“He probably has his reasons.”

“Or he’s a jerk,” Zen quipped. There was more annoyance than playfulness to the statement. “It’d be one thing if you asked him to keep it private, but I think he’s just messing with us…”

The girl couldn’t help but chuckle. She never expected a celebrity to be keen to see a picture of a lowly peasant like her. “Tell me how you really feel?”

“Dare I bear my soul to you? You would tremble if you knew the depths of the words unspoken between our hearts. If these gentle thoughts were let loose… Would your smile warm this lonely path that I have chosen? Or would your tears of joy birth a river - that we may sail away from this accursed place.” There was conviction and passion behind his words…

Miyeon’s fingers gently brushed her lips. “That was… You really are very talented…”

He warbled sweetly. “It’s from a play I did a few years ago… You know, one of the things I love about a live audience is how they feed your performance. The director’s vision shapes it, but it’s the audience that sets the energy behind it. If only I could’ve seen your face.”

“You’re very smooth…”

“Good skin is a must in this industry,” he answered playfully. Either he was very witty or very dull. There was no denying his charm; her pulse was bounding through her, making it hard to stay still.

“That’s only one part of who you are as an artist though, right? Good skin takes lots of work to maintain, and, I can’t even imagine how much hard work you put into practicing and memorizing lines... But I suppose if you love what you do – then it’s not work at all. Plus, getting to where you are wasn’t easy. People always see the success and not the long path to it. It takes a strength of will that most people just don’t have to pursue a dream like you have. Really it’s amazing… Just think about how many people you probably comfort and inspire through your performances!”

“… Thank you, Miyeon,” his voice was rather warm. Her spine tingled as he said her name. “…You know, I’m really glad I called… I can tell we’ll get along. It’ll be so nice to have someone in the RFA I can actually talk to again… Since V’s never in there.”

The girl curled her legs up into her chair. “Do you not get along with everyone?”

“Well… So, hmm : Yoosung is a sweet kid, but he never really takes me seriously. He’s addicted to LOLOL instead of focusing on college. Doesn’t help that he whines about being single, yet a lot of it is because he does nothing but play that game. Seven’s an alien… I mean, I’ve heard he’s probably the best hacker in the world, not that anyone would ever know, right? He’s obviously very good at what he does, but he’s always so hyper and cryptic… Jaehee is honestly the most patient person I know. And she’s reliable… Once she warms up to you, I think you’ll get along. Poor woman puts up with that brat’s stupid cat business ideals, but she works really hard. Like, unhealthy amounts – because her boss is… Jumin…” he howled like a wolf. “That trust fund kid… He’s next in line to take over his father’s business –has had everything handed to him. Is an unreasonably demanding prick... Honestly that guy has no humanity. Don’t even bother trying to get close to him, not that he’d let you. He probably prefer it if you ignore him to be honest.”
I’ll bear that in mind… So what about yourself, Zen?”

“The perfect man?” he answered seductively before speaking plainly. “Not that I’m bragging, but… I’m handsome. I can act. I can sing. I can dance. I am a consummate poet who can charm any lady.” The dulcet tones of his voice ebbed. “But it’s years since I’ve dated. I’ve just been so busy with my career. But you know, maybe you coming into our chatroom was a fateful encounter. Do you think this is a story we’ll be telling our children?”

Miyeon nervously chuckled. “Maybe? Although we might have to go through a few rewrites to get the right feel… And well, there’s also that little fact that you don’t know anything about me.”

“You’re obviously a very positive and kind person to put up with how suspicious everyone has been of you and still be willing to help with our party. Honestly, I would’ve been annoyed and said no. With what I do, I deal with people all the time, so I’m a pretty good judge of character… You seem like my type.”

“You’re very kind. Bold… But kind.”

“I am the perfect man,” Zen reminded her haughtily.

“And how fortunate I am to be alive to bear witness to your existence, lovely Zen.”

There was a throaty laugh. “Ah! My heart! You tease, but I can hear the truth in that sweet voice of yours. So your name really is Miyeon, right?”

“It is.”

“Mmm… Mi-yeon_,” he called softly in a throaty tone. Her back straightened as the baser parts of her instinct recognized the intentions within the vibrations. “Miyeon… It just feels right… Hmm… I should probably stop that. It’s not fair to everyone else if I steal you away before the party.”

“Don’t get the carriage ready yet…” the girl answered feigning resolve. Within her soul part of her wanted him to whisk her away, while the cynical part of her realized that he must talk like this with every woman. “I promised everyone that I’d help; I mean to keep my word… Actually while we’re on that topic, can I ask you something a little more serious?”

“Anything you need, princess.”

“So apparently Seven thinks I should stay at Rika’s old apartment while I do the planning for the party. According to him, it’s safer there than where I’m at now. I’m not really sure what to do. Any advice?”

“Hmm…” There was a soft, thoughtful breath. “I don’t really know enough to make the call for you, dear, but I’ll say this… I trust V, and V trusts Seven. That guy normally likes to take care of things on his own, without bothering us – not that we could really help with what he does anyway. If Seven’s asked you to do something, he probably has a very good reason. Now what bothers me, and probably you too, is that none of us know where the apartment is, and I don’t think you’re allowed to tell us… The code for the door was already hacked once, right? What happens if they do it again, and you’re there?”

“There is a small security office at the apartment complex, which is more than what I have here at home,” she explained. “Where I am, I feel really vulnerable. Umm… I’m sorry
for bothering you with this.”

“Why are you apologizing? The hacker who tricked you is the person who did something wrong – not you. Maybe… Maybe you can give the apartment a trial run for a few days and return home when Seven thinks it’s safer? I mean, you could always visit me if you get really scared,” he chuckled. “We’ll be working together, no need for us to be strangers, right?”

“That’s not a bad idea, actually… That won’t be a problem with like your fans or anything would it?”

“If they have issues, I’ll just tell them the truth. For now, you’re my friend and I’m helping you with your work. Worst case scenario, V yells at me.”

“Thank you, Zen… You really are amazing… I mean, your songs always make me smile when I’m blue… After talking with you though, I feel much better.”

“There is no greater praise,” he crooned.

“Hey… Don’t you have rehearsals or practice tomorrow? I’d feel really terrible if you were tired all day because of me.”

“Are you that worried about me, princess?” his voice was heartfelt. There was a forlorn sigh. “You’re probably right. But I’ll rest much easier now that my curiosity has been sated. Yet knowledge begets a want for more…” she could tell he was quoting from a play there… “You sound so adorable, you know… Like a little bird,” his voice ebbed to a sensuous little chuckle, before he brightened up. “I’ll let you go for now. But don’t be afraid to call, okay?”

“Should we do a daily phone report to each other then?” she suggested, half joking.

“I’d be hurt if you don’t,” he pouted playfully.

She found herself nervously picking at the sleeves of her shirt. “Y…Yeah! Umm… Good luck at practice! I’m sure you’ll be dazzling!”

“I’ll give it my all, just for you! Until then, sweet dreams, Miyeon.”

As the line went quiet, the girl sat the phone aside, pulled her shirt up over her head and let out a squeal of joy as her feet kicked excitedly. She wanted to tell someone, anyone about the whole thing, but she couldn’t. For just the moment, the new RFA member was determined to be happy in spite of the little voice inside her head.

She remained awake for a few more minutes, doing her best to make the spreadsheet look somewhat professional. There was the potential for Jaehee or Jumin to see it, although it wasn’t something the girl wanted to volunteer for their review just yet. After a stretch, Miyeon changed into a fresh pair of pajamas and gave her messages a last check before trying to sleep.

There was a last message from Zen. Within was a picture of a pale, violet blossom, tenaciously clinging to a cliffside. Its leaves and petals glistened with fresh morning dew, increasing its beauty but also weighing it into potential peril. Behind it was a piercing blue sky; the color was painfully vivid. She could almost smell the wet stone and crisp mountain air.

“V sent this to me awhile back… I think about it whenever I get nervous before a performance. Perhaps it can help you too.”
Gently she held her phone close to her heart. For now, she’d just believe the possibilities rather than the reality… If multiverse theory was real, there were versions of her that would indeed be able to tell "their children" about how they met. Reflexively she flipped back to the picture 707’d sent her earlier, finding that it made her smile too. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, people were talking to her as an individual. The kindness warmed her. Before them all was a blank canvas to paint a new set of relationships… It was fresh, clean – full of potential… She was free to be whoever she wanted to be.

As her eyes closed, her mind returned to the thought of the flower and of her brother. A delicate bloom where it ought not to have blossomed, weighed down by the very things that nurtured it.

She was the stone to which it clung.

The blossom had long since withered, its roots leaving holes for ice and rain. Now the elements had torn her free from the cliff face, who had suffered long. Into a sea of stars she fell, eyes cast upward towards a cold sun whose flickering light brought no comfort. Soon, she felt the sand below her and could watch the schools of silvery fish above her. How long she came to rest there was impossible to know… Yet there came along a gentleman crab who spoke in jibberish, who carried her to a palace where merfolk dwelt. It was a place of beautiful creatures with rainbow fins in a sea of jade colored kelp and sunbeams, all of which that danced through the shallow tide.

*Jun, I didn’t forget you… I wish you were here*…
Chapter 5:

You were lost; I found you.

And without hesitation, without anticipation of reward,

You were generous, sincerity conveyed in a confection…

Two souls who, in that moment, understood the Savior’s will.

You smiled warmly…

That’s why that’s why you were blessed with this sacred duty.

You are my hallowed dagger.

That shine of yours should brighten the songs of the devout among endless party in the Magenta.

There you will never know sorrow, solitude, nor fear again.

I wish you, who is so kind - joy eternal;

I will pray for you…

Savior protect you so that you are not tainted and lead into false hope.

I pray, grant me strength…

Most of all give me patience.

Patience to lure that Devil into the open and bring upon him divine judgement….

Pierce deep into his ruined soul with your purity and gentle smile, my blade,

So when I lift you free, to paradise,

His blackened blood will flow all the quicker from his cruel, deceiving heart.

And when the last corrupted breath leaves him, at last we will be free…

*****

Miyeon woke to the feeling of her phone practically searing her hand. Like an idiot she’d left it charging and with active applications running. Pulling the blanket over her head, she unplugged it and looked at the time. It was just a little before 8:00 AM… She’d barely slept 3 hours. The “Mystic Messenger” application was still there, confirming that none of it had been a dream. Her body felt paralyzed as she blankly stared at the screen. She was a quixotic mess. Nestling into her pillow, the girl closed her eyes another moment debating whether or not it was worth getting up. There were tons of things to do, such as packing some essentials and maybe buying a few things to take to the apartment.

The intrepid little girl in her, who dreamt of far away lands, leapt at the chance for
adventure. “It’ll be a vacation from your life! Go get ‘em!” Yet the more pragmatic, cynical part of
her sat with a bowl of ramen, reminding her that, “This is how they lure women into trafficking
rings… You could end up as someone’s plaything.” The budding harlot in her was intrigued by the
concept of being someone’s precious pet to be doted and loved on. Her inner NEET had a nose
bleed at the thought, but reminded her that girls like her didn’t get to do things like that. What exactly
was sexy about sitting in an oversized sweatshirt with a messy bun playing old Chateauvania games
on an emulator with One Slam Man playing in the background…?

Then again, rule 34.

Maybe it was worth packing up a few of her gaming systems to take with her to give her
something to occupy her hands while she made calls and waited for email replies. It wasn’t as though
they could see what Miyeon was getting up to… Then again, it could be really busy. To even
conceptualize how many people she’d have to wrangle was beyond her.

Her stomach lurched. She hated crowds, especially being a lone person in a sea of
strangers.

She thought of the flower, just barely holding on…

With a herculean effort, Miyeon threw the blanket off herself and sat on the edge of the bed
to check to see if there were any new messages. There was only the chat which showed very little
conversation despite the fact that Jumin and Zen were both on.

“Good morning! You two on your way to work?” she typed out, having to go
back and correct her spelling a time or two due to grogginess.

Zen: Hiya, Miyeon!

Zen: I don’t have a set work time.

Zen: Why hasn’t director dude left for work yet?

Jumin Han: I was about to go out.

Jumin Han: Welcome, Miyeon. What are you doing up at this hour?

She gently scratched her ankle with her foot and popped her neck. Perhaps he was
concerned considering she’d been up only a few hours before. “It’s a mystery to me too,” she typed,
recalling Zen’s words the night before… The chairman – to – be likely wouldn’t appreciate her
seeming to take things lightly. Quickly she clarified, “I was researching charities last night and
making a spreadsheet. But I need to pack too, Seven wants me to work from Rika’s apartment.”

Jumin Han: It’s good to see someone taking their responsibilities seriously.

Zen: What does that mean? She isn’t one of your employees.

Jumin Han: I meant that some people use this chat for entertainment purposes
only.

Zen: Like you don’t? P_P*

Jumin Han: I won’t deny that.

Jumin Han: This chat room is quite addictive.
Jumin Han: I can brag about Elizabeth the 3rd as much as I want.

Zen: Whatever ;; No one cares about your fur ball.

Jumin Han: Take this.

Upon the screen was quite possibly the most photogenic cat in existence. Her eyes were bright and clear like London Topaz, even more vibrant from the white of her fur. Miyeon wondered if perhaps the business man took her to a professional groomer who used brightening agents to bring out the almost ethereal color. Upon the cat’s whiskered profile was a fetching pink nose and a set of healthy pink ears whose feathering was meticulously kept. A soft coo of appreciation escaped her before she’d realized it. Desperately Miyeon wanted to perform the “head butt of love” she used to share with her cat.

“She’s so regal!”

Zen seemed to have the very opposite feeling. In fact his emoticon was of him facing away with animated lines of dismay. For some reason it bothered her, but maybe it was just because it was Jumin’s cat?

Jumin Han: Thank God at least one person here appreciates her majesty.

Jumin Han: I tend to believe that a person who likes animals cannot be bad.

Before Miyeon could agree.

Zen: You only believe what you want to believe.

Jumin Han: Certainly. Is that not life?

Zen: Don’t pretend to be so above everything!

The girl bit her lip. If only she could access previous chat logs to see why there was such acrimony. Her hands tightened at the tension and her lungs grew shallow. It reminded her of things that she didn’t want to think about… No people meant no drama or meaningless arguments.

Jumin Han: Anyways.

Jumin Han: Cats are the best pet, so Miyeon, you should look into it.

Seeing the chairman use a cat shaped bubble to send the last message strangely soothed her. Maybe he wasn’t that bad, but there had to be a reason Zen was being so defensive. If the topic came up, she’d ask nicely. With some understanding, maybe she could mediate. Best now to go along…

“I used to have one…;; I’d like another one when things calm down.”

She found an old picture of her cat, with his big green eyes and smoky fur stretched out with his belly up and not a care in the world… How she missed that mischievous beast. After a glance, Miyeon soon realized she had no way to send it. Backing out of the image finder, the girl couldn’t help but feel that Seven had intentionally locked that function for her. The reality was more likely that the version of the app she had downloaded was corrupted due to being a hack. Either way, it was something to ask him about later.

Jumin Han: My condolences… Clearly you recognize that they are sensitive creatures.
Jumin Han: Elizabeth the 3rd is the only one who sees me off to work.

Jumin Han: She’s the only one I need.

Zen: What are you talking about? You probably have all your maids see you off.

Jumin Han: What I mean is… Elizabeth the 3rd is the only one who sees me off with a loving soul.

Zen: Loving soul? LOL.

Zen: Please… If you treated your employees with a “loving soul”, they’d polish your shoes and lay out a red carpet.

Jumin Han: It’s a waste giving yourself to people you’ve employed in such a manner. It’s a business relationship. Money should be all there is to it.

…Technically he wasn’t wrong, but the future employee in her disagreed on a visceral level. There was certainly a valid argument on both sides, but her alignment was more towards basic human rights. She vaguely recalled something from one of her courses breaking down the general cost to benefit ratio of both approaches. It was too early to be having such a discussion…

Zen: Well. That depends on the person.

Don’t drag me into this…

Zen: What do you think, Miyeon?

She pouted aloud. “Gah… No! Why!?"

After composing herself, the girl wrote a reply.

“My personal belief is that all living things should be treated with dignity and humanity – always… But I recall there are studies that show that investing in employees actually improves their productivity.”

Jumin Han: I forget what you call that.

Jumin Han: A family-like company? Ha!

Zen: Miyeon, ignore that pompous jerk.

She was already typing a rebuttal; the tinderbox had already been opened. Here, they were equals. For all his other attributes, this was clearly outside of the performer’s arena. It was outside of hers as well, but her competitive streak got the better of her.

“When people feel valued, they in turn are more likely to do things to benefit the company as they feel personally impacted by its reputation. I’d suspect it also reduces sick days and time off used as well due to the decreased amounts of stress and decreasing the need to self-medicate via poor life style choices because the employees are not being motivated by fear – rather betterment. This also leads to them being eager to learn outside their normal duties: resulting in motivated, well rounded workforce who would be more willing and capable of covering work for employees who may require time away.”

Zen: :O
Zen: That!

Jumin Han: I see.

Jumin Han: It’s not my style, but I should acknowledge that society is diverse.

Zen: I’ve seen people online people crying out that working for your company is like being a slave!

Jumin Han: They should be honored to be my slaves. They are probably tears of joy.

Miyeon got it now. Quietly she apologized to her handsome friend aloud, an agitated growl followed. The business man must really have come from a whole other layer of reality to have formed such a cavalier attitude. It reminded her of the nobles before the French Revolution who would have farmers pushed off the land just to improve their view… Jumin probably would look dashing in the period attire though. Granted, what man wouldn’t? The whole concept of time sparked a desire to point out how cheaply he was essentially buying the lives of his employees, but part of her already knew that he’d likely find no issue with that. Time is a commodity like anything else in a capitalistic society…

Her head ached as did her foot. It itched with a tremendous desire to kick something…

Drawing a deep breath, she simply wrote:

“Please… Could we change the topic?”

Zen: I want pizza bread.

Jumin Han: I don’t know why pizza bread exists.

Her head tilted. Was he trolling them?

Jumin Han: Why do we need pizza bread when we have pizza?

Jumin Han: All the franchise bakeries seem to sell it.

Surely he was doing this to annoy Zen. Such a dry humor.

Jumin Han: Is it because people don’t have enough money to eat pizza, and as a result they created a cheaper alternative? I suppose it familiarizes commoners with the taste of pizza.

“…Yes, Jumin,” Miyeon replied, feeling her face twist into a wry little frown. She couldn’t stop herself from being a little sarcastic to test the hypothesis. “There is the added benefit of preventing scurvy in the peasant class. Without the marinara in pizza bread we would have no source of Vitamin C.”

Jumin Han: I suppose it would be an adequate source of that nutrient.

Jumin Han: It may be worth consulting with my nutritionist; there could be a market for alternatives.

…He was being serious then? Even moreso, what was a healthy man in his prime doing with a nutritionist?!

Zen: I can’t watch you insult pizza bread any longer!
Zen: So do people buy coffee bread because they want coffee but it’s too expensive!?

Jumin Han: Your rebuttal is very strange.

Zen: You’re strange!

Jumin Han: I don’t care what other people think.

Jumin Han: Elizabeth the 3rd’s love is all I need.

Her anxiety over the tension had been replaced to amusement. It was like watching Eun Ji argue with her little sister. Cute, but obnoxious. Maybe this was just a guy thing. Jumin was apparently the current “alpha” with V being absent. Zen had an “alpha” temperament but was currently in a beta position… It was a healthy challenge for dominance. So did that make Jaehee and Seven betas too? Yoosung was probably the little omega. At that, she imagined the blonde as a little puppy, tail tucked and whining, while a sleek, silver wolf gnawed on an utterly unimpressed black one. His dark ear would merely twitch as though the beast chewing on him were but a gnat.

Zen: I bet you sleep while hugging that cat.

Zen: I can’t even imagine all the fur on your bed. Ugh…

Jumin Han: … Did you just imagine my bed?

Zen: GET LOST.

Jumin Han: I suppose you are missing out on one of the greatest joys in life and are bitter? Because of your allergy, you’ll never know the unconditional love of a feline companion. It’s actually tragic.

Point to the “trust fund kid”. It was almost painful to watch as he gracefully dodged insults, using the momentum to swing them back at Zen. At least the girl understood the dislike of animals now… Either the pop star’s allergies were severe or even mild reactions could impact his appearance.

Zen: Don’t care. I have plenty of other joys.

Zen: Which… I’m going to pursue two of those now. Reading fan letters and practicing my lines.

Zen: Bye.

Poor thing… No one ought to start off a morning with such acrimony. Before the girl could even get out a reply, the future chairman bolted out:

Jumin Han: I’m leaving first.

Jumin Han: Adios.

- Jumin Han has left the chatroom.

Zen: *his angry emoji*

Zen: … Seriously, what is with that geezer?
Instinctively they both probably knew why.

“Maybe he likes the attention? XD”

Zen: Ew… I don’t even want to think about it.

Zen: Don’t forget.

He sent his winking emoji, her cheeks blushed.

“I won’t! Good luck at practice!” she replied, grinning like a cat who’d gotten into the cream.

An emoji of him sparkling was his final message before he exited. Since the chat was always open and viewable to anyone, she left a general message.

“I hope everyone makes it to work and school safely and gets a good lunch! Should anyone need me, please call as I will be packing! :D”

The thought occurred to her after post that Seven was likely still up because of her and his “work”. Miyeon finally forced herself onto two feet and walked across her room to check outside the window. There was no one suspicious, only one of the neighbors with their fluffy black Pomeranian. A sigh of relief escaped her, although there was a resurgence of guilt for what she wanted to ask as well as the trouble she was causing him. Time must be very precious to someone like him. Biting her lip, the girl brought her phone open and tried her best to find a picture of a cat that best represented her sentiments. It took a little digging, but eventually Miyeon was able to find one. The cat within it was absolutely pitiful looking with folded ears, large, pleading eyes, and natural pout.

“Good morning! Did you have a good breakfast? So after some thought, I’ve decided to give the apartment a “trial” run – at least until you feel there isn’t a threat. Sorry that the monocle and top hat will go to waste. ;D Also, I noticed that you’re the only person I can send pictures or files to. While I’m thinking it is a security measure, I also want to make sure that it’s not a bug. Is it possible the version on my phone still has a backdoor or something weird going on? It’s not that I don’t have faith in you, just nervous. ;; I appreciate everything you’ve done and are doing for everyone! Thank you for working so hard!”

She glanced back outside… It couldn’t’ hurt to ask Ms. Park if she’d seen or heard anything; there was the added benefit of getting a chance to pet Yeontan. There was no way she was going outside with Medusa hair. Clumsily the girl changed into one of her brother’s old oversized sweatshirts and a pair of black leggings. On the way to the door she brushed her hair straight and pulled it back and up with a clip. The older woman likely wouldn’t mind, after all, she’d watched Miyeon grow up. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d witnessed “little lady” with her hair a mess and less than flattering clothes.

“Mrs. Park! Good morning!”

Yeontan was already wagging and let out a bark to her approach as he waddled up to the fence.

“Have you eaten?” the older woman asked, her wrinkled eyes gleaming.

“Not yet. Umm… I have sort of an odd question. You haven’t seen anyone unusual in the neighborhood have you? Like repair men or anyone working on the lines, right?”

The fat little Pomeranian was already at the fence now with his paws through holes. Gently
she scratched behind his ears and his chin as his cotton candy pink tongue lolled happily out of his mouth. He bounded away for a moment before charging back for another rub.

“No, dear. And the little brisket’s been quiet. Boy trouble?”

“Something like that,” Miyeon answered with a nervous little chuckle. “I talked with a friend about some of the scams going around, and I’ve been nervous.”

“It’s a scary world! Especially for us ladies. I noticed you’ve not been coming out much since everything with your father. You know since he and … that boy… aren’t around to protect you anymore, you really ought to have a husband of your own. You’re at that age, it’ll be too late to have babies a few years from now… You’re such a lovely girl. Were there no nice boys at your college? Who am I kidding they’re all so childish these days…” the older woman sighed. “Oh! There’s someone at my church. He’s…”

Miyeon now remembered why they didn’t talk much beyond a courtesy greeting… With age came wisdom and a loss of tact. She did her best to smile politely while the elderly woman listed off a host of potential options along with a symposium on “Why you’re not getting boys”. It was a good thing the girl had mastered putting on a convincing fake smile years ago...

Although, in a way it was almost nice to have someone finally giving her “the talk”. After all, she had ached for “elder” advice. Though the girl had heard of such talks, this was only the second time she’d heard it, compared to the weekly regiment some girls got. The only person who’d ever given her this speech prior was her best friend, even then, it was only after Eun Ji started dating. While it was partially born of concern, the driving factor had been wanting someone to go on double dates with. Being a “third wheel” was never fun. People in new relationships had a tendency to forget that anyone else but their partner existed. How many friends had her old group lost to “love” only to have them re-emerge days, weeks, or months later broken hearted and in need of consolation? Perhaps that’s why Zen’s phone call didn’t bother her. It wasn’t the first time she’d gotten a phone call at a strange hour.

Why was it the one who’d never even dated that everyone came to?

*Because they know you have nothing better to do…*

Zen’s dulcet voice echoed in her memory, “You’re obviously a very positive and kind person…”

And the puppy she imagined as Yoosung barked, “Ur such a nice person. Just like Rika.”

Mrs. Park asked her a question… She totally missed it!

“Miyeon?”

“Sorry! I just… You’ve given me so much to think about. I truly appreciate your advice, Ms. Park.”

The older woman nodded with a broad smile, perhaps she was too senile to care that the girl wasn’t listening. She just wanted an audience to practice being social. Truthfully, her children didn’t visit nearly enough… People took each other for granted entirely too much.

“Before you go back in, may I ask a favor…?” she asked, remembering part of why the effort to come outside was even made. “I may have a new job opportunity which may take me away from the house for a little while. Could you keep an eye on the place and let me know if you see anything out of the ordinary? Maybe leave me a note under the doormat if you see
something?”

“Of course, dear. I suppose you do have to work now since your father isn’t here, shame. Poor thing… Are you sure you don’t want me to set you up with that boy from church?”

“You’re offer is very generous. But th-there’s someone I’m interested in. I’d like to try and win them first.”

It wasn’t technically a lie… There was someone wanted desperately to win over one day; she just didn’t know who they were yet. Maybe they’d share a fateful meeting on her way to the apartment? Perhaps the day after she’d call one of the charities, and the love of her life would be on the other line? A portal could open up in the floor and suck her into some magical dream world where she’d meet that person… However it happened, they’d just know when they met, right? It wouldn’t be as dramatic as a sweet theme playing in the background or the world turning into sparkling pastels, but surely she’d feel something.

At the very least, the promise of watching young love blossom seemed to brighten the elderly woman up as her wrinkles all seemed to join together with a smile. “Ah… I remember when Mr. Park and I…”

Miyeon patiently knelt, petting the chubby belly of the little Pomeranian as the old woman recounted her romance with her husband. To listen was the least the girl could do since Ms. Park was going to be doing her a favor. Although, she rather got into it and asked for elaboration to show that she was truly paying attention now. Truly Miyeon did enjoy hearing others experiences, she could picture and feel it with entirety. The small wavers in the older woman’s voice waned from happy to annoyed several times, but would invariably come back to content. In turn, the girl felt every trial and triumph. It was sweet… Maybe one day, she would be like Ms. Park: wise, loquacious, and affectionately bothered by someone with whom she’d shared a life full of memories. She could hope…

“My knees are starting to ache…” the older woman finally sighed. “When you get this boy, bring him over so I can meet him! Since your father isn’t here, someone needs to make sure he’s proper.”

The girl smirked. What if it was a girl? She thought mischievously. “I will. Thank you.”

In the back of her mind, a reel was playing of bringing each member of the RFA to meet the old woman. Zen would probably charm her… Jumin would probably scare her, but in private she’d likely shake her hand… Jaehee would probably clear her throat and assure her that nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. Seven would likely dive for the dog… Yoosung was probably what she had in mind. A “nice” normal boy – truthfully, he was probably the only one remotely close to her “league”, even then he was precious with his bright eyes. She couldn’t compete.

“Such a polite girl… Yeontan! Stop being such a Casanova and come in, it’s time for my show!”

The dog’s curled, fluffy tail waggled a bit before he lazily rolled back onto his feet and waddled towards the door, sniffing the ground as he went. His little belly jiggled even through the fur. It was bad for him to be so chubby, but one couldn’t deny how adorable he was.

After a bow of respect and wave goodbye, the girl went to see if the mail had arrived yet. Her eyes scanned the neighborhood a last time before she trotted back into the house, slipping her shoes back off at the front door. There was only the usual bills and a flyer.
Knowing that she would have a lot of work to do, she cooked up some pancakes. She couldn’t help but check her phone while waiting for the individual cakes to rise. There hadn’t been any activity in the chat since the argument earlier, but she did have a private message from Jumin, which surprised her. It read:

Elizabeth the 3rd must not want to part with me. I am waiting for the driver, yet she’s rubbing her body all over my leg. I can’t leave her when she’s like this, so I often postpone leaving for work. One cannot help but be captivated by such a graceful form. Cats truly are the best animals. Don’t you think?

Her reply:

Indeed. It’s hard not to let the cuteness overwhelm you, especially her. Really she is such a beautiful cat! I hope I can meet her one day! Give her a scratch under the chin for me! :3

Flipping her pancake, she found herself trying to piece together what she knew about him… Just the night before Seven had joked, “imagine feeding her in his suit!” From the picture she’d seen, Jumin wasn’t a particularly frightening. He had good symmetry and would pass for what was considered handsome, if a little muted. There was no smile in his picture, merely a taciturn gaze. He seemed the sort that could be imposing simply because he was calm, like the stillness before a storm. But why?

She removed the finished one from the pan and poured a little more batter.

There were tropes about children growing up in rich homes… Even if they were fake, surely there was some inspiration for them in reality. Jumin seemed to very much be on the side of having been conditioned to always be in control of himself or perhaps he was jaded…? Having money also likely meant that people who wanted money and influence were drawn to you, not because they cared for you, but because they wanted the perks associated… Good people seldom sought out wealth or power for the sheer sake of it.

Animals, on the other hand, could care less about wealth. Very simply, they want only for someone to feed and love them. A cat would never betray nor disappoint him…

A flip…

Jumin had been born to a wealthy family, just as Zen had been born handsome. The difference was that Jumin likely had an entire lifetime of people being jealous of him or trying to ingratiate themselves to him. He’d become adept at dodging and redirecting such energy. They were all faceless entities who desired one thing. Not unlike a mob of zombies. No wonder it was easy for him to dehumanize them, they had done it to him first after all.

On the other hand, Zen seemed to come from the tier of a working family which would explain his defensiveness. He was sympathetic to those being used by the system… He understood hard work probably better than anyone. Natural attractiveness aside, it took tremendous effort to maintain such an appearance and mental fortitude to memorize entire works. Perhaps that wasn’t being recognized? Or maybe he felt it wasn’t? There was probably more to it though… The pop star probably had fan sights she could learn about his history from, no doubt he’d paid his dues and then some, but it seemed rude to creep around online looking for tidbits on his past. She’d ask him about it.

Even though Miyeon barely knew them, she cared… If they were going to throw a successful party and if the organization was going to continue doing good for those in need, there had to be a resolution and some understanding. Why was something that came so easy to her so hard
for everyone else? They had different lives… They haven’t learned those lessons yet…

Maybe she was already old…

After adding some thawed frozen strawberries, the girl ate pondering the whole mess while idly writing out a list of things she’d need to take with her to the apartment. There were doodles of cats, ducks, and vines that flowed from the pen between items. Even while washing the dishes her mind was mulling over the ways to handle the conflict. If anything, being a girl gave her some leverage she wouldn’t have had if she’d been a boy. Maybe that was what Seven meant when he’d referenced her feminine charms…? She wanted to ask, but it wasn’t the sort of thing that merited calling him over. This was likely another case of her reading into things. How could she not with someone like him? The girl wanted to ask him about everyone. He probably knew… And he was probably very busy.

Honestly, the only person probably not busy in the whole group was her. That made her want to work all the harder; she had something to prove… Not just to them but to herself.

It was time to pack…
Chapter Notes

Wherein, your intrepid author made up for a decrease in quality via an increase in quantity.

Yoosung fans do not despair, he will be in the next chapter.

Thank all of you who have been reading this drivel. I live off of your continued support and praise.

I'm also always open to suggestions.

Chapter 6:

Getting her suitcases out of the closet was a bit of a challenge. Miyeon was a rather petite girl, which meant getting creative and dragging a chair over to try to wrestle them down from the top shelf while maintaining a balancing act. There was one good scream as a spider crawled on her arm, but the mission was a success overall due to her panicked jerking spilling the set of luggage bags onto the floor. It took a moment of catching her breath before she shakily stepped down herself to drag them onto her bed.

It was only testament to how out of shape she was when she found herself checking the chat while catching her breath and waiting for her heart to slow. Her imagination made her feel as though the spider were still on her… It was a relief that 707 and Jumin were both on. But shouldn’t the business man be at work? Granted, he did say that he indulged his cat’s begging for attention… In her mind, Miyeon had already justified goof off a little herself; it was a chance to check on the person she’d inconvenienced the most.

“Good morning, 707!” Immediately she followed with, “Elizabeth the 3rd still delaying you, Jumin? :3”

707: Wow! The infamous Miyeon! Welcome~!

Jumin Han: Our lady of the evening.

Jumin Han: No. My driver isn’t here yet…

Jumin Han: Thanks to that, I can’t go to work.

707: lol take the subway

Jumin Han: I don’t know where that is. And I don’t have cash.

707: Knew it lol

She almost felt a little sorry for Jumin, although she suspected his assistant was either elated or annoyed by his absence…
“Well at least you didn’t get attacked by a spider. ;;;”

707: *gasp*

707: Jumin!

707: Quick!

707: We need to see Elly~!

On command, Jumin sent another picture of his pet. In this one, she was belly up, her fetching pink nose glistening and her little Cheshire smirk beaming up.

Jumin Han: Take comfort knowing you live in a world with such a majestic being.

707: *his loving emoji*

“Thank you! Her magnificence, Elizabeth the 3rd! I feel better already!”

Jumin Han: Truly, I worry that not enough people appreciate the beauty of felines. Particularly Elizabeth the 3rd… Perhaps I should engage in a photo flyer campaign to spread awareness.

707: lmfao

707: Jumin’s a cat mom.

Jumin Han: I do not like that term.

The girl chuckled at that and even more so at the thought of taciturn Jumin’s brow being furrowed slightly. Where Zen failed, Seven easily succeeded.

“While Elizabeth the 3rd is gorgeous, there are a lot of cats who aren’t as fortunate as her who really need homes. Perhaps we could do a campaign to help them with her maybe as an ambassador for her kind?”

707: : Ambassador Elly!

Jumin Han: That isn’t a bad idea. There is a cat shelter we could invite to the party... And I could have Assistant Kang arrange for the press to be present for a meet and greet along with a question period.

707: *his love emoticon*

707: wanna

707: just

707: shake

707: her paw!

707: the toe beans!

707: and see her in a little sash!!!
Jumin Han: With such official duties, she does not need the threat of a cat abuser distracting her.

707: ;;

707: She’s a pretty chill cat tho.

Jumin Han: She is not “chill”… She’s quite sensitive and picky about with whom she associates.

707: Ya? She ain’t picky with me.

Jumin Han: That’s because you forced Elizabeth the 3rd to… God… I dare not speak of such an atrocity.

Jumin Han: Speaking of rescues… As compensation for violating her, 707, you should put your ill gotten money to use and donate cat food.

707: Should I? Could I play with Elizabeth the 3rd then?

Jumin Han: I will never permit that, even if my life were at stake.

It was more like they were arguing over a lover than a cat. Miyeon wasn’t sure if this was merely the business man being jealous and overprotective, or if Seven really didn’t know how to interact with her.

707: Maybe if I ask nicely? Can I come over? There’s that huge tv, a gray station, the Zet Box, and Elizabeth the 3rd lol.

707: You don’t like leaving her alone anyway, right?

707: I could be so good to her. :3

Jumin Han: Don’t come over.

Jumin Han: NEVER come over.

“…Is it really that bad, Jumin?”

Jumin Han: I have security camera footage of him biting Elizabeth the 3rd on the neck.

707: ;; I’ve been framed!

Jumin Han: Luciel, if you dare come near my place, security WILL stop you.

707: Alright, so I just need to hang around with them for a little, then go in.

707: okie dokie

Jumin Han: -_-:

Jumin Han: Do not be deceived by his antics. 707 is a dangerous man, Miyeon.

Jumin Han: He never listens.
“I think he just enjoys joking around,” she replied. “If he were that dangerous, I don’t think you guys would be okay with me entrusting my security to him.”

707: Yup! That’s right!

707: Wow. Ur like the only person who gets me in this group.

“To be fair, Jumin, you’re guilty of doing the same thing to Zen earlier. Maybe this is karma?”

Jumin Han: The jokes of a dangerous man and the jokes of a not-so-dangerous man are very different.

707: I am not dangerous~!

707: ur cat is alive and well haha

Jumin Han: Barely. She is alive for now. I intend to keep it that way.

“Maybe you could adopt a kitty of your own, Seven? :3 I used to volunteer at a rescue; I still know the people there, I could help you pick one!”

Jumin Han: …

707: *his love emoji*

707: A date with Miyeon and kitties?!

707: I’d love that!

707: ;; Sadly, I can’t have a cat right now.

707: I can only have God.

707: Because I have no one to share it with, my heart is full of love and peace!

707: Why can’t anyone recognize the love inside me!?

“Poor Seven. The burdens of a hero are great. ;;”

707: ;; I kno, right?

Jumin Han: If that’s love, then you’re a sadist.

707: Oo? Whuzzat word mean? O.o

Jumin Han: Do not play innocent. Which reminds me… You’ve been to Rika’s apartment, yet you’ve been quiet this entire time.

707: Well, I had no choice. It was top secret.

707: *There was an emoji that looked desperate*

Jumin Han: It gives me goosebumps thinking about what else you keep us in the dark about. Precisely how many secrets do you have?

707: I’m in charge of managing top secret information lol.
“Respectfully, isn’t V the person in charge...? If there are secrets, isn’t he the one asking Seven to keep them...?”

707: Precisely!
707: Miyeon’s sharp!
707: *swish*
707: I’d like to gift u the thrill and joy of riding a roller coaster!

“Could we stick to tea cups instead?”

707: u seemed to like them… ;;

Suddenly she felt uncomfortable, but why…?

707: :D how do u feel about bumper cars?

Jumin Han: I’d refuse any offer from someone like him, were I you. But you do make a good point. I do not appreciate you keeping secrets from us, Luciel, perhaps I should discuss all of it with V.

707: I dunno about any secrets.
707: lol
Jumin Han: …
707: lololololol
707: lol well, I guess… I do have secrets.
707: But since I take care of classified information, they’re not secrets to me~!
Jumin Han: And that’s funny to you?
707: So I guess that makes me the secretive type? :/
Jumin Han: It makes you dangerous.
707: Jumin, nuu, don’t be like that. ;;
707: Don’t fear me.
707: Love me.
707: Come over to my place! I’ll give u a smothering hug~!

“Aww... ;; Sweetness.”

Jumin Han: …No.
Jumin Han: Anyway… The driver is here. I’m really going to work now.
“Hope you have a good day at work today, Jumin!”

707: Cheer up! Whoot whoot!

Jumin Han: Thank you, Miyeon, I will. I hope your day is productive too.

Jumin Han: And… for you also, Luciel.

707: We should give him the proper cat mom sendoff:

707: Good bye for meow~*

- Jumin Han has left the room

707: No one knows how affectionate I can be. ;;

707: U believe me, don’t you?

“Well I am moving into a strange apartment because of you. Most couples usually wait a few weeks before taking that step. XD”

707: Gotta keep the audience interested! DRAMA!

“If I knew my life was going to have an audience, I would’ve had my agent ask for an action show or a comedy… Think it’s too late to transfer?

707: A girl who doesn’t like romance? :O Yoosung is going to be crushed!

“;; I’m not totally against it, but it sort of bores me as a main plot point. If it can happen in real life – it’ll probably bore me. Which is why growing up I wanted to be a mecha pilot – like Joltron.”

707: *his love emoji*

707: I could make you mech. :3

“Awesome as that would be, I don’t think the laws of physics would allow for it. ;;”

707: Nothing is impossible, for I, God Seven shall make it so!

707: BEHOLD!

An image flashed of a collection of models of various cars and robot suits from various shows. She recognized some, but it was clear some of them had been customized. They were all meticulously kept and painted. It made her want to spend money she didn’t have on a simple kit herself.

“I’m so jelly! ;; You even have the special edition version of the Sehkmet GE-03 from the game!”

707: Cool story behind that one…

707: Maybe I’ll tell you one day.

707: But srsly
707: I appreciate u trusting us.

707: Ur a really nice person. ;; So nice… ;; Like too much. x_x

707: That’s y I want to do everything I can to make sure ur safe.

707: I promise there’s no cameras on the inside or anything rly weird.

707: The security in place was requested by Rika.

707: ;; I am worried about how u plan to get there tho.

707: x-x I’d come get you myself, but I got work…

Chatting with him, much like talking with him, was an endless torrent of racing thoughts. People in LOLOL had accused her of typing fast, but she was nowhere on his level. Plus, she sensed a tone shift, almost as if it was forced.

“You don’t need to worry. I’ll figure out something. :3”

707: ;; I kno, but…

707: Ur little… ;; Like 155.7 or 156 cm or something?

“How… do you figure that?”

707: pulled up the blue prints, compared your height, and the distances to the door frame.

“^-^-* I guess you needed a break from work and catching the hacker…?”

707: Ya. :3

“As long as height’s only one we’re sharing, that’s fine. XD”

707: I’ll keep the secret of your measurements.

707: Stain my soul with forbidden knowledge…

707: and fight off the horde of “Forever alone” men in chat…

707: all for u…

“;; My hero. 707, lone defender of justice… And measurements.”

707: Gah!!! so much fun…;;

707: talking w u

707: Wanna talk more… but I really got 2 get back 2 work now.

“Good luck, and don’t work too hard. Okay?”

707: Thx. 8D But 4 a genius like me – it isn’t hard.

707: Just lots of it…

• 707 has left the room.
707 has entered the room.
707: !
707: almst…
707: forgot…
707: GAH!!!
707: SOS!!!
707: Important!!!
707: SUPER DUPER!!!
707: IMPORTANT!
707: Call me as soon you get to the apartment.
707: Not like – inside!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
707: but as soon as you are outside!!!
707: I mean, u can call me inside 2 but like after u call me outside.
“Gotcha. I’m guessing you had to change a lot of stuff around because of
everything last night. And you don’t want me to set the security system off?”
707: Ya… calibrations…
707: And… stuff…
707: Erm… X_X
707: ;; It’s important tho.
“That’s why you calculated out my height, isn’t it?”
707: lol
707: lololol
707: lolololololololololol!!!!
707: ;;
707: Anywayz
707: K… 4 reals tho!
707: B
707: Y
707: E


• 707 has left the room.

For a moment, she found herself rereading the chat. Something about it puzzled her, although it really did seem quite straightforward. Rather than waste any more time on it, she sat her phone aside and set about the task of getting packed.

Miyeon went down her checklist, setting the needed items out, rolled them up neatly, placed them in the designated case, and methodically checked each item off the list. Double checking the list of toiletries and snacks she could bring with her, it was painfully obvious she’d have to make a trip to the grocers to get food to eat while she was there. The practical side of her wondered if anyone had bothered to clean out the fridge after Rika had passed… It seemed disrespectful to even consider it, but there was no way of escaping it. That would be something she’d have to check before she brought new groceries into the apartment.

After properly securing everything, Miyeon gathered up her laptop and the gaming systems she wanted to take. For her, it was a harder decision than packing clothing. The handheld was a definite, as was the current gen console, but she wanted to bring something older too.

Her father had a collection spanning the decades of electronic entertainment, so there was quite a variety. The apartment wouldn’t feel like home without at least one cartridge using console to flip on when she wanted something simple to play alone. There were so many happy memories with them too… Growing up. Jun Seo was almost always player one, yet he’d usually let her win. As she got older though, she realized that her victories were increasingly her own. The few times he had friends over after swim practice, he’d let her play against them when they gloated too much… She was his “secret weapon”. Being four years younger than him and a girl, none of them ever expected what usually followed. It was so wonderful to see his friend’s wide eyes fix on her in disbelief just before he’d let out a sudden, thunderous laugh. Jun had always been naturally graceful and quiet, like a fish in a pond, but those rare bursts of joy made her smile even now…

Miyeon cherished them.

After he was gone… she didn’t have anyone else to play with despite her father sending her to stay with friends while the divorce was finalized. Sadly, most of the girls she knew weren’t as into games and allowing her to stay the night with her male friends who were was out of the question. Eun Ji humored her though, which was how they’d become so close… Really, she had been a wonderful friend. How could she have let a boyfriend and her father’s death pull her away from that? She should’ve fought harder… But it wasn’t too late, right? Once she got settled in, maybe she could call…

Her phone rang and without thinking she answered.

“Hello!”

“…Good afternoon. This is Jaehee Kang, Mr. Han’s assistant, calling on behalf of the RFA,” announced a gentle, yet firm voice. The woman exuded professional adult in a way that intimidated Miyeon. Should she call her “Miss Kang” or Jaehee?

“H_hi! It’s good to finally speak with you_ um…” the girl noticed the clock on her wall read that it was almost noon already. “Sorry… You’re not calling me on your lunch break are you…?”

“Yes, since I finally have a spare moment…” there was some sign of informality. “First, welcome to the RFA. Mr. Han tells me that you were working on a spreadsheet of charities to invite to the event and were asking for details regarding the actual activities, correct?”
A lifetime of being a student made her back straighten at such a direct tone. She needed to act with some decorum... “Yes, I am…”

“I would be happy to review it. Also I will try to have a report ready for you regarding possible venues and acceptable catering services by this afternoon. Mr. Han has also been requested that I ask if you require assistance moving to the apartment. We are not permitted to know the location, however, Mr. Han feels that you may require a safe and discreet form of transport. A vehicle could be sent to drop you and any luggage off closer to your destination to save a lengthy public commute.”

“…That would be tremendously helpful, although I don’t know if I could accept such a favor.”

“Perhaps you are more prudent than I thought,” the woman pondered aloud. “Please do not feel as though you are imposing. Mr. Han, despite being wealthy, is usually not so… generous, but I suspect your willingness to aid with the party has brightened his mood. If I may be so bold, thank you…”

“I’ve not done anything worthy of that just yet. But I give you my word that I will do my best. I look forward to seeing what we can do together, as I suspect Jumin will probably push most of the work onto you.”

“I fear you are right, but hearing that you seem to be taking this seriously does ease my concerns some. It is possible I may have been quick to judge you.”

“…Considering everything, you have every right to. So I don’t take it personal. You’re just being practical.”

“I am grateful that you understand,” the woman’s voice, though level, bore a depth of sincerity. “Regarding the offer of transportation, I would recommend that you accept for the following reason: refusing it may be taken as a lack of commitment to your role.”

“Is it really okay to give you my home address though? I mean Seven said there are lots of scams going around,” Miyeon was half joking.

“…If I was good at those sorts of things, I may be more gainfully employed,” Jaehee sighed, her tone bitter like coffee and dry like autumn leaves. “Although, that is surprisingly good advice coming from Luciel… If you are ready, I can take down your information.”

The girl recounted her address before the assistant read it back to her for verification.

“Thank you. When would be best for you?”

“I’m almost done packing, but anytime is really fine. Whatever is easiest…”

“I see…” there was a shuffle of paper. “Might I make a proposal as it sounds as though you have some free time…? If it is agreeable, perhaps we can stop for coffee during your move in order establish a proper working relationship. My experience has been that people who do not ask questions either do not know enough to know what to ask or they are fearful to do so. Plus I suspect we both have reservations that only such a meeting can resolve.”

“That’s a good ideal. I’ll have everything ready by then… Is there a dress code?”

“…It’s an informal meeting, so I would just say dress comfortably. It will
probably be around 15:30 PM, unless you have prior commitments.”

“15:30, got it! But… Are you sure that Jumin will be okay with this?”

“In part, this was his ideal as he wants to ensure that everything goes as smoothly as possible, although I suspect either later this evening or tomorrow I will be entrusted with the “Feline Awareness” campaign inspired by your discussion with him.”

“Oh my goodness! I am so sorry! I didn’t mean to cause you more work!”

There was a thoughtful little hum. “No need to apologize. Mr.Han would’ve come up with something on his own, without your influence. At the very least, this is something that could be written off as a charitable cause and would likely have help from local rescue organizations.”

Miyeon smirked. “Maybe I should ask him to raise your pay next time?”

There was a little chuckle. “A little vacation time would be nice, but I won’t hold my breath… In any case, thank you for your cooperation and diligence on our behalf. I look forward to meeting you.”

“Me too! Also thank you, Jaehee! Have a great afternoon!”

Suddenly she felt anxious again once the line disconnected. This was a very professional woman essentially asking her to a business meeting. Miyeon became all too aware of how she was still very much a child when compared to someone like Jaehee. It was enough to make her want to cancel, but then everyone would be disappointed in her – not just the business woman. Plus, there was Zen and Jumin. They’d probably want to see her at some point too. She wanted very much to be liked and seen as a contributing member, but at the same time, how could she compare with people like that? She had enough trouble being “normal” let alone on their level. Internally, her mind was already playing out the conversations that would held in her absence and through calls. Her entire body felt tight and her breath quickened. She needed a distraction, anything…

At first she printed out the pages of her research before packing up her laptop.

Her hands shook as she zipped up her bags and clumsily moved all of the cases downstairs and onto the matching trolley, the remnants of her neighbor’s dog’s hair even more obvious to her now that the color had drained from her skin. Miyeon’s was fair to begin with, but now she was practically snow… She certainly was quivering enough for that to be the case.

It didn’t make sense… But she couldn’t stop herself.

Quietly the girl toed back up the steps and after selecting a slightly more professional set of clothing in which to meet Jaehee, retreated to the shower. The water warmed her, but did little to calm her. It took focusing on getting ready to do that. Rather than her usual wash and drip dry, Miyeon took the effort to present a somewhat polished image. Truthfully, she’d never had an opportunity to learn the finer points of cosmetics and hair styling. Her mother had taken off before the divorce, just when she was hitting “that” age, and while her best friend had shown her some technique, Miyeon’s investment in beauty products (fiscally and emotionally) was minimal. That meant her usual look was natural with limited flourishes and a spritz of Vanilla Lace or Love Spell perfume with its fruity notes. The only other style she could do was “undead couture”, which wasn’t exactly the sort of thing one wore to a business meeting – however informal – unless Dracula or Frankenstein’s monster were in attendance.

After a look over in the mirror, she felt somewhat okay with the person looking back at her.
The reflection gazing back at her had a look of maturity and earnestness, but it felt like she was impersonating her future self. It was like a child putting on their father’s shoes, loose and bound to result in a fall. To appease that part of her, she rummaged through her bag until she found a set of hair clips that were whimsical enough to appease the little girl within her. It took a few minutes to get anything resembling acceptable with them. Miyeon dared not mess with once it looked half decent for fear her head would spontaneously combust.

It wouldn’t be much longer until her ride arrived, which left her with time to agonize over the work she’d done. She sat glancing over it and pacing in the living room, before the thought occurred to her that she hadn’t heard from Yoosung yet. Then again, he was likely still at school or doing clubs… How she missed that… Hopefully, wherever he was, her fellow student was having a good day. Setting the papers aside, she pulled up the video of the match again, this time paying more attention to it. Miyeon’d been so engrossed with what she’d been doing the night before, it had all just been background noise. Now, she could focus on it. It took about ten minutes, but there was no mistaking her fellow gamer, the tag “Superman Yoosung” was about as obvious as it got. Though she skimmed through the highlights it was pretty obvious why he was as high in the ranking as he was. His gear was indeed the stuff of legends, although it was largely comprised of items that had to be grinded out rather than purchased pieces. He’d probably spent months getting the pauldrons alone for that particular PVP set. It helped that he clearly knew his rotations and how to form a wall so his teammates could do what they needed to. Good tanks were nearly impossible to find yet always in demand.

She wondered what his in game ‘played’ time was.

The sound of a passing car lifted her head. It wasn’t her ride…

He did talk about Rika a lot; her death seemed to hit him the hardest aside from what she’d seen of V.

She skimmed the video to see if there was any team audio to see what he sounded like, but sadly it was just the commentators. With a disgusted little huff, it occurred to her that somehow the driver had gotten lost. Perhaps Jaehee had been held up with more work? The application showed no new messages; considering how busy it had been, maybe that was for the best. She had promised to call Zen the night before. The girl set a reminder for herself, knowing she’d likely be a nervous wreck once she was in the apartment. Already the tension was making her pace again.

Rather than stir herself up more, Miyeon opted to wait outside in the fresh air. Her “research” was tucked into her Monokuma messenger bag. It was almost fifteen minutes before a sleek black van with tinted pulled up. Her back tightened as the driver got out and opened the door to the back. Out stepped the very vision of the modern working woman in all of her glory. Short, well-groomed hair, shrewd countenance, and a purposeful build. One slender arm held a clipboard to her chest, while the other pushed the glasses up onto their proper place. She wasn’t much taller than the girl, but her aura was towering miles above.

Was it too late to run back inside?

Jaehee’s eyes were already locked on her with laser precision. Like a rabbit, she froze.

“Miyeon, I presume? Jahee Kang” the woman stated, her voice clear but soft, as she extended her hand. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

The girl found herself bowing a little while taking her hand. Despite looking delicate, they were soft yet strong. Was there a bit of citrus and sandalwood perfume? “Yes. I am Miyeon Ko. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”
She startled as the driver took up her bags, actually letting out a small gasp and reflexively clutching her chest. The business woman’s brow relaxed before she followed her gaze to where the driver was loading her things in.

They shared a small smile before the older woman pivoted towards the vehicle. “Shall we?”

Nodding, she followed Jumin’s assistant into the van.

Her usual mental associations with such vehicles were cramped and creepy. C&R’s vans, however, were lavish in a way that was nearly vulgar… It was essentially like riding in a limo. The black leather seats formed a round, intimate little U shape, leaving an open area in the middle with a little table. Included were shelves with bottles of wine that likely cost more than she dared to think and a mini refrigerator with God only knows what sort of fancy things inside. She couldn’t help but tuck herself into as tight of a space as possible to ensure that she didn’t damage or smudge anything in a way that would bankrupt her. Even sitting on the leather felt uncomfortable. The air even smelt expensive…

Jaehee, on the other hand, seemed nonplussed aside from perhaps being a little amused at how rigid her passenger was once she looked up from her phone. Another faintly sympathetic smile flashed across her lips.

“It does take some getting used to,” she noted.

Miyeon let out a breathless laugh. “That obvious I’m a commoner?”

Though she was swiping at her phone with purposeful swipes, the woman answered in a level voice as she put the device away. “Your perception is most assuredly normal.” Her clever eyes glinted with something resembling mischief, “Mr.Han views these vehicles as frugal.”

“And what is your opinion?”

“They are more than sufficient and more cost effective than a limo in gas and maintenance, yet I still find myself afraid to drink anything in them. Speaking of which, I picked a small café whose reviews state they have a fine selection of baked goods and coffees. I hope that will be agreeable.”

“Honestly, I’m just glad you’ll be able to have something of a meal… I got the feeling you worked your way through lunch.”

An arch in her thin brow confirmed as much, but also spoke to her being a little surprised. “You were concerned?”

“We’ll be working together; so I suppose you could say I have a vested interest in your wellbeing.”

“I’m glad someone does,” the woman sighed before her eyes focused upon Miyeon expectantly. “Is that your research?”

Her cheeks flushed as she awkwardly as she wriggled the sheets free from the canvas fabric. “My apologies, I don’t really have a nice docket to store these in.”

“That’s fine. May I?”

“Y_yeah,” she mewed anxiously, offering the papers with her head low.
There was a quiet in the vehicle for several moments as Jaehee reviewed each sheet with what seemed like uncanny focus. Miyeon dared not hold her gaze on her for too long, favoring instead a glance only when the tension grew too great. Sadly, the woman’s expression was unreadable, even when her fingers brushed her ear to push some of the short strands back.

“I suspect you’ve not contacted any of these organizations yet?”

“No. Once we have the details worked out, though, I intend to. It seemed a little unprofessional to reach out to them without having any real info to share.”

“Indeed,” Jaehee affirmed. “This is honestly better than some of the things that get turned into me. If you clean it up a little bit, it’ll be perfect. The current layout is functional, but I suspect it’ll be difficult when it comes time to start noting who has been contacted, when, and who has R.S.V.P.’d.”

“I thought so too. I’ll fix it, or if there’s a premade format you guys use, I’ll be happy to transfer the data over and give you access.” A nervous titter escaped her, “When I remember how.”

“That’d be tremendously helpful. I’ll have something sent over…” With that she offered Miyeon an envelope that was deceptively heavy.

The rest of the ride was spent discussing the contents which ranged from venue to potential donators merely from the pool available through C&R’s associations. By the time the van had stopped, they’d already found a rhythm, which picked back up quite easily after the order was placed. Efficient seemed too small a word to cover Jaehee’s level of preparedness. She had multiple copies of everything and supplies to make the necessary annotations as needed. Miyeon seldom had to ask questions as the assistant had come more than prepared and seemed to anticipate potential issues with the clarify of a tactician. Though she thoughtfully considered the inquiries that the new member brought up, noting them as things to clarify with Mr. Han when they next spoke. By the time their orders had arrived, they’d gotten a great deal accomplished with very little, although she could tell Jaehee was on the tail end of her second wind by the way she lifted her cup, quietly saying Grace over it.

Though not heavily religious herself, the girl bowed her head reverently with her fellow RFA member while quietly thanking the countless people whose work resulted in the meal before them.

“I suppose that’s all we can do until V gets back in touch,” she noted after lifting her head, folding her fingers around the cup to warm them.

“Is he always this elusive?”

Jaehee’s expression mellowed. “These days, yes. To be honest, I think last night was the first time I’ve seen him on in months, even then, he likely only logged on because Luciel asked him.”

“Rika must’ve been very important to everyone to have left such a void…”

“I respected her, although the other members likely felt the loss more deeply than I,” answered Jaehee. “To be perfectly honest, much like you, I was sort of forced into the RFA. Mr. Han worked very closely with Rika and V, and as his assistant, it became more convenient to involve me.”

The girl gently sipped the foam off her latte. “Did you help her too?”
“Rika did the majority of the work, although the bit I did become involved with had to be performed to her standards. She was a magnetic and benevolent soul, albeit uncompromising when it came to the party. She had to be... When everything happened, it was such a shock. Honestly, I don’t think any of us know the details, but I’d say it impacted V and Yoosung the worst. Before his cousin chose to… end things… Yoosung was a very studious boy. Now he just plays games; it’s a waste really. He’s only hurting himself… And V, from what I gather, travels a great deal. I pray that one day he’ll find the peace he seems to be looking for.”

“Or he just needs to stop running,” Miyeon sighed.

A flash of a sagely smile crossed the assistant’s lips before she politely patted the napkin along them. “If I may be bold, you seem to be adjusting well.”

“Everyone’s been really helpful so far.”

“They probably will be. You’re a girl,” Jaehee answered matter of factly.

“So are you.”

“I’m Mr. Han’s assistant and older than most them,” there was no bitterness in her tone, but it still felt as though she were making a jab.

Miyeon couldn’t help but feel a little defensive, despite understanding her perspective. “You don’t need to worry. I’m not really looking for a boyfriend. To be honest, I downloaded the app because I was trying to avoid people on the bus. I didn’t realize that it wasn’t just a game at the time… But now that I’m involved with the RFA, I’d like to do some good and potentially have this on my resume. After I finish school and have a job, that may be a different matter…”

“A word of advice: be very clear about that. It will save all involved heartache and potential embarrassment. In fact, I wouldn’t object if you could perhaps direct any future interest of that nature outside the RFA in general, particularly Zen…”

She felt her cheeks blush. “…That’s… Is there something between you two?”

“Nothing like that,” Jaehee assured a little too quickly. “It would just be most beneficial to the RFA if he continues to flourish as a celebrity; as you now know he is the public face of our organization. His lack of a romantic partner is one of the things that presently grows his fan base. Him getting involved with anyone at this stage in his career could severely impact his livelihood. A livelihood, mind you, that has taken nearly a decade of hardwork to achieve.”

As much as she wanted to protest, the girl saw the validity in the reasoning. “He’s very lucky to have you looking out for him… He has been friendly, but I figured since he’s a celebrity, he acts that way with everyone.”

“Yes… It appears we have an understanding then,” Jaehee’s voice was level but firm.

Sensing a little tension, the girl opted to lighten things. “You don’t have anything to worry about. But in a purely hypothetical situation what if something were to develop with… let’s say - Seven?”

“There is no accounting for taste, but I wouldn’t object aside from the potential legal issues,” there was the promise of a smile on her lips. Was the hacker finding someone really that amusing…?
“Yoosung?”
“If anything, he could stand to benefit from such an arrangement. From what I’ve seen thus far, you seem practical and could help him with managing his time.”

“Jumin?”
“…I don’t even think that could happen in a hypothetical, but in such an impossible situation, I’d humbly ask that you use any influence to see my vacation time upped, a decrease in feline related business proposals, and most of all for him to stop dropping his cat whenever he feels like it.”

“He really does that…?”
The woman’s eyes lifted with the sort of dull weariness that spoke to years of such abuse by her employer.

For a moment, they shared a little bit of a laugh and the topics gradually ebbed into lighter territory. They were nowhere near “besties” by the end, but the relationship seemed to be well on the way to being amicable at least. She certainly was less formal, although the discussion regarding Zen left the girl feeling rather conflicted even when the drop off was made. She’d taken great care to select a spot between the entrance to a subway hub and bus stop that wasn’t too far from the apartment so that her final destination would be undeterminable. Goodbyes were quick.

It wasn’t until the vehicle was fully out of sight that Miyeon set about making the trek to the apartment. She kept her pace brisk and glanced over her shoulder to ensure that no one was following her. It must’ve looked suspicious as more than a few strange looks were sent her way. By the time she’d reached the elevator, that was the least of her concerns. Thanks to the coffee, she really had to pee.

The apartment that had caused her so much anxiety the night before looked as unassuming as always. The number pad looked the same, and there was the CCTV camera, all seemingly untouched. Setting her messenger bag on the trolley with her suitcases, Miyeon dug her phone out of one of the partition pockets in the Monokuma themed bag. She offered a small wave to the camera as the dial tone began. Chances were he was too busy to be watching, but it didn’t hurt to be polite. Her knees pressed hard into each other to help lessen the discomfort. It felt like it was going to ring forever, she’d bounced in frustration if it wasn’t dangerous to do so…

Soon the ring was replaced with a voice mimicking the sound of a phone on vibrate. “Good evening! This is Lucky Seven Luxury Apartments – accepting applicants with very specific qualifications. Are you interested?” cooed a rather feminine, but distinctly 707 voice.

“Yes, please…” she murmured, hearing the desperation in her own voice.

“I can tell you are eager to view our offerings, but I don’t recognize this stylish lady! Could it be your cup is about to runneth over with joy?”

Her cheeks blushed. “…I don’t think it’s joy…”

He laughed then suddenly went quiet. “Oh… OH! I was just…! Hold on…” Quietly he was muttering to himself. “…And… Voila! OPEN SESAME!”

Her phone vibrated and there was a direct message to her with a new passcode.

“Thank you…! I promise I’ll call right back!”
With that she pushed the door open, half pulling half slinging the trolley in before doing her best to determine which area was the bathroom. Fortunately, it wasn’t too far. After washing her hands, she picked up her phone from the counter and stepped back out into the hall waving again. This time, her phone rang.

“Status update: Is the package secure?”

It was best just to roll with him…

“No breaches."

“No breeches?"

“None. Only kilts,” she announced.

There was a little snicker from him. “Query: Where’s your cute little cat hoodie, meow~?” He gasped. “Did that devil woman cut off your tail!?"

“Coffee with Jaehee, business casual, meow.”

“Gah! You went on a date without telling me!?"

“Business – nyaou-ot pleasure.”

“Does it have to be mutually exclusive? It can be both – you know like professional race car drivers,” he stated eruditely. “So – did you two hit it off? How much of a cougar is our little Jaehee? What base did she get to?”

“No bases - meow… But I’ll let her know you called her a cougar,” she teased.

“Ah! Ah!!! Don’t tell tattle! I got enough scary people after me without her and Daddy Jumin too!”

“Well since you are letting me stay in this apartment and are pretty much my security slave, I suppose I can cut you some slack…”

“Security slave…? Hmm… Dearest, adorable, honorable mistress, grant your humble servant this favor, try the door again.”

Miyeon felt her stomach lurch before she touched the handle. It wouldn’t budge. “Luciel! What did you do?”

A strange series of noises came from him, “You see, I, God Seven, am a benevolent but vengeful security slave. I have granted you a blessing, but now it is time for tribulation and tribute.”

 “…Seven… C’mon… Really?” she whined; the girl was officially annoyed.

“Seven – Really,” he answered mimicking her voice, albeit with a sadistic little purr. “Time for God Seven Oh Seven’s Talent Search LIVE!” he announced dramatically. “So, I’m sending you a video – meow. As tribute, you shall perform this sacrrred rite. If you are devout - meow, I shall return my blessings upon nyaou.”

“What if I start crying in the hall?” she asked, doing her best to muster a pout.

“…You seem a little bit M to me so maybe that’d be rewarding bad behavior? Believe it or not – I have my reasons. And it will help rid you of the guilt you have about making me
“My guilt is increasingly diminished...”

“Then it’s already working – hallelujah!” There was a pause. “I don’t see your paws moving – meow.” She put him on speakerphone, but brought up the link. Miyeon vaguely remembered the video as a meme from years prior. It was a little dance involving her using one’s hands as cat ears and meowing along with a beat. There was some wiggling and mild choreography, although it wasn’t anything too hard... Just really embarrassing to do in a hallway when anyone could see her. She couldn’t’ help but shoot a glare up at the camera. “Woooaah… EEEEEIIII! I just got chills! Elly makes that face too before her little claws go woosh!”

Sighing she looked down the hall and listened for the elevator. To be fair, she had done this dance without an audience, it just seemed strange to do it with someone watching. If anything knowing that she was being forced to do it was the sole reason she didn’t want to. At the same time, if Miyeon just got it over with, she could go back inside.

“Aww… Hey! I’ll do it too if it’ll make you feel better,” he chirruped through the phone.

“You don’t have to... I mean - as long as it makes you smile for me to do this, I suppose it’s worth it,” the girl sighed, resigning herself to her fate.

“Spoken like a true M,” he observed, “O.K.!!! Together now on the count of three~! Non, Eins, Dos, Two point Five, Thalaatha – that is three!”

The girl threw herself into it, knowing that if she didn’t give it her all, there was a good chance he’d have her do it until she did. He didn’t join in until the second round, but he did so with gusto once he did. It was probably the happiest she’d heard him as his voice was full of cartoonish glee. By the end she wasn’t even mad about it and did a little spin and bow before picking the phone back up.

“The voice recognition should be all nice and set now, and we got a nice range of motion for the sensors to recognize you. Good job!”

She felt rather petty for being annoyed at him now, then again this could be him toying with her too. At this point, it was probably best if not to ask.

“...So sad...” he sighed extravagantly.

Rather than ask aloud, she turned eyes up to the camera expectantly. There was furious clicking going on, then a slight slowing of it.

“...That little moment is lost to time now. It’ll be just a memory,” his voice seemed flat but picked back up to its usual energy. “I wonder what Zen and Yoosung would’ve given for me to record that though... Ou! You think Jumin would’ve bought me a new baby car?”

“Probably not. Yoosung would’ve probably given you his entire set of PVP armor though. Actually he still might just for that picture of me that you supposedly have.”

“I don’t need his scrub gear,” Seven scoffed, the machine gun fire of his fingers along his keyboard softening. “...I could probably got some nice premium gas for my babes though; Oh well! Only you, me, and God knows about this nyaou. Miyeon is nice and safe – meow.”

“Except my lost innocence - yes.”
“Nah, you still got that. You need a jury of your peers before you lose that… Or for me to share that picture of you at the amusement park,” he remarked casually before his voice ebbed with thought and there was a pronounced click, which quieted any questions she might’ve voiced. “Okie day! The security has been updated and your biometric data has been added in! So the security recognizes you, me, V, Rika, and Rika’s ghost. This next bit – super important – those people are the only people that can safety enter that apartment unless otherwise noted. OK? So no one but you, me, V, Rika, and Rika’s ghost can go inside.” Despite his cheerful tone, there was something ominous about that…

“…And what happens if someone not me, you, V, Rika, or Rika’s ghost comes in?”

“Just you n me --- Rika and V can go inside,” this time he sang it while drumming out a little beat. “…It just gets messy otherwise.”

“…Something tells me you’re not telling me for a reason.”

“You remember when you rekt Jumin in chat earlier?” there was some reluctance in his voice which betrayed the fact there was more he wanted to say but really couldn’t.

“Yeah.”

“It’s that. I know it’s asking a lot, but you can trust me and V on this.”

Tucking her hair behind her ear, she offered a smile up to the camera. “You’ve got enough dirt on me now that I sort of have to, right?”

“Do you want an honest answer?” he asked, his voice lacked the usual energy.

“Are you at liberty to give me one?”

“TLDR: I found enough to make a professional assessment to categorize you as a non-threat and a single picture. That’s all been secured since then. Right now keeping surveillance on you and tracking down whoever leaked my app, are higher priorities,” his tone was all over the place.

“…I appreciate that, Luciel.”

“…You really shouldn’t.”

Something about the way he said that bothered her. “I do, whether I should or not. While we’re on it, have you slept at all since this all started?”

There was a little chuckle. “You don’t have to worry about me - I’m a living fission reactor who runs off of Ph.D Pepper and Chips – I don’t need sleep! Gonna burn bright and burn out fast! You just worry about the party! Besides, after that steamy date with Jaehee, I doubt you’ll sleep much yourself.”

“Promise me you’ll try to get some rest.”

“Meow…”

“Seven.”

“Meow.”
“Teamwork, meow?” she offered, raising her hand like a paw.

He chuckled and she heard a tap as though he were giving her a fist bump through the screen. “Teamwork! Anyway, give me a call if you need anything.”

“Good night, Seven.”

His voice rather sweetly crooned out what was likely a farewell in a language she couldn’t quite place, although it might have been Arabic, before the line disconnected. After offering a final wave, Miyeon retreated back into the apartment. Within less than 24 hours, knowing someone was on the other side of the CCTV had gone from a source of fear to a source of comfort.
Chapter 7:

Seven'd barely pulled on his earphones and started on the next part of his agency work when his phone’s vibrate function had it slowly colliding into a half empty bag of chips. With surprising deftness, he snatched it up, only to see a decidedly non-agency related name on the other end. It wasn’t the one the hacker wanted to see, but someone still important. Very rare that the opportunity to mess with two people whose reactions amused him came so close together. Either he was very lucky, or this was a set up.

“Helloooo~!”

“Hey!” Yoosung piped back.

The boy probably wouldn’t be so chipper if he knew what would happen to Seven if this particular assignment wasn’t done within the next three hours. Those were the very kinds of reasons he didn’t talk about his job though. He probably had two hours until Vanderwood showed up, stinking the place up with cigarette smoke. Fortunately, talking with Miyeon had put him in a fairly good mood.

“Did you have a nice day at school?” Seven cooed, doing his best to recall the mannerisms of the last person he’d spoken with. Sadly, he couldn’t quite hit the right pitch or sweetness of tone. He found himself matching his keystrokes to the song they’d sung.

“…So you talked to her, right?”

“Her, who? I thought I was the only girl for you!”

“Ummm…. Okay….? So Seven, I’m really nervous right now… Umm… What did she sound like? Do you think she’ll be on LOLOL when I get back to the dorm? She’s probably going to have so many questions about that match and… Ah! What should I say to her?!”

For a solid five minutes he merely let the boy ramble on anxiously while he tried to clear his tracks to hide the breach. It was always fun to see the raw emotion of his friend churning itself into a frenzy, but it puzzled Seven as to why there was already such a display for a person he’d never even seen. Having gone to high school together, Luciel was familiar with these little outbursts over other things. They were always adorable, but this was probably the first time Yoosung’d expressed such interest in a girl since their freshman year. One would’ve thought they were listening to the desperate ramblings of a man who’d just lost the love of his life to a rival. His mind zero’d in on the reasons quickly – this one was replacing Rika in the RFA and they shared one interest.

Zen had said it the night before, “Dude, a girl won’t play that game.”

This one did.
Yoosung was already rambling down a list of things he wanted to maybe do in LOLOL for her before shooting his own ideas down and starting back at square one. Some of them were indeed good suggestions, for people who were already in a relationship… For someone he just met, they screamed of desperation. That was probably his friend’s biggest issue though. Yoosung knew exactly what he wanted to do once he had a girlfriend, but he could never pick one from the girls who’d asked him out. By taking the time to ensure that he found “her”, Yoosung was proving his loyalty to his future girlfriend before they even met. Though it wasn’t something he would ever admit, the hacker knew his friend well enough to understand the way his mind worked.

That approach worked against him more often than not though. Knowing the desired outcome lead to the boy tripping over himself because the stakes of “the game” were always in the forefront of his mind, those expectations would always get in the way. It kept him from asking girls out as he’d second guess himself as to whether or not they were “the one”. He feared that when a girl did finally say yes, there would probably be so much anticipation of how it “should” be that it’d probably scare her off, leading him into obsession as he’d feel as though he were owed her affection. He’d seen it a few times before in people he’d both worked for and worked against… There were probably no less than three requests in his pile at that moment related to jilted lovers who wanted revenge or protection via his agency. Hopefully that day would never come for Yoosung.

Rather Luciel prayed for his friend to find someone who was just as much devoted to the concept of the “ideal” love so that they could be sickeningly, happy together. In fact, he eagerly awaited the call one-day announcing “I’m going to be a daddy, what am I going to do!?” and the hysterics that would likely come. And when that happened, like now, he’d let his friend ramble until he talked himself back into reason with that sweet little laugh once he understood he’d wound himself up over nothing. Yet again, he’d realize that he, Yoosung, was normal and vibrantly alive, doing good things, and that everything would work out.

Seven longed to have problems so common and carefree, but perhaps that’s why they got along so well. He usually enjoyed hearing about the trials and tribulations of someone his own age living a normal life with such passion; it was so very removed from his own day to day. The great challenges and comedies created by his friend over the smallest things amused him to no end. It took his mind off the fact that he now had 2 hours 47 minutes and 38 seconds to get this particular piece done and made it a little easier to accept the possibility of getting tasered for every hour he was late. Vanderwood was rather forgiving, comparatively, to some handlers, but he answered to someone too. That someone would want video showing proof of compliance. Fortunately, his automated scripting had taken care of the worst of it, but there were some things that simply required a maestro’s touch.

It took his friend fussing at him for munching on his chips too loudly to draw his attention back to the lower priority issue…

“What do you think?” Yoosung asked coyly.

“…I think I need to make a sandwich with chips in it; the flavor balance between the umami of the ham, some pickles, and salty, sweet of the chips would probably be aweeeesooooome.”

“Seven! This is serious!”

“It’s a grave situation indeed… Very perplexing, vexing to flex on that lady,” he rapped towards the end tapping out a beat. “First, take a deep breath.” There was a sharp inhalation on the other side. “Okay. Second, let it out.” A dramatic poof. “Third, remember that this is another human being not just a prize to be won, you sexist.”
“I’m not Zen!!! I know that!”

“Four, read Ultimate Player’s Guide.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Okay - Four – alternative for Yoosung and pure hearted, cherry boys…” he offered, sitting back in his chair, pulling his keyboard onto his lap while letting his ankles rest on the desk to make holding the phone on his shoulder a little less painful to his already tense neck.

“Hey!”

“Relax, be your sweet self, and don’t be too pushy,” he continued, undaunted by the interruptions.

“That’s something my mom’d say,” grumbled the student.

“Well it worked for her; didn’t it?”

“…Don’t bring my mom into this…”

“Your mama obviously had game; you wouldn’t be here if she didn’t. So maybe you should listen to her. Besides, Miyeon’s pretty open minded; she already went on a date with Jaehee.”

“What!”?

“Oh yeah, coffee, flowers, cute dress, a little kiss, and everything.”

“No way!”

“Let’s say two of those things happened.”

Yoosung hushed with thought. “So Jaehee met her?”

“You can ask if them don’t believe me.”

“…Do you think she got a picture since you won’t send us the one you have?”

“Dunno.”

“Did Jaehee go to the apartment too?”

“No,” he answered firmly. It was clear where this was going…

“You know… Since Miyeon is there… Do you think V will let me visit now?”

And there it was…

“…You already know what he’s going to say,” he sighed, feeling a little ill that he had to be the “bad guy” again. It was one thing to siphon off funds from someone he’d never meet, but to actually hear the disappointment in a familiar voice always cut him deeper than he wanted to acknowledge. “Miyeon is an exception, but the policy remains in place for everyone else.”

“She didn’t even know Rika though! I mean… What if she steals something or breaks something? She seems nice, but I’m family! I have a right!”
Seven bit his cheek. He’d lost count of how many times this conversation had come up since her death. It hurt, every time… “I’m really sorry, Yoosung.”

“If you were, you’d stop making excuses for V.”

“It’s not easy for me either,” he replied, hearing a breath on the other side that told him that his friend realized he was probably pushing it too much. This conversation was already getting too distracting for him. “… I shouldn’t say this, but there’s nothing stopping Miyeon from talking about the layout of the apartment or Rika’s personal things provided she doesn’t talk about anything classified.”

“You’re right! But she already has a lot on her with us wanting her to do the party too, doesn’t she? Plus she doesn’t really know any of us… And Zen’s probably being creepy already…”

“Bingo~!”

“She must be really scared being there by herself in a new place too… Do you think she has anything to eat for dinner?”

“There isn’t anything there, and she didn’t have groceries with her. So she’ll probably have to go shopping.”

“Really…? Since you know where the apartment is could you at least order something for her? I can pay you back.”

“Should I maybe get her something super spicy to show how passionate you are?”

“…Does she like spicy things?” Yoosung asked thoughtfully. “Hmm… Maybe like pizza? Everyone likes pizza, right?”

“Unless they have allergies, or they’re on a diet.”

“Stop it! You’re making this hard!” the student pouted. “I’ll buy you the new expansion when it comes out if you do this for me, okay? It’s just to help her out. I mean, she went for coffee with Jaehee, so this isn’t weird, right?”

He sat the keyboard back on his desk and returned to a normal sitting position, letting his ankle rest on his knee. His own “flirtations” with her so far were simply to keep that aspect of him sharp should he need it later on; the rest of the RFA was different. They hadn’t even known her a day and were already working against each other as though she were some sort of trinket. There was something else about it still bothered him, but he couldn’t quite place it… On a purely aesthetic level though, Miyeon was short enough for Yoosung to look big next to her. They’d be cute together. He was a nice boy; she was a nice girl. Not that he had anything against Zen or Jumin, it’s just that they didn’t exactly need the help. Perhaps he could mediate – a controlled demolition of sorts. “Okay, since you’re my boy, I got you.”

“Re…Really?”

“Your charitable nature and chivalry have moved me.”

“Luciel! You’re the best!”

“That’s what they say…” the hacker sighed, glancing at his dwindling time. “I
really gotta finish this though, so it’ll be a couple of hours.”

“*Thank you,* thank you, thank you! Just like… Say it’s a welcome present?” he added nervously.

“So, “Here’s pizza, I hope the heartburn you feel is as hot as my love – muah XOXOXO…?” Got it.”

There was an awkward little chuckle. “So… You’re cool if I try to go after her right?”

“Hm?”

“Like, you don’t like her or anything do you?”

“I don’t know her,” he answered apathetically. “As long as it doesn’t cause trouble or interfere with the party, it’s fine.”

“Okay. I just didn’t want to like… make you mad. You’re a really good friend, you know?”

“I’m the best, remember?” he reminded him haughtily. “Anyway, while I appreciate your adherence to the “bro code” I REALLY got to get back to this, or it’s going to be a shocking experience for everyone. Bye bye!”

And with that he disconnected and slid the phone aside, using the freedom of his hand to also grab a chip. There was only the crumbs and tiny slithers that’d cracked off left, which meant pawing out a handful to shovel into his mouth. It was probably unsanitary, but maybe the oil from the chips lubricated his keys and fingers so they moved faster. The body was just a machine, albeit a squishy one… Especially after going without sleep for nearly 48 hours.

After an hour and a half of wrapping things up, he used the restroom, did a quick wash down with a damp cloth, then retreated to the fridge, grabbing two cans of Ph.D Pepper and returned to his chair. Pulling up a streaming service, he let Kitchen Catastrophes play in the background while getting a few preparations made for one of the other large projects he’d been given. Something about listening to Chef RamG go from calm to profanity laced tirades was therapeutic. He’d be softly talking to himself to organize his thoughts before some rather choice words were thrown out, flavoring an otherwise boring bit of analysis with naughtiness.

A warning came from the door below before he heard it quiet, and a familiar voice calling out to him over the earphones.

“Seriously!? Why are there pants in the middle of the…?”

He nursed his can quietly.

There had been a time when he had been too terrified to leave as much as a crumb for fear of being cuffed, tied down, or slapped. Now, it was a small act of rebellion… Sweet, sweet rebellion. Plus he didn’t have the time or energy to bother with it these days.

It was about thirty minutes before the scent of cigarette smoke was adequately mingled with the aroma of burnt dust created by the vacuum cleaner, signaling that he probably needed to take his earphones completely off. He could feel the shift in the air around him as Vanderwood stepped up to the “Control Deck”.

“So?”
Seven tilted his head towards the half hazard pile of completed requests.

“What about that really important one?”

“Had something pop up, but I’m working on it. Don’t worry.”

There was a pop as his handler swirled his neck to loosen the joints, yet it never failed to make his own tighten. Even with training from the agency, he was all too aware of how lacking he was when it came in the department of physical prowess. He was built for speed, not power. There were advantages though, his slight frame worked well for dressing as a female. Vanderwood, on the other hand, was deceptively strong under his coat and long hair, which was why intimidation was often enough to encourage results… “What kind of emergency?”

“Personal.”

“Could it be RFA? You know, I’m being very lenient by even letting you associate with those people.”

“I know,” he replied wearily. “It’s just a little snafu. I finished everything that was due and am actually a little ahead.”

“Who’s the girl?” Vanderwood noted, pointing to the screen.

Seven glanced back up, noticing he’d left the picture of her up. “That’s part of the snafu,” he answered calmly, yet inside he was anything but that. It was one thing for him to be threatened, innocent people was another matter… “She somehow got ahold of the messenger app. So I’ve been sort of doing some digging on her and finding out how.”

“Want me to handle it?”

“No. It’s RFA and honestly, she’s harmless. The people who leaked the app might have an agenda though.”

“You know that’s why most handlers don’t let their people do this sort of stuff, right?”

“Most handlers don’t have the best in the industry either. This is someone looking for the guest info that the former organizer had access to. Really, it’s okay. I have under control.”

“Coming from anyone else, I wouldn’t believe it… Just don’t fuck up and get distracted; I like you, I’d hate to have to break something.”

“You’d have to really pick up after me then,” he chuckled, letting the anxiety slide right off. “Can we stick to maybe a toe? I won’t be able to work if you break my arms or hands.”

Shaking his head, the feminine thug’s head tilted to the pile of cans and empty bags on the desk before he set about tidying them up too. Rather than remain so physically close, Seven retreated with a laptop and the unopened can to the room with the rest of his tech. It was a rather disorganized space to anyone else but was vital to what he did. Vanderwood never ventured into it, as he was too afraid of disconnecting something important… The cold air would help keep him awake.

He was so tired…

Not just physically exhausted, but with the entirety of his being weary of the whole mess.
Elly had it so good…

Seven wanted to shut off the game that was his existence and start fresh. In the next one, he’d be a cat, maybe a huge ginger tom cat who could charm his way into the house of some lonely cat lady. She could carry him around; gently petting his little head and scratching his chin… Rather than yelling, his person would talk to him sweetly just to hear him meow back. She’d let him sleep in the sun all day and get ridiculously fat off cream and leftovers. Every night, he would then roll his tubby self onto the bed cuddle up to his person to show his appreciation. He could then die, having lived a satisfied life.

It probably wouldn’t be that easy for him, even then…

A shivering sigh escaped him, as his fingers dug tighter into the laptop to eke out the warmth emanating from the battery. To be warm and safe… That was all he’d ever wanted, not just for him, but for the other half of him. That was what this was all for right? Was Saeran happy at least? Maybe he had a nice girlfriend and was working on his degree like Yoosung… But he couldn’t know. It seemed so long ago, he sometimes wondered if that had all been just a dream. He was stumbling blindly through the hell of adulthood, just as he had childhood. At least Dante had Vergil… Vergil had a V in it, but V wasn’t exactly guiding him now. Was he just doing it because he could? Was it the money? Was he really enjoying it? Maybe he used to, he didn’t know anymore. Maybe these days he was just waiting for something worth waiting for… Even then, if he found anything like that, it’d never be in his fingers long enough for it to matter. Granted, in the grand scheme of things, it was all sort of a pointless endeavor. The cynical part of him was much louder now…

Pulling his earphones up, he set about doing reconnaissance to shut it up. Hearing the coordinates let the numbers paint his gray world in the way that only he could see.

*So damn tired*…
Chapter Notes

Hello "Sinnamon" rolls. Had a little bit of a delay due to the holiday and some family stuff. This is a longer format chapter. If you have a preference between shorter and longer, please let me know! Also, blame my fiance for making me watch shojou anime to help keep me inspired and the mountain of crappy fan art I've been doodling while I work on future stuff.

I have been sort of mulling around some future ideas if I do an "After Story" like series, and am up for suggestions. I plan to make some use of our alternate model MC's, but your guys feedback is always appreciated. :3 I'm a total slut for feedback and reviews actually. So if you like this, gimme a holla.

**Chapter 8:**

The first order of business for Miyeon was getting a look around to make sure there were no bugs of living and the electric variety. Considering the layer of dust that had built up, it was almost a given that nothing was living in the apartment, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Her first place to check was the bathroom, which she then used to change into more comfortable clothes to work in. Her second place to check was the kitchen, which was a fully equipped beauty of a thing to behold. To her surprise every shelf was empty and the refrigerator was also clear. There were some utensils and silverware left in the drawers, but the rest seemed almost “too clean” to suit her.

As she set about dusting the rest of the space and checking for hidden cameras, it was clear that her initial assessment about Rika hadn’t been far off. The prior owner appeared to have a bit of an obsessive streak when it came to such things; everything was painstakingly organized and maintained, especially the closests. The towel closet in her own home was effective but haphazard; here, it looked like a display case at a store. Rika’s remaining clothes in the sole walk in closet, surrounded by lockers she wasn’t allowed to access, spoke to a slender woman with a feminine flair with the amount of dresses that were in bags organized by color and season. They were a few sizes smaller than what Miyeon thanks to her full hips. There wasn’t a single lazy day outfit anywhere, which spoke to someone who held themselves to a higher standard. Although she did find a few lingering long, wavy strands of blonde hair that likely belonged to the former owner. It was safe to say that part of Rika’s success as an organizer had been due to such a meticulous and appearance conscience nature, although it was a double edged blade often born of anxiety. If she really had ended her own life, it must’ve been to be free of that part of herself.

The price for peace of mind should never have to be so steep…

Miyeon found herself apologizing to the former owner as she moved and dusted things. It wasn’t so much that she believed in ghosts, but it felt disrespectful to not at least extend the courtesy. Even if her staying here was at Seven’s insistence and with V’s permission, this wasn’t Miyeon’s apartment. The apartment belonged to Rika, and she was determined to be a gracious guest.

She didn’t even know how the former owner had passed, or if she’d potentially passed in the apartment itself. Truthfully, the girl did her best not to think about it. Rather, she turned on the
radio and hummed along to keep herself from associating her temporary abode with any negativity. Seven was watching over her; so she was safe.

Zen called as promised, making her turn down the radio as she picked up. He helped pass some of the time as he recounted practice and fuzzed a little about his argument with Jumin while she cleaned the house. Something about hearing him be annoyed made him so very human and adorable that it energized her.

He was audibly sulking. “I knew it too - any day starting with Jumin and rain is going to be a bad one… Please tell me you had a better day, princess. You were moving into the apartment today, right?”

“I did,” she answered. “I got some help though… Jumin sent a car to drop me off a little closer, and Jaehee took me to a little café for a late working lunch,” she confessed.

“Really…? Hmm… Pretty sure you have Jaehee to thank for the ride too,” the pop star pondered aloud, clearly still bitter with the future CEO even being mentioned. “Did you have fun?”

“I did. She was really sweet, although she seems a little protective over you.”

“Really? I guess she’s still getting a feel for you considering how you joined up. You don’t seem like a creepy stalker fangirl though. Oh! Did she get a picture?”

“Not that I’m aware of; it was mostly party business over coffee.”

“Seven hasn’t fixed your ability to send them either, has he?”

“Not yet… To be honest, he seems really busy so I haven’t really been pushing the issue. I don’t think he’s slept this entire time… Does he always work this hard?”

“He probably has to be able to afford the insurance on that brothel of cars… “Zen thought aloud. “You don’t need to worry about him too much though; he’s always been pretty self-sufficient. And with everything going on, your safety is probably a bigger concern, right? I really wish they’d tell us where you were… Being there alone must really be unnerving.”

“To be honest, I always get scared when I’m by myself… But I think I do feel a little better talking to you and knowing that Seven is watching over me helps.”

“I’m glad… You know you can call me if something happens, right? I mean these muscles aren’t just for show; I’ve seen a few scraps in my time, “ his voice was very grave. “…I know you just joined, but you’re one of us now, and we protect our own.”

“You make it sound like a gang.”

“…It’s not too different - actually… Thing is - you’re a girl, and I can tell from your voice you’re not very big, so you’re especially vulnerable right now if there’s a creepy hacker who knows where you are. A camera is nice and fine, but that’s not going to protect you if someone tries to kidnap you.”

“I can be really fierce! Maybe I should protect you?” she teased.

“Heh… Jumin found that out!” he laughed. “It was amazing how you really told him off! I could’ve kissed you!” his voice became very sweet. “I wonder what it’ll be like when we finally meet. You know, I read somewhere that men know whether they will fall in love with someone in under a minute. If we get along half as well as we do in person as we do on the phone…"
The girl nearly dropped the phone as her heart pumped especially hard. Zen’s tone made her ache. “You are gorgeous. I’d go as far as to say you’re painfully handsome; I don’t even know if I could talk if we met face to face,” she replied with a nervous titter.

“Oh? Are you shy?” he observed. “We’ll be friends by then.”

“I hope so… But, to me, there are more important things than looks…”

“Good thing I’m the perfect man. But, out of curiosity, what’s your type?”

“I don’t know that I really have one. To be honest, I’ve never even been on a date.”

“Really…? Wow! You really are like Yoosung! Mind if I ask why?”

“A little,” her voice ebbed. “But since it’s you… After my parents divorced, I sort of became my Dad’s support. He worked all the time to save up for me to go to college. As you can imagine, he wasn’t exactly keen on the idea of me dating… So I guess I sort of kept my head down and focused on school; I didn’t want to disappoint him. I mean, people asked me… But I couldn’t accept. I always felt bad saying “no”, but I really didn’t have a choice. After a while, people just sort of thought I was stuck up, but I was still the girl everyone came to for advice. When I hit college, I guess I knew too much about how people around me were in relationships to want to date them by that point.”

He laughed. “My parents were pretty strict too… So I know how much that sucks. But I will say that you are really easy to talk to… You really listen to people. Knowing that a gem like you hasn’t been picked up makes me want to hold you up and see you shine - show you how fun a date can be! Say! Do you think your dad would object if I wanted to take you out?”

“…It probably doesn’t matter what he’d think much anymore,” she replied, feeling heavy again. “Something like that is really between the two people involved though, right?”

“You’re right! Oh~! Hold up… Man!! The director is calling. Wonder what he needs… Maybe they changed tomorrow’s shoot time,” he sighed. “I have to go, princess. Check in tomorrow?”

“Yes, please. Bye, lovely Zen.”

“Ciao~!”

After two hours of diligent checking for peep holes, vacuuming, and dusting, she treated herself to the patio. The glass door seemed unusually heavy, which made her wonder if there had been any sort of special treatment to it. As it slid open, however, the room filled with the cool, evening air. For a moment, she savored it, closing her eyes and letting her hair waft in the breeze. It wasn’t the best view, but it wasn’t half bad either. There were a few buildings in the way to the front and left side, but to her right the city was below with cars, people, and twinkling lights of various colors. A restaurant of some type must’ve been close by as she caught the smell of something resembling grilled meat along with the usual urban bouquet.

Her phone vibrated against her hip. The thought of who it might be made her heart race. Was Zen out of practice finally? It was already so late. On her phone the clock showed 20:13…
Jumin was calling her. Was he may be mad at her for Jaehee leaving? Tucking her hair behind her ear, she sat on the plush chair of the patio.

“Jumin! Good evening.”

“Good evening…” his voice was as level as she’d imagined, yet deep and compelling. It made her feel very small. “This is, indeed, Jumin Han. Since this is the first time we’ve spoken, I suspect you recognized the name on the display.”

“How was your day?”

“Productive…” he replied curtly. “There’s no need to get too excited. I only called to hear the voice of our new member, nothing else. But I will take one more question. Ask now if you have any.”

Somewhere, there was a harem of beautiful damsels awaiting their sheik with his commanding voice and stoic manner. Exactly what would it take to get his voice above that neutral tone? As much as she was perversely curious, Miyeon bit her lip to stifle that part of herself.

“Well… Since you called to hear my voice… How does it seem to you?”

“Do you want me to judge your voice?” there was no chicanery. “I didn’t anticipate going into detail… But if that is what you want – speak again - slowly.”

There was a part of her that very much felt that taking orders from him could be less work than Jaehee let on… In another setting, it could be quite pleasant indeed.

“Jumin Han, owner of the elegant Elizabeth the 3rd... Like that?” she spoke clearly… He was just a person after all, she told herself. There was nothing to fear from him.

“…I did not expect you to say my name, let alone hers… You are proving to be quiet audacious, between that and our conversation earlier,” he noted thoughtfully. “However, you have asked I judge your voice. There is a person with a voice that hurts my ears when meeting clients. A certain someone whose irksome vibration is akin to shattering glass...”

Part of her knew he was referencing his assistant with the derogatory remarks, yet those were not traits she would’ve personally associated. Then again, they did work together so it was likely that he associated her with unpleasant things. In reality Jaehee’s tone had been relatively demure and sedate, almost excessively so. Then again, a woman’s role in such a position likely required that she at least maintain some appearance of being submissive and perpetually obliging. Miyeon wondered if she had any sort of outlet for pent up emotion; wearing a fake smile for entitled people did not come with some side effects to one’s mental health.

The chairman to be continued. “But your voice is nice; I’d say it’s pleasant enough to listen to at length. There’s perhaps a feline quality to it.”

To anyone else sounding “catlike” might’ve been an insult, but it was clear he associated such terms with positive attributes.

“Really? I’m honored.”

“It is good you understand how much of a compliment that is.”

Miyeon pondered aloud, “I wonder how excited she’ll be to see you. Does she do anything special for when you come home?”
“I said one question… Yet you’ve dared to ask a third.” She could hear the smile despite his commanding tone… It, likely, was a subtle change to match his neutral manner. “Though the topic is not objectionable, it must be the last. Elizabeth the 3rd normally greets me with a song before wrapping herself around my ankles. There she remains until I pick her up.”

“You’re lucky to have such a wonderful companion.”

“Indeed. Perhaps I will send you a picture once I arrive at the penthouse; you seem to recognize her appeal. It occurs to me that I can handle one last bit of business for the evening since I have you on the line. Assistant Kang confirmed that you have already been productive in your role and have been properly informed of your responsibilities therein. Do not hesitate to reach out to her should you need further assistance, as I do not enjoy being bothered unless there is good cause.”

“Understood.”

“Should you do well, know that my offer of an internship may also be opened to you as it was for Yoosung.”

“That’s very generous of you, but for now, I’d like to focus on ensuring that this party is a success for the people who need our help.”

“Good. I leave it in your capable hands.”

“I will not disappoint you.”

“It is good to have confidence. Know that you haven’t thus far, although it would be unwise to do so in the future,” he answered without malice; it was as though he were merely stating a law of the universe.

“You act as though I would ever do so intentionally,” Miyeon joked softly.

“As a person who seems to possess some prudence, you are not likely to do so… But there are many who do not seem to be nearly as… astute… as you. That being said, I really must bring this call to an end. It has been an unexpectedly agreeable experience, seldom does time pass so quickly when I am having a discussion. I will perhaps call upon you again.”

“You’ll likely have to for the party,” the girl reminded him playfully. “Have a safe trip the rest of the way home and please give Elizabeth the 3rd an extra scratch under the chin for me.”

“I will inform her of your request and see if she will permit it. Good night, Miyeon.”

“Good bye for meow, Jumin.”

She checked the messenger app to find a missed chat, mainly related to excitement about the party and wondering when a date would be. Rather than give into the temptation of joining in, Miyeon found that talking with Jumin had given her an odd sense of motivation. In the back of her mind, it was easy to imagine him as the lord of the manor, delegating out responsibilities. That was likely how he understood his interactions with others. One was either beneath him or could be swayed to be in service to him… Coupled with a lifetime of those seeking to ingratiate themselves for selfish gain and others who wanted to tear into the estate and chop off his head, Jumin likely had very little experience in normal human interactions. It was almost pitiful, but no man wanted to be
told that. Rather, it made her want to nurture the compassionate, warm side of him that had long been neglected. Perhaps then he and Zen could get along. That made sense to her on a few levels…

He didn’t seem to have much animosity towards Zen as much as an almost perverse sense of amusement at poking the idol. It wasn’t unlike a cat who idly swats at a passing dog. It wasn’t that he perceived Zen as a threat; he merely thought of it as a bit of sport. Someone who wasn’t interested in impressing him was a rarity to be exploited for its novelty. The scale tipped back towards Zen, whose ardent dislike was justified.

Before Miyeon could ponder it further, the doorbell rang, startling her.

A tense few seconds passed as she agonized over what to do next. As the second sounding of the bell echoed through the apartment, the girl had managed to pull out a can of pesticide to use as a potential weapon before edging over to the door. Seven was supposed to be keeping watch, so either the person at the on the other side was safe or something had happened to her ADHD angel. Discreetly, Miyeon peeked through to see a man in a delivery uniform… She hadn’t ordered anything.

With a careful motion, to offset her quivering hands, she dialed Seven’s number.

“Guten Ta__Grr__ Ya-ello?”

“Luciel… There’s someone at the door…” she murmured softly.

There was a moment of rustling and whooshing before she heard him come back on the line. “Miyeon…?” somehow he managed to sound pleased and uncharacteristically annoyed while saying her name. “Yeah, it’s just… Ah! I forgot to tell you, didn’t I?” A desperate, audible wince escaped him. “Yoosung thought you might be hungry so he had me order you dinner...” he groaned. “Ah ta ta-AH! You might wanna open up before he goes!”

She sat the phone aside before opening the door a portion and calling the delivery person back. Although he seemed a little annoyed at having to wait then stop and wait again, Miyeon’s apology and graciousness smoothed some of it over. Sitting the box on the bed near the door, the girl peeked up at the security camera as the pizza man disappeared behind the elevator doors. Holding the phone back up to her ear, she lifted the receipt.

“Yoosung falls for you and wishes on himself that one day you will bear his children. Ex-Oh-Ex-Oh – star – muah- ha ha~,” Miyeon read aloud, doing her best to mimic Seven’s voice.

There was a little snort from him. “You al_most have it, just a bit deeper.” After another try, the girl went into a coughing fit before clearing her throat. This time he was laughing heartily… It really was infectious; she was giggling herself after a bit of sputtering.

“Meow,” she croaked, her voice raspy from going so low. “That was really sweet of both of you. Him for thinking of it and you helping. Thank you so much!”

“You don’t have to thank me… Yoosung is probably waiting for you to get online though, so you should…”

“…Before you go, I meant to ask…”

“This line has been disconnected because Seven is very busy and wants to talk but can’t…” The girl smiled up at the camera, while tucking her hair behind her ear. Another minute passed before she heard a nervous little hum. “…You’re still there…? I mean… Beep… Beep…”
Miyeon leaned back against the door frame as he did an impression of boring hold music. She couldn’t help but laugh a little. “…Beeeeeeep… Your food is g-g-going to get c-c-cold,” he observed, feigning a chill. He seemed to be almost whispering now.

“It’ll be fine.”

Another moment of quiet, it sounded as though he had his hand over the receiver.

After making sure no one else was in the hall, she did a portion of the dance he had her do earlier. “God Seven, for your continued blessings - meow… And a small prayer from this humble shrine maiden that you don’t skip dinner.”

There was a frustrated, awkwardwhine and a distressed grunt before he continued to speak in hushed tones, “God Seven is pleased and will consider this prayer - meow.”

“Seven… Promise me,” she answered, her voice nearly pleading.


The line went dead before she could even ask what it was he’d said or even what language it had been. His tone lacked the usual variance and had a softly bittersweet cadence to it near the end, despite the rough edges of the words being spoken. Even though it hadn’t even been a day, Miyeon was positive she could pick out his voice in a room by the sheer frenetic nature of it. The three times they’d spoken via phone he was almost never “himself” when he first picked up, but there was still something distinctly “him” about their calls. Towards the end of this call though he seemed like a 2D picture of his usual 11 to 36 dimensions. There was an effort to sound like “him”, but it was almost forced. Could it just be because he was tired?

As she re-entered the apartment, closing the door behind her, it occurred to her that he wasn’t just being playful. She’d called at a bad time… If he really was a hacker, it wasn’t like he had a day job with regular hours. Like a doctor, he was probably on call at all hours for any number of dubious things. There could potentially be people after him either for breaking the law along with unsavory people who wanted his services for any number of horrible things. She wanted to think of him as like Robin Hood, a gallant digital bandit who took advantage of big corporations and caused some amusing mischief, but the reality was probably very far from that. Her mind replayed any number of the horror stories she’d read on forums about “scary hackers” as he’d called them.

And here she was being friendly with one… It was hard not to be that way with Seven though… He seemed sincere and almost boyish. From what she could tell so far, he had seemingly gone out of the way to be honest with her when he could, although one had to read between the lines.

While the girl took out a few slices and ate at the table, it was hard not to replay the call in her mind. Perhaps he really had been covering the phone, and the other language was because he was expecting a client to call. Then again, he had been as quiet as possible and seemed to want her to leave him alone, but at the same time, his double talk said it all. He wanted to talk to her more; he just couldn’t without putting on some sort of act in another language at the end. Was something there
with him and he was pretending to talk to someone he was working for? It reminded her of just how
dangerous and fool hardy she was in coming here.

Maybe he really was just playing with her to see her reactions…

The slices she’d eaten were rendered flavorless under the anxieties that started to pile back
up in her. She’d checked the apartment for cameras, Ms. Park would be watching her own house,
and it wasn’t like she didn’t have contacts to some of her old friends if things got really weird.
Should something scary happen, there were options. That didn’t mean that she wouldn’t have the
pesticide near her when bedtime came though… Maybe a knife tucked behind the pillow so she
could grab it if the need be. If something really bad were going to happen it’d probably be that night.
Then again, they could just be using her as a decoy for something else.

This was why Miyeon hated being alone…

Her imagination and inner voices were her refuge and yet her worst enemies.

Maybe Rika heard them as loudly as she did.

What if she was hearing the former owner’s demons in her own thoughts?

A chill went through her, making her feel the sudden need for human contact. She pulled
up the messenger again. Even if they were still relatively unknown factors, it was better than the
voices in her own head. There had been a chat between Jumin and Jaehee about their meeting that
was to the point but also laid out the general plan. The biggest issue was still the date. V hadn’t been
in the chat since the night before and no one else apparently felt bold enough to suggest one… Jumin
broached the topic but it was short lived topic as the chairman to be was talking about work related
things too. For all the good will he had seemingly established in his prior call, he quickly displayed
his inhumanity again by loading Jaehee up with requests for the next day without as much as a
“please” or “thank you”. No good deed went unpunished, it seemed.

She grabbed another slice and wrote out a message to Jaehee. Though the majority of her
intention was concern and benevolent, part of it was to see if this was all still an elaborate ruse.

“Thank you so much for earlier. It was rather fun to meet you, even if it was pre-
party planning. We should do it again when you have some free time! Tomorrow will likely be busy,
but I’ll be cheering for you! Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. Also there will be
updates made to the spreadsheet once I finish getting settled in; I’ll try to start making calls out to
some of the contacts you gave me tomorrow, but if you need to vent or someone to pick you up
lunch – give me a jingle. I owe you one! :D”

In her box was also the password to the apartment WIFI and the door lock sent from Seven
from hours before. The internet password, apparently, would change daily and the door lock along
with it. Neither of them were easy to recognize, rather they were strings that rivaled a sentence with
the amount of characters and symbols. Even then, he had it noted for her to use a code that her
messenger app would generate twice a day to verify that it was her. It did make her feel safer,
although it was annoying… The only thing seemingly missing was a retinal scan, fingerprint reader,
an offering to a shrine, and blood test. She found herself replying to him to say as much.

“So my blood type is O+ if you plan on putting in a feature that requires blood
typing too. O.o.”

After putting the pizza away and tidying up a little, the girl set up her laptop on the small
table in the kitchen. Miyeon dug around the bag with her electronic equipment until finding her
headphones and slung them around her neck as she started the boot up process. It was a familiar scene: one lonely girl in a sweatshirt, leggings, putting her hair into a messy bun while preparing for an evening of solo gaming like the nerd she was. The difference was it was a new place with a can of pesticide and knife nearby for protection… Her eyes searched the kitchen as she waited to connect.

Was she really going to even be here long enough to justify going grocery shopping? She could maybe play it day by day…

Logging into LOLOL was easy enough, although she found her character in one of racial starting areas likely due to the transfer. Her items were intact, but there was way more gold in her account than she remembered having. Specifically, it was 912911521521, which was almost pushing the limit of the maximum amount even allowed in game… Her armor looked the same, but when she pulled it up, all of it was top of the line for her level, but the textures had been changed to resemble her old gear. It was enough for her to tilt her head, screen cap, and scribble down the number for later. She wasn’t sure if it was something she wanted to report to the game staff, to Seven, or something to keep quiet about… It could just as easily get her banned as anything…

The pink text for a private message flashed in the chat window.

SupermanYoosung: Miyeon?

ZhilaohuMD: Hi hi, Yoosung!

ZhilaohuMD: Thanks for the pizza, btw! ^-^ It was delicious.

SupermanYoosung: OMGURWELCOME!!!:D

SupermanYoosung: 1secmob

ZhilaohuMD: >:D Show no mercy!

A few moments passed as she took the time to find an in game bank to check her inventory. That, at least, appeared unaltered. It was about ten minutes before another response came.

SupermanYoosung: Sosry!!! guild mate had a rare mob spawn.

ZhilaohuMD: Which one?

SupermanYoosung: U know the seahorse that drops the mount in sapphire lagoon?

ZhilaohuMD: Did it actually drop a mount for them? :3

SupermanYoosung: not this time. ;; stingy fish… next time tho!!!

SupermanYoosung: so since im free now~! lets run a dungeon! :D

ZhilaohuMD: Are you sure? I’m only lvl 73.

SupermanYoosung: that’s OK! U won’t even have to heal me until we start getting to level 90 ones. I can totally power level u! :D i solo thm for practice!

ZhilaohuMD: I accept, but only on the condition I help you level any alts. :D

SupermanYoosung: maybe we can level some together!!! how does Yntumal Springs sound? i know it’s level 88, but I’ll keep u safe. :D
ZhilaohuMD: “Safety dance” place, right? Dungeon with the randomly spawning rare invisible dragon that takes 20 people to take down? O.o
SupermanYoosung: he never spawns tho; ive only seen him lik twice, so it’ll be okay! got hdst?
ZhilaohuMD: I do.
SupermanYoosung: YAY!!!sendinginvite~!

The invitation came through, and for the first time, she heard his voice. It was pure, gentle, and bright like the rain that formed a Spring rainbow.

“Miyeon? Can you hear me okay?”

“Yoosung~! Hello~!”

A pure, bubbly laugh filled her ear piece. “Hello~! Ah! I’m so nervous!”

Now she all she could imagine was a precious little golden lab puppy who barked rainbows…

“Me too, a little,” she confessed. “Hey, I can do the port if you want; I have a LOT of tokens stocked up.”

“Ok!”

For the first thirty minutes or so, they simply talked strategy before actually getting into the dungeon. The fact that she could cast a protective bubble around herself and him if the need arose was rather handy. He admitted that normally he ran characters who were all out attackers, and so he’d gotten used to having to be extra careful. With the souped up gear she had, however, she was probably on par with the people at level 90 with midgrade armor. They were making good progress for a two person team in a ten person dungeon. He was the crazy sort of tank who would pull an entire hall onto himself, but unlike most, he could actually handle it.

“I don’t hear your keyboard,” he observed with a puzzled tone. “You’re not a clicker, are you?”

“…There’s nothing wrong with being a clicker!” she pouted.

He sounded a little intimidated. “There isn’t! It’s just that they’re usually really slow, but you’re like lightning! I think we can maybe try a higher level between the two of us,” he clarified with a reassuring little titter. “I’m surprised you aren’t in the rankings.”

“I haven’t had time to really had time to play in a while. And I get too competitive to do PVP… Kinda threw my chair after I got stalked and repeatedly stun locked by a rogue while my computer was lagging in randoms once,” she admitted sheepishly. “Rather not do it again…”

“Girls actually rage like that!? You sound too cute to be so fierce,” he mused. “It’s okay though, from now on, I won’t let anyone mess with you like that.”

“Thank you, Yoosung~! I’ll protect you too! Mobs at 8:00~!”

“On it!”

They worked surprisingly well as a team. Before too long they were at the final section of
the dungeon. It was a large cavernous tunnel that lead to the Yeti that guarded the treasure chest at the end of the instance. Miyeon was careful to cast the cloaking spells before they began to set across just in case the rare spawn dragon would sometimes appear.

“He won’t spawn; you don’t have to worry about recasting that,” Yoosung assured her as they were nearing the end of the tunnel.

“...I’d rather be safe than so...”

Their earphones filled up with a loud roar as a wall of green and violet fire emerged between the two of their avatars.

“AH!!! It’s actually him! Miyeon, are you okay!!?”

“I bubbled! If we run, we can use the animation for the final boss to get him to despawn!”

“...I think we can take him,” his voice was calm. “Miyeon, we can do this!”

“Yoosung, no no no!”

He ran in, drawing the dragon’s aggro off her, just before the protective barrier on her avatar broke. She whined while desperately trying to recast her regeneration and mana HOT’s in order to keep Yoosung alive for a few minutes hoping he’d realize how futile it was... That turned into twenty minutes of sheer, stinging panic as she walked the tight rope of healing him and conserving mana for huge heals.

“ARE YOU CRAZY!?”

He was like a general facing death with a legion of his best men: Noble, brave, and relentless.

But they were still alive... And the dragon was a fourth of his health bar down. He wasn’t going to quit until it was a loot window.

Miyeon’s heart raced in her ears as the adrenaline in her system spiked. Death in game meant losing XP, which meant potentially losing a level. If he died, that could mean hours of work to get back to where he could wear his gear. It could also potentially disqualify him from the next round. All of that would be her fault, but it was a seemingly impossible battle! Even with him giving it his all, there was a limit to how quick he could pop cool downs. The world around her seemed to freeze as her mind fell into a state of focus on her rotations and avoiding the add mobs that the dragon spawned in.

She just had to focus...

Despite his avatar being kissing distance of the dragon, the blonde had a great feel of the battle field and had no trouble calling out where to move, although she was usually ahead of him thanks to a few of her add ons. Leadership seemed to come quite naturally to him. He was positive, even if it seemed bleak when the monster hit 25% health and went into a rage mode. Yet, they fought harder, having found their second wind. Her brave general shone like a beacon.

Yoosung really was amazing at this game!

After a nearly 2 hour ordeal, the invisible dragon shattered into crystals and the victory theme chimed in followed by Yoosung and Miyeon shouting together in joyous victory. She could’ve hugged him, but instead contented herself to hugging herself, before chugging down the
remainder of the bottle of water she’d set aside. Her entire body was drenched in sweat from the sheer intensity of the fight. It seemed wrong to loot the beast, but they did anyway.

“He dropped the account bind heirloom sword!” Yoosung announced.

“All yours!”

“You’re the one who probably needs an upgrade; you can have it.”

“No one is going to believe we pulled that off – you should keep that as proof! Plus if we level alts together, it’ll be useful.”

“...You promise you’ll keep playing with me, right? And that you won’t leave the RFA?”

“I promised you that before!” she fussed. “I already owe you anyway... You had Seven order me that pizza and you were helping me level. So I’ll feel really hurt if you don’t accept it. Take it before I dismantle it for crafting mats!”

His bubbly laugh filled her headset. “Okay... But only because that was so intense I’m too tired to argue.”

They ended up hanging out together for another hour in game before she signed off. After having experienced such an intense battle, they ended up porting to a little hub town and just chatting about things ranging from where they’d each gone to school to his cousin. It became very clear to her just how important Rika had been to the entire RFA and to him. There was clear resentment towards V, although Miyeon wasn’t going to weigh in on that due to the fact she didn’t know nearly enough to make a fair assessment. Rather, she listened, which seemed to be enough for him. Unlike Zen, Yoosung was friendly and warm, without being overtly flirty. It was comforting without being oppressive, although it was still very clear he was curious about her and the possibilities.

“It’s been really fun, Yoosung, but I really gotta get ready to lay down so I can start making contacts for the party.”

“Yeah... I’ll keep a look out too for potential guests. See you on the messenger tomorrow?”

“Heck yeah! Try to lay down at a decent hour so you don’t oversleep through your test!”

“Yes, ma’am! Good night, Miyeon!”

“Goodnight, Yoosung!”

With that, she logged out, beaming ear to ear. In a lot of ways, the two of them had so much in common. He felt so familiar already. Rather than heading immediately to bed though, she took a quick shower and returned to the laptop to check over her e-mails for the formats Jaehee had promised earlier. Miyeon sat about the task of converting the information from the docket into it first. She made it three pages in before her phone vibrated with message from 707.

In response to her message joking about adding a blood test to the internet access earlier in the day, he’d sent:

“urfiercebutsureurnotA?4a”confident”0uhideurfacebehindyourhairalotLOL”
He wasn’t wrong…

“Didn’t take you to be the type to believe in blood type compatibility. So what blood type are you?” she wrote back.

“Ph.D. Pepper, but I need regular infusions because I have a terrible disorder where my body turns it into blood… It’s pretty scary,” he replied with picture of three cans, one of which turned over, a bag of Honey Buddha Chips, and a Pego man with a surprised expression being held up at the bottom of the screen by a pair of slender fingers. A second message soon followed. “01100001 01100010 01000010 01010100 01010111”

Miyeon recognized the binary but had to pull up two translators to confirm it was AB, with a BTW at the end. It was a rare detail about himself. “01101100 01101111 01101100” was her initial reply before she wrote out a second one. “Guess if we ever end up in an emergency situation, it’s good to know I can be a donor for you. We could use the chat feature instead of private messages, you know? :/”

“8Dmehbehl8rightnowushuldgetsomezzzs”

“You’re one to talk… Your brain basically defrags when you sleep. Your cells use it as a chance to remove waste products; your brain is swimming in poison right now.”

“srsly?!80” Another PM followed shortly after. “T_Tiwant2butcant”

“If you won’t lay down, maybe some fresh air would help?”

“chained2thedeskw/work”

“Do I need to come get save you?”

“LOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLO…yshalpmePlz…;” A reply followed. “iswhatidsayifineededhelpbutimfine8D”

The girl sighed and found herself dialing his number before she could help herself. There was an almost maternal instinct in her that roused seeing him be so pathetic. It was more surprising to her when he actually picked up. Plus, she didn’t want to get back to the spreadsheet just yet.

“Are you free?” she mewed cautiously.

“Well… I can be had, but I’m not cheap. How much are you willing to pay?” Luciel asked, his voice portraying a very “cool” customer indeed. The exhaustion was even more obvious now.

“A mutual exchange of intel for services may be more suitable for my superiors,” she replied, doing her best to feign a voice more elegant than her own. By now Miyeon knew it was better to just play along with him; it was definitely more fun to. “Quid pro quo.”

There was a soft puff as he likely was flashing the same mischievous, grin he had in his profile picture albeit likely wearier. “That can be arranged… But is the intel really worth my time? To be honest, I could have my way with your systems; with just a brush of my fingers I could get anything I want.”

Miyeon felt the entendre and felt more encouraged delve into the spy role play a little deeper. It was stimulating on a few levels. His tone was decidedly more collected and had a polished edge.
“Hmm… Maybe I have neglected your needs. You know certain… amenities can be afforded to those who cooperate. Surely there are certain… assets you wish to gain access to, Agent 707,” Miyeon noted, stringing her syllables out sensuously. Women in movies like that were usually femme fatales, right? Subconsciously she was already twirling her hair in her fingers to complete the scene. There were no cameras to catch it though.

“Gah!” Seven then hissed as though he were in pain before a groan escaped him. “I’m really not going to be able to sleep now…!”

She felt strangely satisfied. There was her friend…

“Too pro!!! Maybe I need to do a better background check on you,” he pondered aloud. He spoke in such a way that exaggerated the suspicion roused.

“Mission “Keep 707 Awake” accomplished! But I guess I get a penalty for encouraging more work.”

“Ha! Ha! Urm… Ugh…Hey… Maybe you could talk to me some more while I work as a bonus level. I don’t usually get an opportunity to chat, but the line was just resecured so it should be okay for a little,” his voice trailed off. “… You could tell me a story or about your first day.”

“Won’t that put you to sleep?”

He hummed in disagreement before his usual cadence popped in, but clearly at half energy. “It’ll be like having a show on in the background. Only interactive! So I’ve totally already burned through my favorite new shows and two audiobooks in the past 48 hours… Binged them… I don’t have any time to look for new stuff right now,” he was starting to pout a little as his voice crackled into a little whine.

“Hmm, let me see… You have headphones or something so your neck won’t get stiff?”

“Ya.”

“I could probably read you a little something… I mean, you know nothing really interesting happened.”


“Oh! Here we go… Have you read “The Little Prince” before?”

“Nope.”

The girl began to read a copy she’d pulled up on her phone after setting it to speaker. After the first chapter, she paused after hearing him yawn. “This isn’t boring you, is it?”

“No…! Keep reading ~!”

Although Miyeon only got through four chapters in total as she took time to describe the drawings that accompanied the story, ending with: “And here you’ll have to forgive me. My friend never explained anything. Perhaps he thought I was like himself. But unfortunately I cannot see a sheep through the sides of a crate. Maybe I am a little like the grownups; I must’ve grown old.” The girl had to pause as another yawn escaped her. She took the phone off speaker. “I’m sorry, Luciel… Getting too sleepy to read.”
An affectionate chuckle escaped him before there was a ponderous noise. “I wonder what asteroid 707 is like…”

“Probably has digital clouds floating above lakes of Ph.D.Pepper with roving herds of cats who play in fields of catnip and tigerlillies… And trees with chips as leaves among fields lined with binary roads for your cars,” she murmured, curling up on the bed.

“Think so?”

“Mmm hmm…” Miyeon yawned wearily, simply letting the phone rest on her ear.

“…I like your version.” There was a stunted chuckle. “Why this story, eh?”

“You seem like the sort of person who could see a lamb in just a picture of a box. Some of the chapters later on sort of remind me of the people in the RFA too… But also seeing how the RFA interacts sort of reminds me of a family, which made me nostalgic. When I was little, my big brother would read this to me and “The Little Mermaid”.”

“Gah! Isn’t the Little Mermaid the one where she dies at the end with a broken heart?”

“Yeah, sort of, in the original version.”

“Was it to punish you for being bad? Was little Miyeon really naughty!?”

She giggled. “Nothing like that! But I guess I never really understood how sad they were then,” her voice trailed off… If she’d been observant, she might’ve realized so much more of why he loved those stories so much… Especially “The Little Mermaid…” ” I guess I just liked that Jun was sharing and spending time with me. We read Frankenstein and Dracula together. And watch scary movies – anything with zombies or vampires or werewolves! I’ve always sort of laugh at the really scary and gory things in shows though; I might be a bit weird.”

He didn’t say anything to that for a long while, but she could hear the sounds of him typing in the background. Rather than talk and potentially distract him, the girl pulled up her original spreadsheet and worked on converting it over to the new one. After a little there was a weary sigh from her new friend, “One more done! And now I can focus on catching that damned filthy cockroach hacker thanks to the power of new born friendship!”

“Yay~!”

“Yahoo!”

Miyeon sang a few words from a magical girl anime opening theme song which she was surprised to hear him join in on. They got through about a verse before they stopped to just chuckle at the other.

“So cute… I wish I could have that as a ringtone for when you call, but I can’t ever… Ugh…”

“I can do it again if you really want.”

“I can’t!” he whined.

 “…By the way… Something interesting did happen earlier. Luciel - did you mess
with my LOLOL account?”

He gasped dramatically. “Someone stole your gold? Why are you blaming me!? I told you to be careful, didn’t I? AAAH! Call an admin – get the banhamma!”

“I actually had more gold… And really, REALLY nice gear that’d been changed to look like my old stuff.”

“That’s a really nice account thief or a bug? Praise the Lord!”

Miyeon smirked. “Praise God Seven and his meme chariot pulled by cats, maybe.”

“That’s Freja – not me… You know, God Seven, much like “God” God – works mysterious ways – small drops of good that ripple out to spread as much happiness as he can… Er… With the occasional spawning of a rare mob in a dungeon upon the brave Superman Yoosung and a certain adorable cleric.”

“I knew it!”

“Can’t help it! I see him doing something nice and I just wanna mess with him! And I was feeling sort of meh and messing with him makes me all YAAAAY~! But he has skills, right?! He wanted to get you pizza and he was so cool taking on that big dragon alone~! He’s awesome, right? You’ll have his babies, right?”

“Haha – no… No, babies with men I just met… But he certainly knows how to put up a good defensive wall and how to work his class, I’ll give him that. It’s really hard to find a good tank; his guild should be counting their lucky stars he’s so talented. Seriously he can’t be human and even with add ons that’s just incredible.”

“Yar – beep boop - click click… For reals, I do worry about my boy, Yoosung. I wish he’d focus more on real stuff. Games are fun, but only for so long. I mean, I’m married to the world binary numbers so I have to stay near my computer or she gets lonely… He’s different. He needs real people, not digital ones.”

“You’ve not exactly been subtle in pushing me to spend time with him.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing? Why would I do that?”

“…Rika’s death probably hit him harder than anyone talks about, and since we’re all sort of the same age, you want me to try helping him work through it maybe?”

“Ding!”

“…You’re actually really nice, you know that?”

“Eh… Not really. Just parroting what I’ve seen on TV shows; humans are weird so I have to watch TV to study their behavior.”

“That’s true… Humans are weird… But I think you understand people better than you’re letting on. You’ve been working so hard for all of us… I hope you realize how much I appreciate you’re doing.”

“You know, I’m sure God Seven’ll just hopes you’ll stay in the group and do a good job on the party. And hopes that you don’t break his friends’ hearts… Or his. Ba-bump.”
Her cheeks blushed. “Seven, not you too.”

“Gotta keep the blade sharp,” he noted as though he were quoting from an old samurai movie. “Look but don’t touch! I’m dangerous.”

Miyeon chuckled. “Don’t worry; you already know, I didn’t join because I wanted to talk to pretty, “dangerous” boys…”

“I’m pretty?!”

“Would you prefer handsome?”

“Ah! She thinks I’m handsome! Meh… Zen is hotter though, and he got dat pheromone that be driving all the honeys craaazaay. Sure he isn’t your type?”

“…I don’t really have a type…”

“But you said you were O…”

“… You know what I mean! But that’s not why I’m here… I just want to help people and do good, and if the party lets me do that – that’s enough... So if you work in the shadows, I’ll work in the light, and we’ll make a miracle happen!”

“You’re so responsible and cool when you say things like that! Like a magical girl or one heroine in that marionette drama Skyclash: Reverie! We should totally have a fight to the death like Yoosung and the dragon! Have at you!”

“Swish!”

“Swoosh! – Ha ha! Missed!”

“Somersault – flip - Clink!!!”

“My sword! AAAARG! My arm!”

“Sorry, oppa! I’ll put a bandaid on it!”

“Gah!!! Now my nose is really bleeding! All my Ph.D. Pepper blood, all over the ground, sticky, sticky all over the place!”

“That’ll attract ants!”

“Eew! Bugs!”

“But ants are cute…”

“Nuu! Bugs are bad! Especially the kind I need to start resetting things to guard against here in a minute,” he sighed. “But !!! You woke me up, so I can get a few more hours of searching done before crashing. Woo! Ughn… But, Meowie-eon, my pillow looks so soft ~. “Come let’s cuddle” it says.”

“Be strong, don’t let it tempt you with honey’d words!”

“You’re right,” he groaned. “I shall not be deceived…! For I am the Defender of Justice, master of the night! But you… You, Miyeon, should really get some sleep; you’ve got a party to plan so my hunt for evil will be rewarded!”
“I won’t let your sacrifice be in vain, 707!” she answered solemnly. “You **will** sleep soon though, right?”

A nervous laugh escaped him. “You seem really eager to get me to bed… Ah! Heh… Eh… I mean I’ll lay down as soon as I can! I promised! Although I might just end up sleeping with the keyboard… Then she’ll be my mistress – Binary and Elly can never know of this sin! Ugh… Nite nite.”

“Bye bye~!”

As the line disconnected, Miyeon sat in the silence of the apartment with only the hum of the air conditioner to break the stillness. How strange it was to be able to talk to people all day, yet still end up alone at the end…

Despite having washed the sheets to make sure they were totally clean, slipping into the bed felt alien and perverse. The scent of cherry blossom perfume from the former owner seemed to come back with a vengeance, making her feel a little spooked. With real people who potentially wanted to harm her, a ghost seemed silly, but sometimes it was hard to fight such childish fears. She had a knife and can of pesticide nearby to harm a physical attacker, but there wasn’t much she could do against a ghost without an exorcist on call…

Miyeon drew a circle of salt around the bed just incase…
Happy holidays, everyone!

I am so sorry this chapter took so long to get out and is kind of short. Next chapter we’ll be on mission with 707 on day 3 though, so that should make up for it! I’ll also be starting some groundwork for “after story” stuff here soon… ( mwaahahaha )

! I had some IRL stuff going on which sort of kept me from keeping up to my usual schedule. Plus the Christmas DLC came out, which I’m sure we’ve all been busy with! For the record, I did try to do some really lame art of Miyeon with her Christmas bouquet. For those who are curious, her bouquet would probably have been Forget-Me-Not flowers. The symbolism of such a bouquet matches her nicely on a few levels... I would recommend looking into it. Although I will confess to having hidden in some other little messages throughout the story in a few previous chapters. I may be putting little things like that in more.

I’m hoping to have Chapter 10 out pretty quickly after this as things should be picking up as we get farther along. We get to see the first real “spark” of "something" next chapter... :O

:3 I am really considering trying to set up a schedule though so we don’t have anymore long spaces between chapters like this.

As you know, I'm always open to suggestions and feedback. Stay warm, have fun playing, and have a safe end of the year, everyone.

You're all amazing~!

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Chapter 9:

It was so bright out that it was hard to see where she was swinging the branch, and though she couldn’t quite feel it, something told her that each strike was making contact. A lithe frame moved along with her, parrying and swiping with a chuckle like a babbling brook as they had the advantage in height and grace. She desperately wanted to look up to see the full face but something kept her from it. Somehow it was always just out of her reach.

Eventually her vision changed to looking up through a canopy of leaves that sun peeked through as they waved. The face she desperately wanted to see was all obscured by the light of the canopy except for the silhouette of short waves of hair. Something about it scared and saddened her… Her body felt numb and weighed as though her clothes were wet.

“Do you think it’s okay if a prince kisses another prince?”
“Why wouldn’t it be?” she asked, sincerely perplexed.

A hand lightly patted on her head.

“So… You wouldn’t be mad if I married a prince, right?”

“I don’t know… Is he going to take you away to his castle…?”

“Maybe one day,” the voice sounded wistful and happy.

“…I can come too, right?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t ever leave you behind!”

Suddenly the grass below her grew into tendrils of ensnaring sea weed. The glimmers of light that playfully skipped along the surface tension soon ebbed into blackness. Her body became cold and heavy as she was pulled her deeper and deeper into the depths without as much as an angler fish to light her way. Her lungs burned with a hunger for air and her heart ached for something much less corporeal.

Liar…

Big brother is a liar…

*****

Miyeon woke with her forearms covering her face and found the sheets gnarled around her tight. The animal part of her brain wanted to desperately flail to free herself, but she managed to control her impulses as she untangled legs. Her sleep had been light and fitful judging by the disarray of her bedding. Looking towards the patio, she could see a grey sky with light rain falling. Nothing would’ve pleased her more than to curl back up under the blankets and feel sorry for herself, but there were more important things to do.

“Good morning, everyone! I hope everyone made it to work, school, and practice alright! I’ll be busy touching base with contacts, but I’ll be checking chat regularly~! ^-^”

She almost wished she had one of Seven or Yoosung’s “pumped” emoji’s to sprinkle in, but for now at least she was stripped to a barebones sort of layout. Maybe that would be her official sign of acceptance into the group…? The personalized emoji’s seemed catered to each person based upon their temperament, which made her wonder exactly what sort of moods Seven would pick to portray her. Something told her the “kitty” dance she had to do to get into the apartment would likely feature, but only the two of them would likely appreciate the full meaning of it. Just remembering it made the ache in her heart from her dream the night turn into a smile.

Seven really was awesome…

After leaving that message she sat down at her improvised work station with a cup of coffee and some breakfast while bringing up the first few options for a venue. While Rika’s old computer and work area was towards the back of the apartment, Miyeon felt wrong disturbing it. Instead the girl had pulled a little end table towards the corner where the wall met the sliding door. From here she could look outside and open it just a bit so that there was air circulation. She’d have the white noise of the world outside and street below to help diminish the tomblike feel of the apartment. There was probably a no pet policy, but desperately she wanted something else alive… Maybe she could pick up some sort of plant?
The first few calls were a little challenging as she got her nerve together, by the third person on her second call (after a round of transfers), she’d mastered her lines. “What Would Jaehee Do?” ran through her mind as a mantra when her anxiety got the better of her. When that wasn’t enough, “What would Seven do” was the backup, which proved just as effective. All the while, she popped into chats throughout the morning, mediating when necessary but focusing on encouragement more. Seven was still up, but around 9:00, he assured her would be laying down soon…

It was around 10:30 and a page into her contacts when her cellphone began to rang, with Yoosung’s bright smile beaming up at her. He’d changed his profile picture.

“Hi hi!”

“Hello! Hehe,” his voice was hushed. “I snuck out of out of a lecture to chat with you for a bit. Are you proud?”

A giggle escaped her before she whispered back, “+2 to sneak skill~! You’ll aggro your professor though…!”

“Haha, I’m fine! It’s about lunch time though; I was starting to get tired. That fight last night was so intense! You were such an awesome healer~! But I’m so sleepy now… Kindergartens have naptime; I don’t see why universities don’t allow it too,” he pouted adorably.

“You can thank the Industrial Era and electricity for the weird hours.”

“Oo? That sounds like something Seven would say,” he sounded slightly awed and curious. “So… Miyeon, you’re a student too, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you study hard? Or like… Do you ditch class like me?”

“I studied. Dad worked really hard so I could afford to go, so skipping was out of the question…”

“But you were taking this semester off though, right?”

“Yeah… But honestly, I miss school,” she tried to force a laugh.

“You must’ve been a good student to miss this! All I ever get now are C’s… I wish there was a way for them to grow into A’s, but that’d never happen.”

“You could get A’s again if you really wanted,” Miyeon answered with encouragement. “Tell you what - I’ll be your personal cleric if you bring those grades up to B’s.”

“Really?! What if I get A’s?”

Her cheeks felt warm, but she suddenly understood the need for “feminine charm”… “If you pull that off – it’ll be your choice.”

She could practically hear him swallow hard before a giddy little laugh escaped him. “I sort of want to run back to class now…”

“Hey - before you go, Yoosung, I might have a favor to ask…”

“Sure, anything!”
“Thank you… I made some appointments tomorrow with a couple of our possible venues… Jaehee will probably be too busy to help since it’ll be during her hours at C&R, and Seven told me that you’re usually free. So I scheduled most of them later in the day, could you go with me to check them out? I’ve never been to a party like this so your experience would be so very helpful.”

“Really?!”

“Really!”

“I can even do it this afternoon!”

“Nothing was open today for that sort of thing, “she sighed. Truthfully Miyeon did have options for that but was too afraid to go alone… “So if it’s okay, I’ll send you the details – just let me know if you can make it or not. Considering we don’t have a date yet, I can always reschedule.”

“Okay! And just for you I’m going to go back to class and study hard! Bye!”

“Good luck - Bye!”

The next few calls that followed were surpassingly easy as his sunny disposition brightened her mood some. For lunch, she contented herself to cold left over pizza while changing from calling out to working on the format for the e-mail invitations. Jaehee called while the girl finished the last bite of her slice, although it was not so much a “friendly” call as one related to the spreadsheet she’d modified and shared the evening beforehand. After that bit of business was cleared up though…

“Do you always work through your lunches?” Miyeon pried, unable to hide the concern in her voice.

“I got a little something on the way,” the woman answered timidly.

“…This isn’t going to do. I’ll be out checking out a couple of the venues tomorrow; I’ll bring you something!”

“That’s very thoughtful, but I couldn’t…”

“You treated me to coffee yesterday and have been putting so much time into helping me. Please let me do something to show my appreciation, Jaehee. Just tell me when and I’ll pop by the office and deliver~! I mean it’s the big C&R building, right?”

“Yes… If you insist…” she replied, demurely. “I just feel sort of strange accepting something like that.”

“I felt the same way yesterday, but we’re in this together, aren’t we?” the girl answered encouragingly.

“Yes- Oh! I have to take this - we’ll talk later, Miyeon.”

“Keep up the good fight, Jaehee! Zen and I are cheering for you against your corporate oppressor!”

There was a rare chuckle from the woman before she closed the call with the proper company closing.

It was well into afternoon before Miyeon drew her “work” for the day to a close in order to
venture out for supplies. There was no telling how long she’d be at the apartment, so getting a few days’ worth of food and necessities was a task that couldn’t be put off for too long. Cleaning up a little, she made herself “casual presentable” and dawned the cat hoodie that her friend seemed to like so much. As she stepped out of the apartment, her eyes drifted up to the CCTV camera. Hopefully Seven was resting well and having sweet dreams rather than watching it, but she mouthed that she was going to the store and gave a little wave anyway.

Being in an unfamiliar area made using her maps application essential as she tried to navigate the new neighborhood. It was a relatively trendy part of town, which made sense considering that V was apparently a photographer. Part of her wondered what Rika did aside from organizing the parties, but considering the people in the group – it was probably something equally prestigious… Nothing at all like her commoner life. There were a number of convenience stores that tempted her along the way, but it was probably best not to go “commoner chic” in this case.

Miyeon kept her head down and tried her best not to make eye contact with anyone, feeling the suffocating weight of their silent judgements. Focusing on her shopping list and what sort of treats she might take to Jaehee was the only respite she had. It wasn’t as though she were on an empty street, but it was when she surrounded by other humans that Miyeon felt the most alone and afraid. If someone familiar was with her, it wasn’t nearly as bad… Her chest tightened as every perceived glance in her direction felt like cold water splashing against her.

Reaching the store eased things some, as she could fully focus on the products and prices; it helped that the aisles gave her places to tuck into and hide. As she studied the options as compared to her budget, her phone lit up with a notification that Zen had sent her an e-mail. Enclosed was a selfie of him in costume with an expression of great focus… It was clear that it was from a dramatic scene, potentially even one with combat. He looked so handsome in a hanbok, granted he looked good in anything.

“Got some great work done today – knowing you were going at it hard too made me want to give it my all! What do you think?”

Her arms drew closer to her chest to where she was nearly hugging the basket. How could she not be comforted by someone so kind?

“A gallant hero indeed~! I can just feel the electric tension in the scene! I almost dropped my basket!”

Not even a moment after she replied, the phone rang, as expected.

“A basket of flowers?” Zen queried playfully.

“I wish… Does broccoli count as a flower?”

His beautiful laugh soothed her soul, although she felt as though everyone in the store would hear it and rip the phone from her hands.

“Not every flower can be as beautiful as a rose, yet even the humblest bloom can still nourish the body – if not the soul.”

“Says the rose to the broccoli,” she quipped with a nervous titter.

“You’re far too sweet and lovely to be broccoli, princess…. So you’re at the store? What are you getting?”

“Just a few basics. You wouldn’t know what sorts of things Jaehee likes to eat
would you? She can’t live off of convenience store food alone, and I seriously doubt she has time to cook for herself. So I’m taking her lunch tomorrow.”

“That’s because Jumin’s a jerk…” he grumbled, before humming thoughtfully. “But that is a great ideal – and very sweet… I’m almost jealous!”

“I’d make you something too if you were here.”

“I’ll take you up on that when I get back into town! So are you a good cook, Miyeon?”

“I bake better than cook… But growing up I had to handle meals for Dad and me,” It was an honest answer. “How about you?”

“I’ve been on my own awhile and have worked at a few restaurants, so I’ve picked up a few things!”

“I suppose something had to pay the bills while you were putting yourself out there… It’s really admirable… You must have incredible willpower.”

He hummed with approval. “How is it you always know what to say?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s been just a long frustrating shoot today, one of the actresses had a fight with one of the staff, and it just put a bad vibe on everyone, so we had to do a few retakes. But because I knew I’d get to talk with you, I couldn’t be brought down! You saved the day today, just by cheering me on.”

“You did that on your own,” she soothed. “But I’m glad that even something small like this encouraged you.”

“Great men often rely on great women; you know? I wonder how far I could go with you at my side.”

She nearly dropped her basket. “You’d probably end up carrying me the whole way…”

“Being cradled in my strong arms like a princess doesn’t sound that bad does it?” he chuckled. “I’ll be back in town the day after tomorrow; maybe I could maybe help you with some of the party arrangements on my day off.”

Her heart was practically in her throat… No doubt her cheeks were as red as the apples she was standing in front of. Truthfully, Miyeon had no idea of how to handle someone flirting so openly with her. As she spoke, she became aware of just how her voice was beginning to waver.

“I had planned to check out some of the venues tomorrow. Yoosung was going to help me, but I can try to maybe check out some of the caterers the day after. I still have a few left to call…”

“You know, there’s this guy I used to run with who does kebabs and a great little place I know that has this killer selection of local beers,” he caught himself. “But the RFA parties are a little more formal normally… Hmm. I’ll get to wear a nice suit while we check out the caterers!”

“…Do you really think it’ll be that formal?” Miyeon asked, feeling very aware of her place in the world.
“They’ll probably be 3 star outfits knowing C&R’s involvement – so yeah. Could it be you don’t have anything to wear?” Zen thought aloud.

“I’ve never exactly been fashion conscious…” she confessed awkwardly. “Zombie effects and vampire make up isn’t exactly in Vogue.”

He laughed out loud. “Are you a goth-loli?”

“Nothing like that!” the girl protested, getting a look from an older woman. She shrank. “I just had friends who asked for help for costume parties.”

“You know, I once got offered a spot in a vampire themed boy band… If it’d just been a production play,” he sighed.

“You probably would make a wonderful vampire prince with your fair skin and those piercing red eyes.”

There was a sensuous hum. “Is that what you’re into?”

“I can appreciate the aesthetic… But to be honest, I’ve never really been much of one for looks… I mean, I can appreciate physical beauty, like yours, but I don’t think I feel the same way about it that other people do…? Umm… I guess I can’t really think of someone like ‘that’ without knowing them? I think I’m broken,” Miyeon laughed nervously.

“Not at all,” he assured her. “Not many people appreciate inner beauty – it’s much harder to see. Look at “Beauty and the Beast” for example. Handsome prince inside a fierce monster; he only needed love of someone willing to see past that to return to himself. You’re the sort of princess who could love a beast…”

“…Thank you for that, Zen.”

“The thing with men though is that we’re all beasts on the inside. So be careful on your own.”

“Oppa Zen, protector of shy commoner girls.”

There was that lovely chuckle. “Oppa~! So used to hearing that from my fangirls – hearing it from you isn’t so bad.”

“Taking it back!” she announced playfully. “You know… Since I joined the group, I’ve felt a little out of place. Everyone seems to be so important and talented. Then there’s me…” she chuckled. “Somehow talking with you always makes me feel a little better.”

“Of course it does… You know, I came from commoner roots too. Miyeon, you might’ve come into our messenger under some weird circumstances, but everyone has been getting along more and most importantly we’ll be having the party again because of you. You’re working so hard for us already – there’s no way it can go wrong! You can hold your head up.”

“Your right, lovely Zen. I am a little worried that we still don’t have a date,” she sighed.

“V will definitely give us one after seeing how hard you’re working. He just seems to keep himself busy after what happened with Rika…”

“That explains why he isn’t on the messenger much… Hope he’s okay…”
“As much as a man who lost the love of his life can be,” the actor soothed. “With you around though, he’ll come around more. I feel it.”

“I hope you’re right; it’s not good to be off on one’s own for too long when dealing with things like that… Even if it’s not blood, family is precious.”

“Yeah,” his voice ebbed some as though he wanted to object. “Let me know how Jaehee’s lunch turns out, okay?”

“I’d send you a picture if I could. You know, I think I might make her some cookies too.”

“What kind?”

“She seems to like coffee, so I think something like espresso mocha macarons with maybe a salted chocolate ganache might suit her. They have a sort of sophistication that matches her.”

“That sounds amazing… Aren’t those like super hard to make though?”

“Macarons are finicky, but the air is dry enough today that I’m willing to take that risk! Lovely Zen, wish me luck!”

“You got it! Hey, put some aside for me too, okay?”

“Aye! I’ll also see if Seven has time to set up my ability to send images after he wakes up so I can send you a picture.”

“That’d be amazing~! Maybe I can call you later?”

“Of course!” she piped, “Hey… Thank you so much for everything… I really do appreciate you.”

“I know you do, princess. Take care.”

For a moment she merely clutched her phone, savoring the warmth of it. There were so many good people in the group…

By the time she’d reached the check out, her plan to make a single batch to one person had turned into a plan to make enough for everyone in the RFA to show her appreciation to all of them. Carrying the bags was a bit of a pain, but she managed well enough. She was rather certain that if Ms. Park was around, this would be one of those situations that the older woman would insist “needed a man” to help her with…

Her options for dinner became street food on the way back into the apartment, which she justified by the fact that the bags were heavy and that’d count for her exercise of the day. The lazier part of her was okay with leaning against the wall of the elevator on the way up and setting the bags on the floor. Although the door clicked before she could even begin fiddling with her phone to look up the code.

Seven was watching again.

A smile crossed her lips as she waved to the camera and took the bags in. She trotted into the kitchen and sat the bags down. Before Miyeon put anything away, an impulse drove her to pull a permanent marker from her bag and a notebook. Hastily she wrote out a message and stepped back
into the hall to hold it up for the camera.

“Making cookies for everyone!”

She’d taken time to draw little paws, stars, and a bunny on it. Thinking quickly, the girl used the next sheet. Miyeon drew a coffee cup + a bar of chocolate equaling a scribble of one of the sandwich cookies she intended to make.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

“ZOMGCOOKIES!!!”

“OMNOMNOMONOM!”

She smiled at the camera. A moment passed before another private message popped up.

“;;iwantcookies2butcan’tmeet4them”

This was immediately followed by a stock picture of a chain.

Her heart sank a little… She quickly wrote out another message on her notepad before holding it up. “I’ll make some b4 the party! Just 4 u! K?” Next to this, she’d drawn a happy cat face.

“LOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOL K!”

The girl gave a little fist pump before writing a last note and holding the pad up one last time. “I’ll show them 2 you when they’re done!”

“Make meowie cookies! Nyaou! =*w*=”

With that she bowed and waved to her eccentric guardian angel on the other side of the CCTV, before retreating back into the apartment for a long night of baking…
So sorry for the delay. Recently started a new job only to find they'll be phasing it out in a few months... Craziness all around!
Thank everyone for their kind support and patience. I truly hope the next chapter will be more timely than this.
Not my best, but it's long and spicy. I might go back and edit some of it, but I thought you guys waited long enough.

Chapter 10:

Now and then Seven would catch himself slipping in and out of consciousness while a ferocious headache throbbed just behind his eyes. The fear of being dragged into an agency safe house for “corrective action” could only do so much to motivate him at times like this. He was watching a camera feed from a warehouse to watch guard rotation while the CCTV feed outside Rika’s old apartment was up in the corner of his screen, to the left of him was a stack of eight background checks left to finish, and in the back of his perpetually restarting mind was the details of a whole operation that would require him to set up surveillance equipment at target’s hotel. For that he would need to don a full costume matching the attending staff’s apparel. The arrangements had already been made with someone inside so that a new employee wouldn’t look too suspicious; he just needed to doll up a bit...

In the background he had make up tutorials going on with the latest women’s trends, as he didn’t leave his house enough to know what was the “in” season thing. Part of him wanted to call up Miyeon and ask for tips, but she seem like the type to follow trends. Frankly she didn’t need to, she had a style all her own... The first night he’d seen her on the CCTV the girl had been draped in her oversized tabby cat hoodie, a cute plaid skirt, black tights, and an oversized shirt with a game logo graphic on it... Geek couture… His thumb tapped slower at recalling it. It was a departure from the business casual she put on for the meeting over coffee with Jaehee, if one didn’t count the rather cute pair of shooting star hair barrettes. Her face was always hidden by those long bangs, except in that months old photograph.

Seven had to wonder if she was naturally shy or if something had happened to make her so timid. From her own account she’d downloaded the app wanting to avoid people talking to her, the question was “why?”. Was she just naturally afraid of people noticing her? He could probably find out if he wanted, but there were more important things for now. There wasn’t time… But the unanswered question and horrible scenarios in the back of his mind made him want to shelter her from the group more, but then again, the attention of all those handsome men would probably be good for her confidence. If she recovered from some of that insecurity, it was a given that Miyeon would probably smile more…

He’d counted at least six different kinds of smiles from her and the transitions between each. The brightest had been during the little dance he’d made her do to get into the apartment. Once she finally got into it, her eyes lit up with happiness. It was so different than the sad smile he’d first seen in the photo… Yet it was that smile that he understood the most, despite not knowing details…
Somewhere inside that timorous little bud lived a brilliant nebula.

As much as he wanted to see her thrive in the group, there were the inevitable concerns that brought with it. The reality was that he couldn’t keep her hidden away forever. Everyone would eventually meet Miyeon, and there was no telling what would happen from there… It could be catastrophic or maybe a year from now, Seven’d probably be at her wedding to one of the other members, and probably every few years following there would be more ceremonies as the rest of the RFA as they started their own families. Anytime between now and then he could be moved to another assignment and another… Yet he’d still probably see the pictures in the messenger, assuming he’d still have access or need of it…

His life had but one constant: solitude. That was what he’d chosen... In exchange for his own happiness, safety for both himself and a normal life for the brother he’d left behind. It was a bargain between men, as well as between god and himself. After his last breath even the atoms that made up his body would probably break their bonds in a single brilliant burst. What was left would then wander the universe unbound until cosmic heat death left only the void. It would be there he could feel at home: reunited with Saeran in the nothingness, separate in life but together in oblivion.

But even then, “nothingness” was not eternal; God would make it all again as he probably had an infinite number of times before that. And there would be the collection of atoms that made him joined up again for another tragic lifetime to be a soul split amid two bodies…

Perhaps that version of him would be bound by new universal laws born from the seemingly unanswered prayers of the reality that came before… Statistically, there had to be at least one universe where he was happy and had never joined the agency. A world where he had grown up with a normal family… He’d give anything to visit that reality, if only for a minute. A whole other Saeyoung Choi, quirky and hardworking who held an honest job, who had an amazing girlfriend with whom that very night he’d share a family dinner when Saeran visited after work. One who made visits to his aging parents who adored their future daughter in-law and lovingly asked when they’d be grandparents... It was a life so many took for granted and yet it stirred within him the sin of envy. He was supposed to trust in God’s plan, but he had to wonder precisely what part of that divine mandate following now. Aside from his directives from the agency and V’s polite requests, there was no real direction or seeming purpose to any of it. His existence in a nut shell: tragic, pointless, empty…

The feel of his head tilting made him sit rigid and straight. He was falling asleep at the desk again…

The guard was now picking his nails and doing a little jig to loosen up his joints on the grainy feed. If this were a dream, Miyeon would be there instead saluting him valiantly with a brave face hid behind Ph.D. Pepper colored bangs and a cute little military fatigue with kitty ears poking through a beret. She’d be cheering him on… The silly girl…

A throaty sigh escaped him.

It was only 6:00 AM… The newest member was probably snuggled up in bed, hopefully sleeping soundly, trusting that “God Seven – the Defender of Justice” would find the hacker and keep her safe. Yet here he was looking up the associates of some schmuck who’d angered a cartel…

How could she have confidence in him after coming into the chat because of a failure in his protocols…? The girl had affirmed her confidence in his ability without hesitation, like a child who’d never known a harsh hand. The thing was that he wasn’t a person someone like her should trust. Part of him wanted to scold her for dropping her guard so quickly, yet another part of him desperately wanted to call her to hear what her “sleepy” voice was like and to see if maybe that’d annoy her...
little. Maybe the RFA’s new princess was a demon when she didn’t get enough sleep…? He
desperately wanted to test it… To see the fire in her honey colored eyes flash brilliantly with fury as
her graceful legs stomped into the hall and glared up at him. No doubt, it’d burn out quickly before
sublimating into that grin that would keep him awake for a few more hours.

His fingers left the mouse long enough to feel the touchscreen of his phone before Seven
rigidly moved it back into place. His guts felt warm and gooier than normal… It had to be that he’d
had too many chips and too much soda… But he still felt warm… Maybe he needed to change the
internal fans of his rig?

With robotic movements and sore joints, the hacker ventured to the fridge to get a fresh,
cold Ph.D. Pepper, holding it to his brow as he leaned against the black stainless steel. For a moment,
Seven stood still, very aware of the pull of the Earth’s gravity holding him to a planet that he didn’t
want to be on. He’d much rather be inside metal, weightless with the coldness of space around
him… Yet here he was, burning up from the inside with a strange feeling.

Between the rotation of the galaxy, the solar system, and the planet, one would think
there’d be more of a breeze… There was only the relief of cold aluminum.

“Thank you, Doctor…”

What sort of doctorate did Ph.D Pepper have anyway?

He popped open the tab and slurped lazily, hoping that washing down the discomfort in his
belly with more carbonated syrup would weigh it down. Letting his elbow rest on the counter top, he
allowed his hand to slip just under the elastic of his lazy pants. The nerves were too exhausted to
even register a tickle, yet they had the ability to itch… Had anyone ever tickled him? He’d read that
schizophrenics could tickle themselves… He could tickle his own feet, but not his belly or sides.

Inspired, he lowered the can to his bare ribs, eliciting yelp and spilling a little of the
precious nectar over his hands and counter. Rather than clean up, he nursed and lapped the warming
soda from his hand and rubbed the rest in before grabbing two fresh bags of chips. Seven threw one
bag across the keyboard while he gnawed the one he’d been carrying in his teeth until he worked an
opening just big enough to fill his nostrils with the scent of greasy, honey soaked and salted potato.

His arteries practically crawled in protest as he upturned the bag into his mouth.

He didn’t have time to clean – work work work hacking slave~!

Sitting back down at his “throne”, he used some glasses wipes that he’d tucked away to try
to clean his hands to avoid making the keyboard sticky before throwing the moist towelette
somewhere in the general direction of the trashcan. It wasn’t aerodynamic – he didn’t favor it making
the distance.

“Mayday – mayday!” the napkin would cry before likely crashing next to his dirty
jeans.

Stretching his arms behind his head, Seven finished crunching away on his mouthful of
chips and yawned extravagantly before noticing his ankle… At some point he’d have to shave his
legs. So distracting was this revelation that he couldn’t help but lift his leg and pull the loose fitting
flannel up to reveal his pale, slender calve. Women had it rough being expected to keep so much
surface area smooth. A perpetual war being fought between the fairer sex and nature… Though it
wasn’t the hair follicles fault, they were just doing their job… His leg itched now… Maybe the cells
knew that he appreciated them and were signaling that they understood that the coming visit from a
razor didn’t reflect his opinion of their craftsmanship.

The hacker tried to focus again yet his mind was kilometers away. Yet it was distance that was quickly being crossed as his fingers lead him into the less savory parts of his own admin profile…

Checking over Miyeon’s interactions and messages since her joining confirmed that they’d spoken the most, with Zen a close second…. That didn’t count her game time with Yoosung… Of course… If one were playing a numbers game, he was ahead, but the reality was that they’d only spoken so much because it was related to his duties to the RFA… He couldn’t allow himself to misunderstand that.

Seven repeated that to himself as he set about calling “Alice” to give the recall code and the intel he’d obtained. At some point, he’d need to contact 0ph3l14 (pronounced Ophelia) on field recon, but that would be an hour or two from now. With such literary names, he had to wonder if the Agency had sent the others to liberal arts universities somewhere… Unlike many others, he’d actually heard Alice’s voice, but 0ph3l14 wasn’t too different than himself in that they were an enigma. The agent wasn’t even sure if that liaison was male or female. Much like him they were a faceless, nameless cog in the agency. It wasn’t like there’d ever be an office party he’d be invited to, or would want to attend for that matter, where the two of them could meet and say “Hi!” The Honey Buddah chips and Ph.D Pepper wanted to say hello too, albeit their increasingly lively dance in his belly made him feel even more nauseated. He really needed to eat something else, but that meant leaving the security of his house and would cost money… He had plenty of money and nice things to show for it. His “babies” for example… The want to get into his newest acquisition and take in a drive hit him, but he didn’t trust himself to keep awake with the gentle purr of the engine so close…

Well beyond “damn” tired…

When Seven next pulled himself from the screen, it was already after 8:00 AM and there was sunshine in the palm of his limp hand. Miyeon’d left a message to everyone stating her plans for the day. If the chat bubble was to be believed, she planned to start making the necessary arrangements on location so the process of inviting guests could start. After fifteen minutes of secretly listening to her calls, it was clear that she meant business. For the next hour, he continued to listen feeling his body go weightless a few times as he nodded off. At first, her voice was nervous, but now and then he could swear he heard his turn of phrase or Jaehee’s mannerisms. Was she mimicking them? It was so cute…

The temptation rose to mess with her, but his push to finish agency work so that he could start the hunt for the hacker fresh became his goal marker. He owed the girl that much.

The hacker’s throat tightened reflexively as his sleep deprived mind thought she was talking to him a time or two. Maybe she was just a voice inside his head now too….? Or maybe the frequency of her voice shorted something in his nervous system…?

“You can do it, Seven~!” she’d chirrup before pouting, “You should lay down…”

“I know… I promised. After this… Okay?”

His earphones glided aside as someone wonderful ran her fingers through his mess of fiery hair. How did she get in? It couldn’t good for her to see him like this… His house was such a mess, but it felt nice. Someone was holding him… Such a sweet scent and beneath his cheek such soft brea...
He nearly fell out of his chair! The rush of that brought him back into focus with the last bit of steam he had.

Vanderwood would be by in just an hour to go over the operation the next day… Yet all he wanted was to reach out to the newest RFA member before he laid down. When Miyeon took a break, Seven joined a chat with her for just to wake himself up a little. He was so sick of looking at text, but the feedback of a living system was so gratifying. As expected, the girl was happy to see him and cheerfully played along with whatever craziness his sleep deprived mind could come up with. She was like sunshine on a desolate Martian surface, powering the 707 Rover to its target.

The chat was the only place he acted out to get attention, even then it usually got him scoffed at or ignored. Yet Miyeon gave the impression that when one was with her, the entirety of her being was focused on them. Not only did the girl perceive the things unsaid, but her intuition always seemed to lead her to the right words to say… Even if those words were egging him on.

It was strange… But in a way he understood. In some ways, the girl wasn’t so different than himself, except she was entirely different. He was a brilliant flash that was meant to burn out quickly; she was a steady, nurturing glow.

His handler arrived around 9:00 AM where they briefly went over the completed work and the operation for the next day. Only then was he allowed to rest, rather Vanderwood specifically ordered it. The bags under his eyes were dark enough to be mistaken as bruises which prompted a round of questioning. Though he joked about being accosted by men in fur suits, his handler gave him the usual “tired of this crap” scowl and reached for his tazer. This made Seven retreat back into his bedroom after showing the agent out and putting the house on lockdown. Finally, he could fulfill his promise to Miyeon from the night before…

As he flopped onto the luxurious fabric, sleep overtook him but left just as abruptly. His alarm went off at 16:00 PM to start the round of rolling algorithm resets that kept everything secure…

A brief glance at the security footage of the apartment showed that the girl had left Rika’s apartment a little earlier, which on its own wasn’t worrying yet Seven felt anxious. When she was there, he knew she was safe. Without a live feed of wherever Miyeon’d gone to, something could happen to her and he’d never know. Yet if Seven called and asked, it could potentially cause her unnecessary concern… It was a balancing act to maintain the illusion of “safety” for people who were unaware of how very tenuous the situation really was. For a flash, the hacker thought to triangulate her position using her phone, but opted against it. Pinging her location could potentially use up battery she’d need to call for help… Miyeon probably had just left to get supplies and would be back before he could even make the effort. That meant he’d have to wait… Yet why did he feel so concerned? Was it just because she was planning the party he was looking forward to? That had to be it…

He got in a brief bit of exercise to stretch the tension from his muscles before retreating to the bathroom. There he used his phone to bring up the CCTV feed. Seven sat it on the sink beside the shower while he cleaned up and set about the unpleasant task of shaving his legs for the operation the next day. There were a few knicks and cuts along the way as his attention was divided, but after a bit of lotion everything seemed to be in order… Like cream: smooth and pale… The lack of a hair barrier made his legs very sensitive as he slipped a fresh pair of lazy flannel sleep pants on. It was a very sensuous feeling that he worked very hard to distract himself from focusing on lest it lead him to more sinful things that he frankly didn’t have time to indulge.
Pulling a simple tank top on, Seven kept the phone close and set about the task of waxing his eye brows. Even with the numbing agent, it hurt like hell. The worst was having to tweeze away the little hairs that remained. His eyes were watering from the sharp consecutive stings that came with every pluck. Now and then he’d stop to check the symmetry. While Seven could go with a thinner line, he opted to stay within his natural range this time… There were always brow pencils to darken or thicken it up so he was less recognizable; contouring worked magic.

Women, and appearance conscience men, like Zen, had it rough…

Truthfully he had no issue with dressing up minus the flourishes. Clothes were just that, fabric. He could probably wear a maxi dress around the house and feel no shame about it. There was something undeniably liberating about wearing a dress, but it was more fun to be someone else when the opportunity presented itself. He rather liked getting “into character”; it was like acting for audience who didn’t know they were watching a performance… After all, if they found out he wasn’t who he said he was, his audience wouldn’t like the routine and would likely take defensive measures. Fortunately, he’d never run into that, but Seven’d come close a few times. It was certainly more fun than being himself on a standard field op…

Retreating back to his desk, a familiar outline came into view which made the hacker quicken his step.

His fingers were already moving to unlock the door through keystrokes; Miyeon’s arms were full of bags. It was surprisingly how strong a little thing like her probably had to be to carry so much. The question was then, why did she have all of that? If only he could help her with the door in person, he could sate his questions about what was inside…

Her head tilted up towards the camera as the lock clicked, a lovely smile of appreciation. It was hard not to reciprocate. Miyeon knew he was there… He sat, ankle crossed over his knee and watched the feed a bit more with a goofy smile as a sense of satisfaction came over him. What she lacked in grace, the girl more than made up for in efficiency.

A moment later, the newest member re-emerged with a note pad and began scribbling furiously before holding up her work.

“Making cookies for everyone!”

Judging from the drawing, they were likely coffee and cocoa flavored ones. He wanted to call, but instead sent her a private message, which to his surprise she quickly picked up. Talking would mean they’d spend less time together… As Miyeon dug around in her pocket after freeing a hand, her smile broadened. Did she always smile like that when he messaged her? He hoped so.

“ZOMGCOOKIES!!!”

“OMNOMNOMNOMONOM!”

The joy was fleeting though as he caught himself… If she was making them for everyone, that implied that she would be meeting the others sooner than the party. He wanted to pry on who precisely it was, maybe even he felt a little jealous. Not that he had any right to… It wasn’t as though he’d see her except at the party and potentially future ones if she continued her responsibilities as organizer. An old familiar weight settled over his chest robbing him from the brief feeling of zero-gravity her smile had brought him to.

He sent a picture of a chain with, “;;;iwantcookies2butcan’tmeetu4them”. It was best to be playful about his situation; she didn’t know – she could never know… Even Jaehee felt chained to
her job right? The way her lips fell into a frown made it feel as though he had given away his secrets… Seeing her troubled made him feel anxious and desperate, like he felt as a child… Proud, stoic little Saeyoung who wanted only to shelter her as he would Saeran from all the unhappy things possible… It was a horrible helplessness.

“I’ll make some b4 the party! Just 4 u! K?”

To match her reassuring grin, there was a smiling cat face drawn next to the message. Nothing would keep her down for long…

“LOLOLOLOLOLOLOL K!”

Rather enthusiastically the girl pumped her fist and did a happy little bounce before scribbling out the last note, “I’ll show them 2 you when they’re done!”

As long as she was happy and bright, he could be content.

“Make meowie cookies! Nyaou! =*w*=”

A mischievous little smirk crossed her face at reading that before Miyeon gave a wave goodbye and disappeared. There was no telling how long it’d be before she re-emerged… Although a brief look of a few general recipes seemed to infer he had about an hour and a half at least before she’d have anything successfully baked to show off. Seven adjusted his schedule accordingly, moving as much of the necessary equipment as he could into the car he’d be taking the following day before returning to his desk with his tools. While waiting, he tested out the cameras and audio devices that’d be put in place. The hacker even took out a small camera drone in the event of a moving mark to run some calibrations.

His phone began to ring with an old hymnal… It was V.

Awkwardly Seven perched the phone on his shoulder while setting his work aside to pull up the visuals for the network so he could keep a live view of any connections made during the call.

“Hey.”

“So she’s clean?”

“Yeah, there wasn’t…” his voice ebbed at what seemed like an abnormality. They were being tapped by someone… “”, anything wrong with that tabby cat… Our mutual friends have kept me neck deep in work though, so I haven’t had much time to check on the stray she showed up with… She’s a really good kitty though… She plays well with the others.”

“…Understood…”

“…Have you picked up that roll cake yet?”

There was never an easy way to ask if someone had gotten a package without giving away that one had been sent… In this case, “Roll Cake” was a care package Seven had sent, with a few extra features. Specifically, it would let V know when there was someone else listening in on their calls.

“No. But I’ll be waiting in line… We’ll talk more later.”

“Take care.”
“You too. Bye.”

Setting the phone back aside, the hacker quietly continued his work on the drone with one hand, while the other brought up the logs for the night Miyeon had joined them. He would work on it since the agency would probably be giving him less busy work due to the mission the next day… At least Vanderwood could be good for something other than tidying up. As much as a hardass as the agent was, he wasn’t the worst handler Seven’d had; he wouldn’t have the RFA were it not for the leniency given to him. What mattered was results and as long as he produced them – there wouldn’t be a problem…

That left his mind free to wonder exactly what V had been up to.

Rika’s suicide was a hard time for everyone. During that time Seven’d pop on once every other day while being moved between assignments only to find relative silence and V’s calls dwindled from once every few days to maybe once every few weeks. When his old friend did call, the concern was always security… Not with the usual requests either… While this raised flags, it wasn’t entirely out of the ordinary.

It was V’s contacts with the agency that had got him the position to begin with, so Luciel guessed that V had potentially thrown himself back into the life of a recon field agent… The photographer wouldn’t kill himself, but Luciel didn’t put it past him to do something dangerous so someone else could be responsible. It wasn’t something he could ask or easily hack into agency databases to confirm though. All he could do was obey, afterall, he owed his friend his life…

Although Luciel knew loss and longing better than some men twice his age, there was nothing a boy like him could’ve said comfort a grown man who’d lost the love of his life. At least Saeran was still out there somewhere… Rika was gone, although there was no body, which likely left all sorts of unresolved issues for his friend. In a way that made him jealous, if he disappeared one day, there would be no one to mourn him… It was probably better that way.

As he closed the drone back up and gave it a quick test, his phone rang again.

She was calling him… The gloomy thoughts ebbed; maybe it wouldn’t hurt to tease her a little. Clearing his throat a little, he picked up the phone and did his best to summon his inner CEO…

“Good evening… Elizabeth the III was just fed… Tell me, have you eaten dinner yet? My nutritionist says that three balanced meals a day are crucial to one’s mental, physical, and spiritual health… Perhaps I should have Assistant Kang arrange for you to meet with my chef… Commoner food cannot be good for your constitution.”

“Jumin…?” her voice was hesitant.

“Your trial period for Jumin Han’s voice has expired. If you wish to proceed, a charge of one bag of Honey Buddha chips per moment will be occurred upon your account for every ten seconds. Do you accept those charges?”

“No! Bring on 707~!”

He wanted to jump out of his chair!

“Ta dah~! Here is 707 in all his glory! Did you miss me?”

“With every arrow so far,” she quipped. “…It’s a shame I can’t see you too.”

“– So are you ready for the chef to judge your cookies?”
There was a nervous chuckle. “Are you Chef RamG now?”

“!@$# right I am~! So get your !@$# out that door!”

He’d hit the keys on his phone to hide the curse words he wasn’t saying…

“Yes, sir!”

Her enthusiasm…

He wanted to bottle it up...

Something giddy stirred in him as he set the drone aside to pull the windowed CCTV camera up to full view. She was dressed down to a pair of shorts and an oversized sweatshirt with her hair up in a messy bun. There was the little wave whose energy could be felt through the photons of light capturing the image. He could feel the electricity tingling and reverberating through him, stirring his atoms out of their stillness.

Miyeon carefully selected out a cookie. He had to zoom in a little, but there were undeniably little ears on an oval shaped face. She’d done some detail work, but the camera didn’t do it any justice.

Were the kitty ones exclusive to him? Maybe she’d made them for Jumin? His mind raced over the variables, the ordered subroutines of his personality were stumbling over themselves.

“See?”

“Ah… Hmm… Hmm…”

“No?”

“Closer… I can’t see the details.”

“…You won’t lock me out and make me dance to get back in again will you?” she asked, edging out with her foot still in the door.

A chuckle escaped him, before he playfully and ominously asked, “Don’t you trust me?”

“…I do, but I also know you probably wouldn’t pass up another chance for me to put on a private show for you.”

“You make it sound so R-Rated!”

“…The dance DID come from an “ero game” with cat girls,” she mumbled looking very coy suddenly. “Does God Seven like cat girls? Are you a god of debauchery?”

His ears burned.

“E-everyone likes cat girls! You know, I even dreamed I was a cat – meow!”

“…When you slept earlier?”

“Yah – meow.”

“Was it a good dream?” she asked adjusting the container holding the cookies.
A nervous groan escaped him… It was probably okay to share it; Miyeon knew nothing about him… To her, it’d be just a cute little story.

“Mommy cat didn’t give me food, so brother kitty and I escaped. We passed through walls, over rivers, scaled mountains, and made it across oceans – meow. Then we ended up on a pirate ship! Then I woke up and my hands were curled up just like paws - meow.”

There was a thoughtful expression on her face as she listened. Anyone else would’ve given him “the look”… He wanted to tell her everything, but there was nothing good that could come from it.

Like a star, she could only see the bright face of him…

But as a secret agent, he was an orbiting satellite- always skirting the point between gravity pulling him closer and pulling away on an ever decreasing fuel supply… Until one day, he would be flung out of orbit to the depths of the unknown with only memories of this moment. Luciel wanted to savor every morsel of it so he could recall her properly…

“You were probably a really cute tiger striped ginger cat…,” Miyeon noted ponderously. “Did you get to wear a pirate hat?”

“I woke up before I found out, meow. But I could wear one to the party… I have a lot of costumes because of my work.”

He tapped himself on the head - stupid! STUPID!

“You were serious about that secret agent stuff?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Maybe, sort of…” his voice was shaky. “So did you eat dinner yet? I saw you got groceries!”

“Not yet, but I will here in a bit… I was going to take some to Jaehee tomorrow too before I meet up with Yoosung to check out one of the venues…” There was a fret to her brow. “I probably should’ve asked you before going or making plans, I’ll send you the details if it’ll help.”

“A homemade meal from Meowie-on? I’m a little jealous! But it’s okay - security threat isn’t that high right now, you’re not a prisoner unless you want to be,” he noted. “But you would look really cute in stripes! Like a little tiger ~!Raaaawr~! Ou! Should I get you chain to wear around your ankle too? Or better yet! Maybe a bell collar since you’re so small?”

“A collar would be nice,” she chuckled before her expression softened into one he hadn’t seen before… It made him want to melt. “… I like knowing that there’s someone waiting for me… If something happens, someone will miss me and come looking for me…”

All he could hear was the sound of his heart racing.

“I can’t let anything bad happen to you. That’d make everyone sad and Yoosung would cry – and he like… gets ugly “booger sad” when he cries. It makes me laugh, but it’s so ugly!”

“It’s not pretty when anyone cries…” she noted softly, setting the box down to rest her arms. “But I’ll probably be leaving around lunch time tomorrow though to drop Jaehee off some lunch. After that though, I’m supposed to meet with Yoosung to check out the venue. I’ll send you the location too if you wanted to check on it too for security purposes. If all of us go together…”
“…I have work, so I can’t, but… It would be nice to know where you are. But you’ll have the forever number 2 player in LOLOL with you, so I know you’ll be safe.”

“Forever number 2…?” Miyeon’s eyes widened with surprise… So adorable. “You’re number one aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t been banned yet!”

“Oh I have been, but you think something like that stops me?” he answered cheekily. “I have a father’s heart, you know? Yoosungyi’s been working so hard, when he finally gets that #1 spot, he’ll feel so accomplished! Then he’ll know the meaning of hard work! And then he can start working on stuff in real life so he can get a girlfriend!”

She did a little zip motion in front of her mouth.

“You’ll keep my secret for me?!”

She crossed her heart and pointed to her chest.

His face was burning. “Dangerous putting me so close to something so vital you know… I have easy access to your heart. Can you feel it? Thump – thump… Getting closer?”

If only he could screen cap her face in that moment… Her eyes wide and the darkening of her cheeks. It was like driving a car fast on a curvy road, it was every sort of illogical, dangerous, and wrong, but it felt amazing.

“So like… Would you be in a tiny submarine and be inside me…?”

Inside her…? He had to swallow – hard… For just an instant, something indecent and impossible yet wonderful occurred to him. Very adult thoughts he didn’t have often…

“I-I’d much rather go to space…”

“Me too!”

“Really?!”

“When I was really little, I wanted to pilot a giant robot and be like one of those pilots in the cartoons. Fighting aliens and saving the day. Guess I’m a bit short for that, huh?”

“Small body means better handling of G-forces! You’d probably be a great pilot! But… There are all sorts of real monsters here – that’s why we have the benefit party! I can’t have you one this time, but next party I’ll have you a full robot suit to host it in!”

 “…That’d be amazing! You know, maybe one year we can hold the party on a space station?”

“I know right! Ah! That’d be so awesome!”

“Since you’re already God Seven - defender of justice, what does that make me?”

“Meowie-on Prime, Defender of Hope in her mecha powered by dreams!”

She giggled, shaking him up.
“For now though I’d just be happy with like one of those little robot companions that they have in those shows… Something that could keep me safe, so I wouldn’t be afraid of my own shadow and so you can keep an eye on me.”

“You feel scared?”

“I’m a girl… I’m always a little scared,” she admitted. “…I’m odd…”

“You’re not odd… You’re just in a weird situation! But would you really trust me having a camera that can follow you anywhere? I could blackmail you or turn you into a gravure idol like I did Zen,” he asked teasingly to try to cheer her up.

“I already sort of trust you with my life, right? You would’ve already done something weird to me if you meant to.”

…He was wanting to do all sorts of “weird” things with her the more they spoke… Sinful things… Innocent things … All of them in zero gravity…

“…Seven… I’m not causing you any trouble am I?”

Luciel the spy was desperately trying to reign himself back in, but 707 was having too much fun… Even during his time in the States in college, he’d kept to himself aside from his classmates. Invariably the IT courses were primarily male, which made it easy to avoid situations like this. When he’d come back, there had been a few people who had gotten fond of him, but rather dutifully he’d report it and get moved to save everyone involved heartache and risk… Everyone except the RFA…

“…Seven… I’m not causing you any trouble am I?”

His eyes had been cast aside with shame but lifted back to the screen to Miyeon’s concerned pout. There was something wholly familiar and painful that made him reflexively tense. “Nah! You make things more fun!”

“Speaking of gravures and Zen… You wouldn’t have any more pictures of yourself, would you?”

“…M-me? You really want to see me that badly?” She nodded, even with the delay in the feed it was quick. “Wouldn’t you rather see him? He’s more attractive! Besides my profile pic…”

“Is really small… I want to see my friend who opened the door for me. The one who can see the lamb in the box.”

You can never see that person, Luciel reminded himself as the loneliness set back in.

“I don’t think the camera picks up ghosts,” Seven answered aloud. “But… I can maybe send you a picture if you really want…”

“I do! Why would I ask you if I didn’t want to?” Miyeon answered firmly like a defiant child, her eyes full of determination… Battling against invisible boundaries she had no way of knowing were there to begin with. In a way, she reminded him like Yoosung… Sweet, stubborn, guiltless, and naïve… Quietly he prayed to God to let him be strong enough to protect her from the evils in the world.
Turning his camera on, he tried to get a pose before feeling very self-conscious. His hair was a mess, as usual... He glanced around his desk and picked up his unopened bag of Honey Buddha chips. There was also a deep red shirt that he pulled on to hide his shoulders to look a bit more modest. Maybe it was better if he sent her a bad picture? If Miyeon didn’t like what she saw, he could talk with her without her liking him... But he wanted her to like him... Taking a deep breath, he did his best “duck lips” while holding up a bag of chips and hit the button.

No...

Instead, he sent an old picture of him. It was a full body shot of him edited into an ominous looking room with multiple doors. Seven knew she wanted to see his face clearly. As she pulled the phone away to check the message, he sent her the one he just took as well before he could second guess himself again. He could always delete the conversation later...

It was agony waiting to see her reaction. The first one drew a thoughtful nibble at the lip, but the other made her smile softly.

“...It’s probably really risky for you to do stuff like this... Isn’t it? I’m a little honored you trust me too... Thank you, Luciel.”

“You’ll see me at the party so it’s not like it’s a huge thing... But it’s probably a good thing... If something happens and I have to come by before then or if I have to come get you – you’ll recognize me.”

“I thought so too...”

He had to wonder why her mind even operated like that... What happened to her before she joined the group? She mentioned a brother before, but he hadn’t found any record of one. Maybe he was looking at the wrong person.

Miyeon looked down at her belly with a little embarrassment.

“I probably need to get back in to start working on dinner and Jaehee’s lunch... If you’re free later, maybe we can play something other than LOLOL? I’ve been meaning to play Overlook if you want to join me. I generally go Noctis.”

“That sounds so fun!!! I usually run Soleander – we’d be so perfectly teamed! Ugh... But right now, I should really get back to work. My babies need gas – and gas takes money – and money comes from work.”

He had something to look up...

“You must really like cars.”

“I like how they work – all those parts coming together! And since I can’t own a cat – the engine sort of reminds me of a cat purring. So it’s like – two birds with one stone!”

“God Seven – defender of justice and mastery of economy~!”

“Exactly! Right!? Heh – think I should write a book to make more money?”

“Heck yeah, diversify those assets!”

“You so get me!” Seven piped before he could catch himself. “Just message me when you leave and when you get back tomorrow, I have to step out for a little for work.”
“Understood. Be careful, okay?”

“I’m like the best at my job – so you don’t need to worry about me!”

“It’s them who should be worried!”

“Oh yeah! Justice is coming for them! Ciao~!”

“Ciao– meow~!”

The girl gave her usual little wave before returning into the apartment, yet he kept watching for a little before getting to business. After the last of the preparations were completed for the tech for the following day’s mission, he set about making sure his disguise would be acceptable. There were no tears and plenty of places for him to hide his gear.

Only once that was done did he set about looking up Miyeon’s relatives. Surprisingly, there were very few. Though he didn’t want to pry, he found records of her parents’ divorce. There was almost nothing to be found about her ever having had a brother. That raised a few red flags. His thumb tapped his mouse loudly as he leaned closer to the screen and kept looking.

The time rolled around when the agency usually gave him his duties for the evening. As expected Alice contacted him back about the prior op, but otherwise he was assured to have relative silence from the agency to focus on the operation later that day… Tomorrow would be hell though. Part of him wanted Vanderwood to storm in and taze him to remind him of what he was supposed to be doing… There weren’t the usual requests tonight, just the mission to set up the wire taps and cameras and the bigger project that it tied into. He couldn’t finish that job without the intel he’d get, but even then, it was going to be a damn ugly mess…

His attention was elsewhere…

Maybe it was because he was having to keep an eye on Miyeon for the RFA’s and her own safety that made her feel so familiar so soon… The more he knew, the more he wanted to know. Not because it was productive, not because he suspected her, but because he was curious… She was on his frequency, no matter which version of him she was talking to.

It was a problem…

But even then, the issue wasn’t her… He needed to keep control of himself, for everyone’s sake.

It was after midnight before his phone jingled with a link from Miyeon. He checked the message before he could help himself.

“I found planet 707! There’s an exo-planet called Kepler-707B orbiting the star Kepler-707!”

With it, she’d linked an article covering how it was a “Super Earth” like planet within the habitable zone of its star. There were even instructions on how to find it’s general position near the constellation Cygnus…

“8) Just need a rocket! Wonder if it really has Ph.D. Pepper oceans like you thought?”

Any other time Seven might’ve followed up on it, but right now, it only made him feel angry with himself for reasons he didn’t even fully appreciate.
He had to find the hacker…

To this end, he committed himself fully for the next few hours.

There were suspicious things that looked promising, but it was hardly enough to go on… It was sickeningly frustrating. Usually these things were so easy for him, but for some reason this particular instance was challenging. A challenge was one thing, but this was becoming personal… It was aggressive and strange. The messenger had been made with his own personal programming flourishes – it wasn’t something that could’ve been easily accessed without someone having “cased” it for some time. That spoke to a targeted attack but who would want to hack in? Furthermore, why hack in just to lure a new member who wouldn’t even be acting as an inside agent?

It was just before sunrise before he resigned himself to continuing the search for later. Catching a quick nap so he wouldn’t have bags under his eyes, Seven woke to perform the usual round of security checks and updates while getting ready. Before he could even start putting his make up in, he had to put in contacts. There were a few colored ones he had to help change his appearance, but today he stuck with the clear. Next came the make up…

Fortunately, his skin was decent despite his lifestyle, so it didn’t take much to get it looking dewy. Being a shut in had had that advantage at least… The lack of sun gave him a fair canvas to work with, so most eye shadows had a nice pop. He had the money to splurge to get the long staying stuff, but it had taken him some playing around to figure out how it all fit together. Men who complained about how long it took for women to get ready clearly had never tried to put on eye shadow or fake lashes. There was an artistry in using such dainty little tools to the right look. Much like repairing an engine, there was a degree of technique involved. He’d practiced on paper for hours before getting the hang of it.

It’d been much easier to pass as a girl when he was younger, before his face and body had matured. A little too well at times… With time, it had gotten a little more challenging due to his broadening shoulders and Adam’s apple. But with a bit of contouring, he was able to soften the lines of his face and draw attention away from the lump in his throat. Today’s disguise had a high collar too, which would be tremendously helpful. The poofy sleeves of the uniform were also a blessing. There would be no need to change his posture for long periods…

The underwear was suitably feminine just in case, which admittedly wasn’t the most comfortable to arrange… Then a bit of baby powder to the legs so he could pull on the panty hose on without ripping them… He failed the first attempt and had to go for a second before strapping on a pair of black shiny Mary Janes. For a touch of realism, he even put on an anklet. Next came the one-piece dress which took some work tying the bow in the back, but he managed well enough. Tucking his natural hair under a bit of nylon, he picked out a wig and carefully applied and pinned it to make sure there would be no unwanted slippages…

Its style reminded him a little of Miyeon’s, with long bangs… Although unlike her lovely Ph.D.Pepper brown, the wig was nearly a wine red. With care he styled it straight and to where it’d naturally fall towards his shoulders to help hide his more masculine features. Real maids might put it back, but he felt for a younger maid down might make more sense. She felt like the sort of girl who was keeping her eye out for a rich husband… After a quick change of the lipstick, he felt pretty – pretty confident even.

Grabbing the last of his things, he checked the chat and bantered a bit to give the illusion of everything being normal.

As much as he wanted to take his favorite, prudence spoke to sticking to his “normal” car which blended in much more easily… Even then, he took it only as far as needed to find a train
station which he rode while wearing a light coat to hide his maid uniform. To anyone unaware of what was below the stylish little rain coat, he was just another young woman. There were glances at his legs and at his modest chest. While some men definitely preferred larger ones, he found it best blend in with something within the normal range… Not that he wouldn’t have appreciated the storage space, but it would’ve come with more issues – such as more attention.

Once off the train, his focus became maintaining the image. Women had a very different walk and manner of speaking than men. That meant watching the length of his steps; in general, ladies had a shorter stride… The most challenging was going to be his voice. Aside from the different mannerisms and seemingly unique patterns of female speech – his distinctly male voice could give him away. When he was younger, it was much easier. As his voice had deepened, however, it was something that took some preparation. He’d done some singing in the car and a few vocal exercises while getting ready, but even then it took a tightening of his throat and practice down to even the way he held his tongue to get it to come out right. Even for a genius like him, it was a bit of a stretch… It was kinesthetic – not exactly his strength…

After checking in with his liaison, they met the manager and got access to the upper floors to clean up after the prior guests before the target would arrive that evening. It was a flurry of activity drilling holes, laying wires, setting wireless things in place discretely as possible, puttying things up to hide the work, and then cleaning the actual room. Penthouse was done… That left elevators, halls, the event hall, and dining room. The whole while he had to keep an eye over his shoulder just in case his liaison sold him out.

They had just finished setting up the equipment in the event hall and were on the way to the auxiliary target’s room when he heard a familiar laugh. It was enough to put a falter in his step…

It couldn’t be…

His contact eased her pace as he glanced back, pretending to be dusting off his shoulder.

Standing in the lobby with someone from the hotel management was Yoosung and Miyeon… His friend was practically glowing. There was a smile a mile wide on the boy’s face between glances to the short girl beside him… They looked almost like a cute, happy couple… The college student was just a few inches shorter than himself, but even next to him she was petite. So cute…

Her bangs were long as always, but she’d made some attempt to pull them back with hairclips to look more professional. Rather than her lazy wear, she sported a comfy looking peach sweater belted to accentuate her figure and chocolate colored skirt.

He wanted to go over, to say hi… To see if either of them would recognize him…

Instead, his pace quickened as he followed his look out to the next point. They ended up taking an elevator up three floors, only to have a walkway overlooking the lobby. All the while, his eyes kept searching the crowd for Yoosung’s blonde head with the knowledge that Miyeon would likely be right beside him.

The two of them seemed to be getting along; Yoosung was holding himself with confidence. Miyeon was smiling and laughing… He ought to be happy – it was what he was working towards… The both of them together so that they could both be a couple. I mean it was sort of like a date for them, right? Yet seeing it only made him feel terribly empty and desperate. He wanted to be with them…

He wanted to be with her…
As he worked, Seven could feel his hair standing up on his arms just thinking about how close she could be even a floor below him. It was imperative he get this job over and done with… This wasn’t something fun – it was a risk to the whole operation. But there was more…

He’d seen agents hurt on missions, but this… This was something he didn’t want to witness in person. It would be bittersweet enough hearing about it from Yoosung later on. What if they got along REALLY well and they kissed? He’d be wearing a costume then too, smiling and cheering his friend on.

God forgive him for his envy. Heaven knew he had the best of intentions… He pleaded for the good lord to give him strength to endure it.

Suddenly there was a stinging in his eye that made him stop work with the drill. The contact seemed to catch a bit of debris from where he’d been drilling into the paneling… It itched.

“You okay?”

“Yeah… Think I just got something in my eye,” he murmured. “… I’ll be right back…”

His contact nodded, picking up where he’d left off while he retreated to the restroom. There were a woman and her daughter in there along with an older woman when he first entered. Fortunately, he was able to retreat to a stall where he removed the contact to check for any damage. The air beneath the stall door flowed as they moved, finished their business, and left leaving the bathroom surprisingly still while he removed the contact from his eye. The door squeaked open again as someone else entered. After a moment to make sure it wasn’t a threat, he retreated to the sink, washed the contact off under the guise of washing his hands and slipped it back in.

His make-up looked mostly okay, but his eyes were red and irritated… It looked like he’d been crying. Dampening some towels with cool water, he very gingerly patted the area to avoid messing up the blending. As the stall door opened, he recognized the silhouette, although Miyeon seemed to be looking at her phone…

He couldn’t just run out. Instead he hung his head, utterly panicking for how to react. If was just the two of them, maybe it would be okay – but if anyone saw them together… No he had to keep incognito. What the hell was she even doing on this level – the event hall was… Of course, the conference room was on the third floor… They were probably seeing if it would work as an operations room for the technical aspects of the charity party.

As she began washing her hands, the scent of her perfume made his heart flutter. It was sweet and light… Maybe something vanilla with a splash of something cherry. He sniffled uncomfortably, noticing her head tilt. A shuddering breath escaped him… He was being too conspicuous…

“Are you okay…?” she asked softly.

“Just a fight with the boyfriend,” he answered using the guise of having been crying to mask the deepness of his voice.

“That’s awful… Can I get you anything?”

He shook his head and sniffled dramatically.

Very gently Miyeon patted his back, sending a chill through him. How long had it been since anyone had touched him in a way that wasn’t meant to cause harm? His muscles tightened
reflexively from fear, but desperately he wanted more… She mistook this for a sob too, which only
drew a rub between the shoulders as she reached into her bag.

“Maybe do something nice for yourself and give him some time…? If you mean
that much to each other, you’ll work it out… So just hang in there okay?” the girl assured, setting a
little package of disposable tissues on the counter next to him. There was that concern on her face,
but a kind, reassuring smile… The one Rika and V would give him… She wore it better. On
Miyeon, it seemed more sincere.

Hiding his face as though he were wiping tears he thanked her, starting the sink back up to
help sell the act. Once she left he found himself holding one of the tissues to his face… Her scent
was all over it. Everything about her was pure and sweet.

After freshening himself up, he arranged to start setting up the equipment on the roof while
his contact finished the remaining three floors. As he took a spot on the elevator, his imagination
grew very clear… Until that point, it had only been flashes and slight feelings: this time, with the
view of the city through the glass, the baser part of him knew exactly what it wanted.

Seven wanted to find the petite girl and lure her away from her companion. To see how
long it’d take before her eyes lit up with recognition. They’d retreat to the elevator and as the door
closed, the impetuous little thing would be in his arms. The sweetness of her scent would fill his
lungs, her breasts pressed to his own, and her lips caressing his own with increasing vigor. It
wouldn’t be just a mere peck. No, he wanted to taste her fully, for his lipstick to stain her his color…
He wanted all of her to be red, blushing, and breathless…

The peach sweater would be pushed up around her elbows and over her head as he pinned
her hands to the cool glass, behind her the sunset would make her glow gold and scarlet.

How her delicate neck would reverberate with little mewls as he nibbled at the soft skin
leaving a smear of color until there was no costume… Her pale, little hands pulling his wig free so
that there was no mistaking who the stranger in her arms was. Seeing him, Miyeon would wrap her
arms around his shoulders as he hoisted her up against the glass. She’d want to belong only to him...
Even now his mind was working on how her voice would sound conveying as much. The stray
strands of his wig brushing against his ears wasn’t helping; it could easily be her breath as she clung
to him while they joined. How very soft her thighs would feel as her delicate legs wrapped around
his waist… The city below could look up and see their skirts swaying as he thru__

Get your shit together! he ordered himself, but it was too late.

Very clearly he could imagine her tied up with his pantyhose while he explored her
feminine frame… Or even having Miyeon tying him down while before what she wanted of him was
thrilling. It was strange, wonderful, and absolutely the worst to even consider such things to begin
with…

It wasn’t that he’d never had such thoughts but having them about someone he knew and
so vividly was very different… This was dangerous, especially now!

The more he tried to suppress the thought, the more debauched it got. It was almost as if
707 and Luciel were separate entities within him… 707 argued not with logic, but by spamming the
other part of him with lewd thoughts as if sheer quantity made an argument for why it should be
considered. Luciel was fighting hard to keep him alive. The boy in him was curious about such
things, but at the same time, wanted to play more innocent games with her… Somewhere deeper still,
another part of him wanted all of those things, but also something else; to hold her after they were
both satisfied, to walk out hand in hand, and to find a quiet spot to look up at the stars and talk about
life, the universe, everything.

There had been a time when it was nothing for him to turn such things off, but it was impossible in the moment. Some relief came as the elevator stopped and a service stairwell as necessary to reach the top. He bit his tongue, using the pain to help him focus as he set up the last of the equipment. When his contact emerged, he used a jail broken back up phone to finish the installation and tested the surveillance of each of the 8 points, 1 to 4 camera and microphones each, before both were satisfied. That just left watching and waiting for their mark to make it. The contact would get first watch; he would get second…

Security seemed to take an interest in him on the way out, but he got out without much fuss. After checking with his liaison, it was safe to start the train ride back to his car. Even then, it wasn’t a straight path. He took a series of trains going another direction before using the routes to circle back aground to where he’d left his vehicle. The drive back was silent…

Parking in the garage of his fortified house, for several minutes he did nothing but sit in his car, his head against the steering wheel… What the hell was wrong with him? What if the agency knew Miyeon had talked to him in the restroom?

He needed to remember his place…

Retreating inside, he first stopped in the bathroom to tidy up. As his golden eyes focused on the mirror, an observation soured his mood further. Studying the lines of his face only worsened it… With the make up having ran a little thanks to the incident with the contact, traces of a familiar and unpleasant face were so much more visible now. The bone structure was his mother’s… The fine details belonged to a man he’d never met, but whose countenance he’d seen on television. He hastened to wipe the make-up away, scrubbing so hard his face started to sting.

There must’ve been sometime before he was born when his mother had been a normal, pretty girl… That was, after all, why the man who had sired him had likely slept with her… But that wasn’t the “mother” he knew. He knew the yells that would go from coherent to slurring, the sting of being struck and burned, Saeran’s cries, hunger, and the foul odor of vomit, urine, cigarettes, and beer mixing with the taste of blood and his own sick… Even now he remembered her bar schedule and when she’d be out… When she expected him to go to the store and when he had to be back… The smell the church…

Looking back up in the mirror, there was no soap deep cleansing enough to wash that away.

It didn’t matter how far he ran, what his name became, or who he left behind… That woman would always be there inside him… Because she was so engrained into him, he’d always feel strange and dangerous.

The RFA was the closest he’d ever had to family, and even they had to be kept safe from her even though she had passed years ago. According to a coroner’s report it had been suicide, but Seven knew better. It was probably a case where his father finally caught up to her, but as long as Saeran was safe, he didn’t care…

V and Rika had promised him…

In turn, he’d promised to take care of the RFA…

Miyeon was in the RFA…
If he protected the RFA and found the hacker, she’d be safe.

He just had to focus and step back… It used to be so easy.

The best thing he could do was to keep her at a distance…

But he didn’t want to… Not without a fight…

Staring back at him in the mirror now was someone Seven didn’t recognize…
Chapter 11:

Jumin’s life had a schedule and very often had a routine that marked his every moment from the time he woke with Elizabeth’s gentle paw brushing his cheek to the moment he laid down at night with her curled up beside his arm. There were some deviations from the general course, but these were generally infrequent and of very little consequence. When they were of any importance, Assistant Kang could be counted upon to remedy them. The shift of his 9:00 AM meeting to 10:15 AM – easily handled. The proposal for their clothing retailers to carry extended sizes for pets – also readily dispatched by his assistant. One crying employee already down for the day, which meant another who would weep openly before him was unlikely for the rest of the day.

It was lunch before he knew it.

Driver Kim drove him home for gourmet lunch with Elizabeth III, taking the usual short cuts to avoid traffic, and he was back on the way up to his office by 1:00 PM. There was a deviation, however…

Assistant Kang was usually at her desk, her annoying voice chattering platitudes to clientele about any number of things. Today, however, she wasn’t there. While he had been informed his assistant would be taking her lunch late, that normally didn’t impact his ability to find her. It was vexing, and though not quite annoyed, it didn’t suit him. Regardless of whether or not it was scheduled time for herself, his needs took priority. That was, afterall, the contract she’d signed.

A quick call to her and confirmation lead him down to the first floor again, where Assistant Kang stood talking to a petite woman with long dark hair. Was it perhaps a relative?

Adjusting his cuff, he pushed forward.

“Assistant Kang…”

“Mr. Han, my apologies, I only stepped down for a moment.”

The shorter girl with the bright eyes seemed to step behind Jaehee just a little, her head lowering like Elizabeth would when she was startled. He wasn’t sure if he liked the acknowledgement of his dominance or whether the weakness it inferred in her annoyed him.

“…I’ll be in my office.”

“Mr. Han… Sir… Before you go…” There was no hiding his displeasure for the delay. His Assistant unlike others did not cower or flinch before him. Rather she spoke clearly – to his further displeasure. “This is Ms. Miyeon Ko, our new party organizer,” the assistant noted, holding a brightly colored bag with a cat pattern along it.

His gaze then returned to girl in the peach colored sweater at his assistant’s side, her expression lacked the lust or feigned niceness as most women imposed upon him. Rather she looked like a cat: delicate, curious, unassuming… Politely he offered his hand, finding hers were rather small and soft like a fine silk ribbon.

“Ms.Ko…”
“Good afternoon, Jumin,” she answered with a charming voice while smiling brightly. “Did you have a good lunch?”

“It was adequate. I trust Assistant Kang has been helping you with an important matter related to our mutual friends?”

“Ms. Ko, in her generosity, has brought me lunch for today,” his assistant clarified, looking a little embarrassed.

“…Why?”

It was by no means a dig at his secretary’s pride but a sincere question.

“Convenience food store food isn’t very healthy, so I thought I’d save her time and brought her some lunch,” the girl offered. “I also brought cookies! Here!”

The girl offered up to him a small pastel colored box with a simplistic drawing of Elizabeth the III stretching across it, and blue ribbon binding it up.

He accepted, if only because the picture but was certainly perplexed. Was this a commoner custom?

“Thank you…” Girls brought things like this when they had affection for a man, if the dramas he watched were correct. Jaehee had gotten some too, as well as lunch, so perhaps this was commoner business practice? It was definitely a better offering than some he’d gotten from his fellow executives, as he opened up to see that there were macarons shaped like cats. It was quaintly charming. “Truly… Thank you.”

Her smile was so sincere…

For some reason, he felt strange. “I’ll be in my office… Good afternoon, Miyeon.”

“Have a good afternoon, Jumin!”

As he boarded the elevator, he saw the two of them talking still. Both were smiling. It looked strange on Jaehee, whose stoic expression robbed the joy from his every working moment… On the girl, however, it seemed quite natural. For some reason, he didn’t want to look away. Her fiery defense of his employees seemed in direct opposition to the delicate, graceful creature he saw. So engrossed were his thoughts that he missed hitting the button to his floor. The chairman to be instead took the stairs back down, getting a few looks and quick steps aside from employees carrying dockets.

The rest of the afternoon he had trouble focusing and found consolation in only checking his apartment camera feed to see Elizabeth the III soaking up the warm sunshine coming in from the Eastern facing window and the chat to see if Miyeon was on.

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When his last class was over, Yoosung could scarcely get to the dorms to change fast enough. It wouldn’t be a long trip to the hotel where he was supposed to meet the new party planner, but he wanted to freshen up some. For twenty minutes he’d agonized over what to wear after having spent time the night before second guessing himself. The student just barely made it onto the train. Any work he’d done to tidy up was likely put to waste as he ended up trotting the way through the crowd to make sure he made it in time. He wanted to be early – to make a great impression – there was a five minute leeway.
Climbing up onto a set of steps, he looked around looking for a familiar face. It was a nice sunny day out; a great day to make a good memory! His heart was racing and blood coursing thinking of all the possibilities. It wasn’t like he’d picked out the names of their children, but he could already imagine taking her home to meet his mother for approval… If it was true love though, he didn’t care if his mother liked her or not.

It was right on the dot of the meeting time and still no sign of her.

She wouldn’t stand him up – this was for the RFA. Miyeon promised to stay with them…

Just as he picked his phone up to dial her, worried that perhaps something had happened, it started to ring. He answered without a thought.

“Sorry, Yoosung! I am SO sorry! Running a bit late!”

“That’s fine!” he assured, feeling a little dizzy hearing her voice say his name.

Anyone with a voice like that had to be cute, just like Seven said… Even then, she was so nice and good at games…

He craned his neck around, hopping up on the brick work without a care of who saw… This was going to be a moment he would remember forever; the blonde was sure of it! Just needed to look for a girl on a phone… But there were lots of those. If only there were mods in life to mark essential characters, he desperately wished to himself.

“I see the hotel now! Are you standing on the planter?”

His cheeks reddened as his violet eyes scanned the crowd for anyone with a phone whose gaze was on him. There were a few of those too. “Yeah! I can’t see you though!”

“Peach sweater!” she answered.

Was that more orange or pink? Yoosung bobbed anxiously until he saw a small girl hopping and waving as the crowd parted around her. He nearly dropped his phone. Seven wasn’t joking… His eyes remained fixed on her as she made a skitter towards the hotel steps; his feet were already working to meet her halfway. The blonde threw himself into the crowd to pull her out. Without thinking, he took her hand and lead her through, pulling and apologizing as she lowered her head to hide near him.

“Thank you so much,” Miyeon murmured, breathing with a shudder with both hands on her breast as he let go…

He was too enamored with being close to her to even notice that she was pale. Her long bangs nearly hid her large, cheerful eyes. Her skin was fair and smooth… Her lips were full and almost matched her sweater in color. It made him swallow thinking of what he wanted to do to them. She was shorter than him, which was a definite plus – not that he had anything against taller girls, and despite the situation, she was already smiling which in turn made him grin from ear to ear. The little mushroom from an old NES hanging from her purse sealed the deal… There was NO way he was letting Zen have her.

“…You’re okay, right?”

Her lips formed a cute little shape as she huffed out the last bit of anxiety. “You’re my hero, Superman Yoosung!”
The college student beamed before turning his gaze up to the steps, then back to her as she pulled out her phone. There was a cute little cat charm hanging from it along with a case that was the violet of his eyes... Stepping close to her, Yoosung could smell vanilla... It was hard to focus as she pulled up an app to check the information.

“So... When we get in, we need to find Mr. Gwon. We need to definitely check out these areas while we’re here,” she noted, pointing to a list which the college student studied before taking out his own phone and copied. “I know you guys said you wanted a small party, but I think we can manage something at LEAST as big as what Rika pulled off. Especially since it’s been awhile.”

Though the girl didn’t look anything like his cousin, but her spirit seemed similar. Focused... Strong... But she felt so much warmer than Rika... Desperately he wanted to be of help to her, to be indispensable. For the honey color of her eyes to focus only on him.

“...We might want to see if they have AV equipment too,” the young man noted reaching over to check her list.

She didn’t seem afraid of him, but her cheeks did seem to redden when he got closer... Maybe Miyeon liked him too?

“...AV?”

“Yeah, we usually have a big screen to show pictures and names of the donors and to announce winners of prizes.”

“Ah...! I totally spaced on that,” the girl mewed.

“It’s fine! I mean – we remember now, right?”

“Right!”

As they walked up the steps, it was nice to have someone who wasn’t out pacing him. Her cute little sneakers held small feet... Everything about her was adorable to him...

Once they were at the front desk, it was a flurry of activity going from conference hall to dining area to other potential venues within the one location. Miyeon was a little concerned about the cost point, but it took only reminding her that C&R via Jumin would be helping to ease her back into a smile. The venue would be worth every penny too. Its walls were colored with rich fabrics, ornate chandeliers, an indoor waterfall and fountain, and all came with a variety of seating options. While they did offer onsite catering, they had contracting options too.

Now and then Yoosung could almost feel as though someone were watching them, although it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Maybe Rika’s ghost was giving her blessing to them as a couple. The short girl certainly could summon his cousin’s charisma when the need arose over paperwork.

Very quickly the college student reaffirmed that they worked just as well as a team in real life as they did LOLOL. He was a natural tank and guild leader, she was a natural support and second in command... The person showing the facilities was trying to put a hard sell on them and charge more simply because of their young appearance. But between his recollection of the past party and Miyeon’s subtle inferring that another place was already well ahead in favor, they were able to come to more suitable terms. Jaehee’s layout of the deductibles that they could have for hosting the charity were also put to good use. Already he was thinking of how far he could go with her supporting him. He could be come anything or go anywhere she wanted! Knowing her though,
she would never ask him to do anything he didn’t want… Not that he’d mind… As long as she praised him.

At the end of the tour, Miyeon excused herself to the restroom, leaving him to wait in the main lobby. The realization hit him that they could do so much more now that they were relatively free – that was – if she was free too. While his mind rolled over the options and tension built over what to ask her out to do, the girl re-merged, looking a little less cheerful.

“Is everything okay?”

The girl nodded offering a sad smile that made him feel urgent, “Just ran across someone having a rough day.”

“What happened?” he asked, his voice wavering with concern.

“One of the hotel staff was in the bathroom… Bless her heart… Poor thing said she had a fight with her boyfriend,” Miyeon explained, her lips tightening into a pout. “She’d cried herself hoarse…”

“It’ll be okay! Love can overcome anything,” Yoosung assured her before anxiously looking at his feet. “If it were me and my girlfriend, I’d probably do something really nice for her…”

“Aww… That sounds like you.”

His smile warmed as he rubbed his shoulder to ease the tension. “You know since this didn’t take as long as you thought, we could maybe do something fun together…? I mean, we might not get a chance to see each other until just before the party.”

Her eyes widened and the rose in her cheeks deepened. “…We could, but… I told Seven I’d be back as soon as I could.”

Something about that made him feel itchy deep in his heart … “I think he’d be okay with it if we just let him know. I mean, he wouldn’t have let you out of the apartment if it was that dangerous, right?”

“You’re probably right… But the thing, he said he’d be out today, and he hasn’t replied to the message I sent him… Or my calls.”

“He’s usually busy, so I don’t think that it’s anything bad.”

Even while assuring her, he tried to rationalize his worries… It was just because the hacker was handling security – he didn’t need to be jealous. Seven had always been sincere and never had shown interest in girls. It was silly to worry… Zen was the threat.

Miyeon’s hands curled around the strap of her purse as her eyes darkened. “…I just worry.”

“You don’t need to worry,” Yoosung soothed.

“…Everyone keeps saying that.”

“I probably know him better than anyone, except maybe V…” the young man’s voice ebbed at the mention of his cousin’s former lover. “He’s really smart… And weird… But I think geniuses are always supposed to be a bit strange. He’s really okay. I mean he works for that agency, but I don’t think they have him do anything too weird…. He’s probably just super loaded
You’re probably right,” Miyeon affirmed aloud. “Seven also said you usually are free.”

“Really?”

“He did… He also seems a little worried about you.”

“Seven doesn’t worry,” Yoosung replied, not wanting to mention his real thoughts on why his friend would say such things. He wanted to hug the bespectacled prankster and vowed to take back every bad thing he’d ever said if Miyeon became his girlfriend… He’d owe his friend so much… “Really I’m okay…I know how it looks… Playing so much LOLOL and skipping classes. But I’m a student; this is the time in my life when I’m supposed to be figuring stuff out, right?”

“Right!”

“Thank you! You so get it!”

As they walked out of the hotel, the girl glanced at him after tinkering with her phone. He did his best to not seem too interested in who she was talking to, but he was ferociously curious. “…As long as I’m back before dark, I think it should be okay to hang out a little more.”

“That’s great!” he piped taking her hand again. “C’mon I know just the place!”

It was worth looking back to see her blush and look so cutely embarrassed as he lead her through the crowd. Her hand was so soft and warm. Though she wasn’t holding on too firmly, he took that as her being just as shy. That made him all the more eager to show that he could be a strong, useful boyfriend. Her anxious manner calmed some as they stepped into an arcade. The familiar sensory assault of digital noises, music, and light seemed comforting to her when compared to being in large groups of people. Maybe he wasn’t imagining her looking afraid?

Yoosung kept close, offering to buy her some tokens, only to find she was fine getting her own… Independent women weren’t a bad thing, he affirmed his appreciation of that accordingly. This acknowledgement drew a nervous chuckle from her. Maybe she wanted someone to rely on? Hopefully that could be him.

Though he wasn’t a fan of scary things, but his new friend apparently was. She immediately zeroed in on an older themed zombie shooter complete with old fashioned gun peripherals. His usual forte was MMO’s and fighting games; so it took a few moments for him to find his speed. Even then his panicked aiming was way off, especially compared to Miyeon. Every time he’d glance over, her body would be lined up like a police officer’s with a look of intense, unwavering focus between reloads… In a way, it reminded him of Seven the summer that they’d teamed up to take the top scores of every arcade. It was so cool… Her petite frame was so fierce, so powerful, so amazing. Eventually he was looking at her more than the game, yet her attention never drifted. She managed to keep their health bars on full for the entire game while a small crowd gathered. There were other guys who’d noticed her and were already vying for her attention.

“Who’s the cutie with the high score?”

“Is that loser beside her her boyfriend?”

“No, idea. Never seen her in here though.”
“Dude - honey thighs has been carrying him the whole game…”

“I’d like to carry her…”

“Hey Dead-eye! What’s your number?”

He only edged closer to her to make it clear that in a sense they were “together”. Maybe a movie would’ve been better.

“…I guess you’re my hero now,” he blurted out before he could help himself.

Miyeon’s eyes finally peered up to him, seemingly unaware of the throng that was gathering around them. In that moment, her attention was wholly his… His heart stopped and the world slowed for just a moment. He wanted her to look at him like that forever: her smile broad and playful with her pearly teeth bared with sheer joy… Maybe more… Yoosung’s cheeks reddened as a nervous chuckle escaped him.

“Boss!”

Shaking his head to snap himself out of it, he called back and did his best to match her. His overall ranking by the end was only 35% of the damage done with an accuracy of less than 45%. It’d been awhile since he’d played a game like this… As they stepped off to let another person play, the throng of men and boys looking at them weighed heavily upon him. Yet he puffed his chest out and held his chin high until someone grabbed her shoulder.

“Calamity Jane! Digits - Please!”

She shrunk back and before Yoosung could say anything, the girl darted out onto the street. Shaking his head at the stranger, he dashed out after her, finding her just a few buildings up looking pale and hanging her head, pulling up the collar of her turtleneck to keep anyone from seeing her. A realization hit him…

“…I guess you have to put up with that a lot since you’re a girl…”

Miyeon’s eyes peered at him from under her long, thick lashes as she tucked her chin even more. “…More than I used to… Before I had to take time off from school, I used to have a group of friends I could go with… Not so much these days,” the girl replied.

“…Yeah,” his voice trailed. The truth was that he just wanted to touch her, but shielding her had been a nice bonus. “…With the hacker and stuff, you must really be worried to even leave the apartment now… But it’s okay now – you have me. Seven can sometimes play too, so the three of us can comeback and beat their scores --- we’ll see who’ll be laughing then!” This brightened her a little, but he could still sense her uneasiness. “I can walk you home if you’re scared.”

“As much as that would make me feel better…I can’t give away the location of the apartment.”

“Seven won’t know.”

She shook her head. “… I promised that I’d keep it a secret. I had a lot of fun today though!”

“… Can I at least walk you to the station or till you get a taxi?”
What he really wanted to say was, *Don’t go.*

This was agreed to with a small nod of the head. On the way, the talk changed to the upcoming ranked match he had and some concerns about class. He wanted to ask her more about herself, but she seemed distracted. It worried him, but also made him feel strangely jealous… Maybe there was someone she liked already? Was he already too late? Rather than show it, the student kept himself open. He didn’t want to sabotage himself, not when they seemed to get along so well.

“You’ll call me once you get back to the apartment though, right? Or like post in chat?”

“I promise,” she assured him before giving him a hug around the shoulders and offering up a box of cute little sandwich cookies. His box was covered in rainbows and scribbles of his avatar

“Ah! You even got my new armor!” he beamed. “I’m going to eat every last one of these!”

Miyeon giggled sweetly. “Not all at once – you might get a tummy ache.”

“It’d be worth it for you,” the student soothed.

Her cheeks reddened again. As her eyes drifted up to his, the want to kiss her flashed through his mind. “Thank you for everything, Yoosung. Be safe getting back to the dorms!”

“I… Uh… Text me when you get home, okay?”

Perhaps it was still too early for a first kiss…

“I will… Bye!”

“Bye!”

Something in him couldn’t leave it there. Yoosung discreetly trotted behind the taxi for a bit, making use of the lights it stopped at to get as much of an idea of where she was before an opening in traffic left him unable to follow by foot anymore. While he wanted to make sure she got home safe, another part of him wanted to find the apartment if only to find out the truth about Rika…

…If he could get Miyeon to love him, she’d agree to help him… That’s what lovers did, right?

As he walked home, the more complicated his thoughts became. It would be wrong to ask something like that of her. She had given her word, and it would be a bad thing to have her break that for him. At the same time, if they were together, he’d do anything for her… He wasn’t like V. It made him dizzy and sick with emotions he hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Checking the chat, he saw that she’d made it home fine, although he still ended up dialing Seven. The hacker didn’t pick up.

Rather than letting the lack of someone to share the events with overcome him, Yoosung checked the messenger… He allowed himself only one cookie, nibbling it in little mouthfuls to fully enjoy the flavor. She did make them for everyone, but his box had so much cute personalized stuff on it… The cookies he ate were filled with her essence. His entire body felt warm and alive in new and wonderful ways… It wasn’t a cookie that he wanted on his lips though.
He wanted to feel Miyeon in his arms and to hear her voice through his headset… Most of all, he wanted to bring her to his room so they could be together. Covering his face, he let out a happy little cheer as he settled into his chair to play LOLOL.

On the ride home, Miyeon found herself dialing her hacker friend’s number for the second time. Still no response. Her worries deepened. Maybe the other hacker had found him and gotten to him? What if that agency he supposedly worked for did something to him? What if the poor diet he’d had made him have a heart attack or worse? What if those guys from the arcade had hurt Yoosung and followed her? The thoughts racing through her head overwhelmed her until all she could do was lean against the glass trying to force herself to breathe normally. Some days it was easier to calm herself down from this state, but not today…

As she made her way up to the apartment, her sweat ran cold as every person around her felt like a threat. Once she was back in sight of the CCTV camera, a wave of relief washed over her. Never in her life had she been so grateful to see a blinking red light. The door didn’t click, which seemed to infer that Seven wasn’t watching the stream currently. She quickly shut and latched the door behind her, letting her back rest to it as she desperately tried to force air into her lungs.

It took several moments of deep breathing before she could finally stand without feeling as though the world were sloshing. There was a text from Zen letting her know that from where he was traveling he might not be able to call, which was a disappointment, but at least he was safe.

Still no word from her eccentric guardian angel.

The girl retreated to the bathroom, showering then filling the tub with water so her body could soak in the warmth. All of her felt so very tired… The temptation to nap was there, but as she let her head slip under the water, the fear came back with thoughts of her brother…

Miyeon forced herself back up, hugging her knees tightly. She wanted someone to stroke her hair, to hold her, to tell her she was safe… It wasn’t even that the girl wanted a lover; it would be enough to just have someone to come home to. Maybe it was time to sell the family home and get a roommate… That meant having to deal with a stranger. Her stomach lurched.

For now it was enough to have the water making her hair float like a kelp forest…

She was drifting in a warm, tranquil lagoon on a distant world…

Her phone rang… As tempted as she was not to answer, her loneliness overpowered her weariness with the day. It didn’t even matter who was calling…

“Hello…?”

“Oh… You picked up,” her friend observed, seemingly surprised. Immediately Miyeon covered herself with her arms and closed her knees tight. It wasn’t like Seven could see her, but it felt so vulnerable talking to him naked. “I saw where you called earlier which worried me… But I saw you made it home okay, which made me realize that your voice sounded like… Which is really weird since I have a super good memory… So I thought I’d call to hear you and make sure it really was Miyeon who I saw on the security feed…” his voice trailed. “…Now your voice is back in my brain… Wonder why I couldn’t remember it before.”

He was rambling more than usual… Had something happened?

“You haven’t exactly been sleeping well since I joined the chat,” the girl
answered, idly twirling a strand of wet hair between her fingers. “Seven… Are you okay?”

“Maybe…?” he groaned. “Must be all the Dr.Pepper… Ugh…” There was a sigh. “…I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

What would it take to cheer him up?

“I was taking a bath,” Miyeon confessed before she could help herself. Not that the sound of water wouldn’t eventually give her away. There was a nervous chuckle on the other end of the line which woke her a little. “And now innocence is gone… Seven… How could you?”

“Ah! We’re just!” For once he sounded truly flustered. “…Your innocence is… It’s not like I slept with you or anything!”

“I can’t wear white on my wedding day now, you’ve defiled me… Your priestess is no longer pure… You should take responsibility!”

There was an agonized sound on the other end. “Ok! Ok! I’ll take responsibility. But first I’ll need you to fill out a form in triplicate stating your favorite snack foods, favorite shows, most embarrassing moment… your favorite dream…”

“You want my three sizes too? My chest is_..._”

“Miss! Miss! Miss!” Seven sighed. “…That’s not necessary.”

“It’s okay, as long as it’s you, God Seven…”

“Gah!!! I’m really going to have a nose bleed!!”

For the first time ever, there was quiet between them aside from his sniffling on the other end of the line. Was he really bleeding? Miyeon almost felt embarrassed at herself; truthfully she didn’t know why she’d even said such a thing. Perhaps it was just because she knew nothing would probably ever come of it. An even more bold part of her wanted to take pictures or ask if he could actually see her through the camera on the phone to get his opinion on what he saw. Something about talking with Seven made her feel comfortable and open… Nothing was ever “weird”.

“…Did you have a good day?”

“We did! We managed to talk the cost down too thanks to Yoosung’s negotiating skills and Jaehee’s forethought! It would’ve been more fun if you could’ve come. Your day must’ve been exhausting, I can hear how tired you are…”

“Just… talking to you helps. Every time I see you’re online I get a little excited.”

“We do sort of have our own wavelength don’t we?”

“Maybe that’s why – you’re like an outlet!”

“707… Charge!”

“Ah! Up to 1000% percent!” he cheered, sounding a little more like himself. “And back down to 79… So I… Wasn’t kidding about those questions before.”

“There were so many though!”

“Okay – okay – I’ll pick one. Which Joltron mech was your favorite?”
“Ah!!! No fair! That one’s hard!”

“You said I got a question,” his words were elongated as he teased her.

“I sort of want the whole set --- but if I had to pick a single piece – I guess I’d probably go for the red tiger! It’s a big kitty of death that shoots fire! And the flaming claw sword it gets! Impractical – but COOL AS HELL! The feather scythe the silver crow gets is pretty nice though…”

“Right answer!”

“God Seven has impeccable taste!”

“Next question ~!”

“Aye!”

“What is your… favorite… snack?!”

She pondered it a moment. “Right now… Honey Buddha Chips! Kancho choco biscuits are a close second."

“The harmony of sweet and salty,” the hacker pondered aloud like an old sage.

“A delicate balance~! Although I like spicy sometimes too…”

“You so get it…! Question two – would you come with me to the space station?”

“Yes! Yes, please! We could totally steal all the astronaut ice cream! How do we get up there though?”

“…I suppose it would be hard without a rocket… But I have an idea. Hold on!”

Miyeon listened attentively as the sound of keys clicking caught her attention before she started to see her phone’s screen flickering. At this point, she was too impressed to be worried. This was Seven, after all; there was nothing to be afraid of.

“Ba da da – da da da DAA! Open up that little star icon!”

“God Seven, what did you do?”

He hummed with feigned annoyance.

The girl did as asked, finding that her phone immediately pulled up a stargazer app that was superior to one that she’d used before. With her phone pointing at the wall, she could see the star placement through the wall, through the other side of the planet, and above her. “Wow…”

“Goin’ to the space station, and we’re gonna get ma---aaa-aaa-ried,” he sang. “So… If you look to the west and about horizon level… You should see it.”

Miyeon wasn’t familiar with the song but joined him the second time around until he broke into an awkward throaty laugh.

“Stargazing in the bathtub…” the girl observed. “Do they even make veils that work in zero G?”
“Hmm… Maybe we could use safety pins to hold it in place?”

“With baby’s breath so it looks “natural”. I’d probably have to wear shorts under the dress too. Unless it’s just the groom at the ceremony…”

The hacker hummed in affirmation before a quiet settled.

“What sign are you, Seven?”

“Caution.”

The girl giggled.

“You’re a Virgo, right?”

“Yeah.”

Once again his voice was low and was thoughtful. “Now that I think about it… You two do have things in common.”

“Who?”

“The other Virgo of the RFA.”

“Who is that?”

“That’s a secret.”

“So not you.”

“Nope… But we already share a planet close to the sun… Maybe that’s why it’s so warm.”

Miyeon understood immediately his meaning. He was a Gemini…

“That actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Miyeon, do you believe that stars guide people’s lives?”

Something about the way he said her name made the tiny bird inside her heart flutter.

“… No, but there are things like availability of food and the types of illnesses – and holidays – that might have impacts on personality and what sorts of options they have open. People born during certain months are more likely to develop allergies for example…”

“My priestess is wise.”

“I’d like to think being your disciple gave me a stat buff – God 707’s Blessing +15 Wisdom, +100 Protection, and a stacking H.O.T. buff of happiness,” she quipped. “Does his awesomeness get anything from having a disciple?”

There was a chuckle on the other end, before a sigh.

“I know I mentioned it in chat – that I haven’t made progress finding that hacker yet.” A quiet settled over the line as she heard motion on the other end of the line as he likely changed position. “…From where I was out on business today, there’s a whole stack of work waiting for me that I have to get done… So it’s going to be a little longer. The defender of justice asks that you be patient.”
“You don’t need to apologize, Luciel… I know you’re doing everything you can.”

“How?”
“…I feel it… Plus I can see when you’re online… You never sleep it seems.”

“I’ll sleep plenty once I’m sure everyone is safe.”

Her cheeks blushed. “You can’t see me through the phone, can you?”

“…I could tap the camera if I had to,” he replied, his voice hesitant. “But I wouldn’t do that to you – not unless there was a good reason.”

“…Could you make it to where I can see you?”

There was a soft huff into the speaker. “…Probably… But for now, you have my number, or if you get really scared, you can call out to the Defender of Justice. There’s a 0.00000001% chance I’ll show up.”

“The ficklest summon ever, basically.”

“Yep.”

“So I just need to call you a whole bunch then.”

She could hear him breathlessly laugh on the other end. “I’ll probably too busy to answer… If you get lonely, you know Yoosung is usually free.”

“That doesn’t help me if I want to talk with you though,” she observed. “You’re my friend too, right?”

There was silence.

“Seven…?”

“…Sorry, I think my maid is coming… Can’t talk much more. I’ll keep a watch on the apartment tonight… So get a good night’s rest, okay? Thank you for working so hard on the party for us.”

“You’re welcome… Thank you for_...”

There was a click before she could even finish.

Sinking into the tub a little more, she studied her lonely expression reflected back at her. Something deeply hurt… The water around her had gone from warm to cool. Quietly she pulled her phone close, resting it to her cheek.

“…for keeping me safe, my binary angel…”
It was quite late by the time Jaehee Kang returned to her modest apartment. The day had been a strange one as Mr. Han seemed uncharacteristically distracted after lunch and spent his entire time researching confections that were suitable for cats. That left her with some time to try to prepare for the inevitable deluge of end of the day requests from him once the executive in him roused from its reverie. If there had been any highlight to the day it had been the lunch that the newest RFA member had brought her. A meal that was certainly more inviting than the microwavable “lonely girl” meal she set the timer for.

As Jaehee changed out of her work attire and into comfortable “lazy” (as if such a word could even apply to her) clothes, the older woman found herself smiling at the memory. It had been so long since Assistant Kang had enjoyed a homecooked meal. Her aunt would make food, but the taste was entirely different than the meals of her childhood. Her mother used to say that one could taste kindness; Miyeon’s cooking confirmed this. There was thoughtfulness in every part of the meal as the bento was packed with consideration to the heat distribution, nutrition, and the sauces being packed on the side in the event she wouldn’t want them. The ingredients were fresh and seasonal, and the cookies… Praise to the Virgin Mary for those…

Temptation had been gnawing at her throughout the day to have a nibble at them, but with the way Mr. Han seemed fascinated with them, she thought better than to eat something shaped like a cat in his presence. The microwave beeped, she stirred the contents of her reheated meal and set the timer for another moment. Her eyes quickly skimmed chat for anything useful. There had been a bit of a flurry earlier in the chat throughout the day as Mr. Han and Zen were bickering as normal while the actor was on his way back to the city from a long week on set. Yoosung was on more after having scouted locations, which couldn’t have been good for his grades. There was still no sign of V. And Seven was on less than he had been in previous days. He had chatted with Yoosung and Miyeon, and then had harassed Zen with a story about how he was “exploited”… Although the reality was moreso that, if true, he singlehandedly hurt an entire group of men trying to take care of their families. For her part, the new girl seemed to encourage him… Poor Zen….

Taking her warmed meal from the microwave, the secretary sat at her desk and began to prepare for the next day’s work in between bites and checking the chatroom.

As far as the new member went: it wasn’t all bad. Miyeon was proving more reliable and focused than expected when it came to her role as planner. Already there were notes regarding the confirmation of a venue, at least 27 guests who were deeply interested in the date when it was made available and many more who had been contacted. There was even follow up whether something more traditional in theme might be best with the unrest in the region or something more traditionally “chic”. So many other girls at that age would’ve been openly and shamelessly flirting with all the men in the chat without as much as a thought of organizing a thing until a date was set… Miyeon was working hard; it was certainly not what Jaehee expected… It was perhaps cold, but serving under Mr. Han had perhaps bled onto her opinions of her fellow females. So many of the women she ran across were transparent in their greed, lust, and ambition. Perhaps there was a part of her that was a little jealous…

By sheer virtue of being a young single female, Ms. Ko had gotten the attention of the desperately lonely men in the group. Age was the main factor… It was to be expected for Yoosung, but to see her idol fawning over a woman he’d never seen was disheartening. His career was still so very fragile yet his emotion, which moved her in his performances, was sometimes a liability… Perhaps it was inevitable that the actor would win her over. He was handsome, talented, and surely
would achieve the stardom he sought. Most girls would’ve been eager to pursue him, and the actor was very open with his intentions towards her… Yet Miyeon had sent the executive assistant an email confirming that the two of them would be checking out catering options the next day. She was asking for her opinion and keeping her informed of that interaction… Maybe she thought Jaehee had feelings for him deeper than that of a fan? Or maybe she was trying to ingratiate herself to her before the inevitable sting of the announcement that the two of them had begun seeing each other.

It felt wrong to pry, but at the same time, the uncomfortable feeling of being misunderstood was almost as bad as the ache of seeing her idol potentially ruin his career with a romantic partner. Her phone rang with a message from Mr. Han, stating that he’d taken the liberty of choosing the food for the party as, “Unless it’s cooked by a chef it all tastes the same”. A sigh of relief came to the executive assistant. No need to make that decision meant no reason for Miyeon to see Zen the next day and an excuse to reach out… She couldn’t have sent an e-mail faster in her life. Looking back over the chats again to see if she’d missed anything, a pattern seemed to emerge. Maybe there was one person that Miyeon indulged a little more than anyone else. If she had the time to make a chart, Assistant Kang was sure there was a correlation with someone.

Yoosung and she both liked games. Mr. Han seemed a little more open to her than most women… And Seven… He probably just enjoyed having someone new to entertain. The two of them together seemed to feed off each other though, which the secretary wasn’t thrilled about. Seven was puckish enough on his own; he didn’t need a catalyst.

Dialing the number out to the young woman, she was surprised to hear the receiver pick up with the same quickness Mr. Han usually got from her.

“Hey! I just got your e-mail about Jumin’s decision. I did read that right, didn’t I? He can get us THE Chef RamG?”

“Yes…”

“Seven will probably freak out! But if we get 100 people to come it just seems as though he might be overwhelmed…”

Miyeon’s voice was so unlike her own. Maybe the secretary’s voice had been that way once… Furthermore, why would Seven “freak out”?

“He will likely bring a staff along with him to help with those preparations. I’ll likely need to notify the kitchen at the venue to clean before he arrives and get him a list of what is seasonally available right now…”

“I can do that, Jaehee,” the girl assured her. “You have enough to do without taking on my job too… You’re going to make yourself sick if you keep pushing yourself this hard.”

“Thank you…” She really was kind… “By the way, I wanted to thank you for lunch earlier. It was very enjoyable. I’ll have your dish back to you the next time we get a chance to meet.”

“No rush! Will probably have to change my plans for tomorrow though.”

The secretary felt a little rush of joy.

“While catering for the food will be handled, we still need decorations and entertainment, right? So that might actually be more in Zen’s wheelhouse. He’s an actor and musician with connections so it actually might be best this way. Not sure if he’ll be okay trying to
reach out to people last minute though…”

Detaching herself from the situation, Jaehee answered calmly. “If you like I can see if there are any performers who might be interested as well.”

“You’re already going to be up late again working on stuff for C&R, so don’t worry. There were actually a few guests on Rika’s books that look promising. I’m wondering if they might be up for offering services for charity. Which… Out of curiosity… What did V and Rika do for entertainment?”

“They would hold auctions of Mr. Kim’s photography work.”

“That’s rather elegant… And here I was thinking we could have Madam Fortuneteller peddle predictions – I’m such a commoner… Ugh … It would be lovely if we can get him to donate a few pieces this time too?”

“He likely wouldn’t object but the problem is…”
“He’s never online,” they both sighed in unison.

Jaehee adjusted her glasses. “The fortune teller isn’t necessarily a bad idea provided the manner it’s handled is not without taste.”

“Inviting her – good… Setting up a booth with spooky sound effects – bad.”

“Right,” chuckled the secretary.

“There’s an apparently well regarded weaver that Rika invited in the past too who might have some work we can put up as well,” the girl stated, as there was a series of clicks in the background. “Problem is thinking of a theme… I mean parties like this generally have a theme of some sort, right?”

“Not always, but it can help keep things more aesthetically pleasing to do so.”

“The venue using has these very rich red and gold colorings, so probably white works best… There’s this confectioner that I had planned to meet with tomorrow to make a center piece for us and to help with catering. I was thinking she could also potentially be a source of entertainment if she’s willing to make it in front of the crowd.”

“That could be something to watch. There is interest in watching cake makers and sugar sculptors work lately.”

Miyeon hummed in response while another flurry of key taps followed. The woman sat the phone on speaker and continued with her own meal and preparing for the next day. After several moments, there was a bothered little hum.

“Considering that a lot of the charities you guys have put money towards in the past have helped with clean water projects, maybe we could have the sugar sculptor do something with an aquatic flair…? Sorry for asking so many questions; you must have the patience of a saint. It feels like I’m taking advantage of you…”

“No. It’s a new role, and you’re learning fast. The end goal is the important thing. I am Mr. Han’s employee and as a member of the RFA – so this is my responsibility too. As you have said, “we’re in this together”.”

“It must be really hard though… It seems like Jumin doesn’t really respect where
“your personal life begins and work ends,” the girl sighed.

“That isn’t untrue…”

“Something tells me you don’t exactly get paid overtime for the work you do at home either.”

“No, but I get paid salary, which means that there is financial compensation that I agreed to for this. You don’t need to worry on my account.”

“It’s hard not to,” Miyeon noted softly. “You’re sort of like my RFA big sister, so I want you to be happy and to do well. If Jumin works you like I’ve seen on a regular basis, I worry about your health – work and life balance.”

“I do things I enjoy now and then.”

“Oh?”

“As you know I’m a fan of Zen’s…”

“He seems to be a fan of you too considering how annoyed he gets seeing Jumin marshal over you.”

“It’s nothing like that… Mr.Han and Zen are always like that.”

“Maybe, but I think you being female might make Zen a little more protective,” the girl observed thoughtfully. “He respects you, which I am honestly a little jealous of.”

Jaehee nearly dropped her coffee. “Oh…?”

“Whenever he talks to you in chat I can see the fact he treats you like an equal, someone he can count on for advice. When he talks to me or calls me, it’s very different. Which is a bit annoying,” she chuckled. “…Then again, respect has to be earned. You work really hard, eonnie.”

The older woman sat back in her chair, not really knowing what it was she felt. Perhaps still a bit jealous, but also her age was settling in on her. Maybe appreciation was the only emotion she should acknowledge? Miyeon at least seemed to understand how much she put into everything. “Eonnie” was something that touched her and vexed her. At least she wasn’t calling her auntie though… It was a term of familiarity and perhaps endearment coming from Miyeon – of this she was sure.

“You’ll get there eventually, Miyeon. Although between women, I’d recommend avoiding any internships with C&R.”

“Jumin already made that offer - I declined.”

Jaehee smiled. At least she wouldn’t make the same mistakes as her. “Although I can’t deny it might’ve been nice having someone reliable to help me with some of this.”

“I’m sorry, eonnie… But I’ll do what I can on this front,” Miyeon piped. “If you get time off, we really should hang out. We could go get coffee again or maybe see one of Zen’s performances together – I’ve never actually been.”

“He’s AMAZING to watch live!”
Before Jaehee could help herself, she was gushing about his latest performance. For a full fifteen minutes she didn’t even touch her work as her hands were moving. At some point, she found herself munching on the macarons between sips of coffee. Something in her felt lighter by the end of it, encouraged by Miyeon’s little giggles throughout. It was almost familiar… Companionship – that was it… How long had it been since she’d had an actual friend?

The older woman softly laughed. “…I am maybe a little bit of a fangirl.” The question was on her lips before she could help herself. “So how did things go with Yoosung earlier?” Jaehee asked.

“We got a lot done, but… It was a little distracting. He kept looking at me and was probably a little too nice – sort of like he is in chat.”

Jaehee understood all too well, although it’d been awhile since she’d experienced such a thing herself. If she nurtured it, it could be healthy for the both of them, plus it’d take her off the table as an option… “Maybe you two could get to know each other better?”

“Maybe… But it sort of makes it harder to be friends with someone when they already have their heart set on other things. I get the feeling that he wants to try to build something more than just a friendship, so it sort of makes it weird… People act differently with someone they like than someone they want to be friends with which means you aren’t really getting to know that person – you’re sort of seeing the side they want you to see. And to be honest, I think honestly he and Zen are both sort of enamored with the ideal of being in a couple – it probably wouldn’t matter who, just as long as they weren’t single– if that makes sense.”

“There’s truth in that,” the older woman acknowledged. Maybe she felt a little warm that this was something the two of them could discuss so openly. “…Not to pry, but is there someone in the group that… does interest you?”

There was a moment of quiet. “Maybe… I’m not sure…” Miyeon let out a pained half laugh. “I hope not…”

“…Why not?”

“It makes things complicated and then there’s the risk they won’t feel the same… And the even more scary prospect of what if we did start seeing each other. Other people in the group would be jealous or… what if we ended up being really bad for each other… I mean… My parents were in love once, but they still ended up breaking it off…”

“That would inspire a healthy amount of caution… To be honest, I know how you feel,” Jaehee soothed. “My parents passed when I was still young… Even though my aunt took me in, I felt like a burden. She didn’t exactly mince words on her feelings. During school I focused on my coursework, so I could be independent sooner… I saw people, but the issue became time. You know I once hired a matchmaker to try to help… She confirmed I just didn’t have “time” for anyone, took my money, and left it at that… I’m probably too old for that now anyway.”

“You’re not too old,” Miyeon affirmed in a surprisingly authoritative tone. “It’s just a matter of time – in this case not enough of it. After we get this party handled, we can maybe try to talk some sense into Jumin. Or if you really need the help, I’ll have Jumin hire me to help take things off your shoulders.”

“As nice as that’d be, I don’t know if you have the qualifications just yet. What was your course of study?”
“I was thinking something healthcare related, but… Right now, I can’t stand to be in hospitals…”

“Did something happen?”

“Maybe it’s okay to tell you,” the girl sighed. “A few months ago, we found out that dad had cancer… Rather, that’s when he couldn’t pretend he was fine anymore… It was too late for them to do much except try to make him comfortable – and since my mother left years ago – someone had to take care of him.”

“That’s why you aren’t in class this semester…”

“Yeah. I would prefer that stay between the two of us though, if that’s okay,” Miyeon asked in a meek tone. “People always start to feel sorry for me and treat me differently when they find out; things are sort of weird enough in the RFA without that being common knowledge too.”

“I understand… After my parents passed, everyone kept telling me how sorry they were and how lonely I must feel… They meant well, but I definitely understand how troublesome it can become when you’re trying to move on.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” the woman replied before softening. “… For now, we should both probably start to head towards bed. Mr.Han insists on having a meeting early tomorrow about a cat cafe before he leaves on a trip, and you have that outing with Zen.”

“…It’s sad you can’t come along, but duty calls I suppose… I take it that you got him to see that oil prince then?”

“Merely an underling wanting to secure a client…”

“Absolutely nothing to do with his litany of cat inspired products.”

“Of course not,” Jaehee replied haughtily.

Miyeon chuckled. “… Also before you let me go, about tomorrow. You don’t need to worry.”

Would it really be so bad if someone like Miyeon ended up with Zen…? At the very least she seemed mature enough to realize what her place would need to be in his life. Plus the girl seemed reasonable enough to know her place needed to be discreet and hidden. She could likely be trusted… The thought still didn’t sit well with her, but Jaehee had long since given up on any prospects of her own. It was pointless to reach for the moon, no matter how lovely.

“Miyeon… I trust your judgement.”

“…Thank you… Sleep tight, okay?”

“You too, rest well.”

After they hung up, the woman looked through past chats before a clearer image began to form of the newest member. The question of who Miyeon took an interest in became one that lead her to revisit chats from the previous days. This time, it was not out of selfish interest in her idol’s career, but rather, a want to prevent her the girl from following the same lonely path she had taken. A
clearer picture of “who” began to form, alleviating some concerns, but only increasing them in other ways. As she laid down, Jaehee added a prayer for her friend for guidance and luck.

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It was still awhile before the young woman could bring herself to anything resembling sleep after her bath. She focused on work rather than play LOLOL, in part because she knew Yoosung would be on working for the next ranked match and that somewhere Jaehee and Seven were working hard too. Zen called her once he got home, and the exhaustion clear in his voice was clearly happy to talk to her. This was despite the way she found herself joking along with Seven earlier during a group chat, perhaps a little at Zen’s expense. The hacker’s personality was infectious though, it was hard not to encourage him.

She shared some of the change of plans, which the actor seemed more than receptive to. He even went as far as to text his director to see if arrangements could be made to contact other performers to provide entertainment for the party despite the late hour. Generous was hardly enough to describe it. Speaker phone served them well enough as he changed before bed, admitting quite freely to her that he was laying down in a way that was bordering on flirtation.

“I can’t wait till our eyes meet…” he uttered wearily. “I’ll finally get to see you for real tomorrow and not just in my dreams... So I need to make sure I get my beauty sleep.”

“You’re the sort of person who could make jet lag fashionable though,” Miyeon soothed. “But you could get sick if you don’t rest up and we work too hard tomorrow. So sleep tight, lovely Zen.”

As expected, he had shared a selfie of himself in bed to give the perspective of laying next to him. Miyeon’s heart felt like a hot air balloon, floating and warm, but there was still something tethering her from getting lost in the reverie of it all. He’d not seen her yet… She wasn’t an actress or idol. In her mind, she was still a potato.

Zen seemed sincere, but she couldn’t know how much of this flirting was just part of his nature. There was a part of him that seemed insecure and desperate for the acknowledgement and praise. While she’d never been a big enough fan to look up his past, Jaehee had mentioned in passing that he had a rather tumultuous rebellious phase that lead to him moving out in his youth and building his career from the ground up. Something had to have motivated him to undertake such a thing on his own so young… In either case, it was part of why the secretary admired him so – his passion… Jaehee was passionate in her own somehow more subtle way, yet there had been a glimpse of it earlier as she spoke about the performer. Quietly part of the girl still wondered if the secretary’s feelings and physical attraction to him could be something more.

That was part of why she had been so quick to call and check in with the secretary earlier. Even if the conversation had been enlightening and seemed to affirm that they were on good terms, Miyeon couldn’t help but feel that the older woman still held some reservations towards her. By her nature, Jaehee seemed a diligent and cautious person… But she was also sincere and reliable. And lonely. It was hard for her not to worry about someone who gave so much of herself to others. Part of her desperately wanted to maybe see Zen and Jaehee together, if only because she knew that the secretary found him so handsome and that Zen, on the surface, seemed so sweet. But if there were any interest between the two of them, that would’ve already happened, right?

The tension of it all kept her awake a bit more, only to nearly jump out of her seat when her phone gave the message tone. Looking over to her phone, the girl expected anyone but who she saw… V was online. There was a brief exchange between the two of them, where he apologized for not having yet picked a date but assured her that it would be done with due consideration. She was
quick to let him know how much she appreciated everyone, and he was gracious. But his answers were short and though kind, relayed a sort of emotional distance… until Jumin got online. Like an older sister, the photographer bothered the future CEO about his disinterest in finding a romantic partner or making new friends, to which the taciturn man replied confirming his reservations about such things. Still waters did run deep… considering how far the two of them went back as friends, Miyeon almost wanted to ask if Jumin had always been one to detach himself from his feelings on such matters. They weren’t likely things he’d speak about openly, but in the few conversations that they had shared over the past few days he did seem to be coming down from the position of nobility in his dealings with her. Truthfully there was a part of her that was still concerned about being perceived as being interested in his money, when there could have been nothing farther than the truth. She’d just be happy getting a chance to meet Elizabeth the III if only because she’d never actually seen a solid white cat in person.

She spent another hour fussing over what to wear the next day and chatted a little with Seven regarding her current social circle, then later on with both him and Yoosung… He seemed curious if she had any other friends outside the RFA, to which Eun-Ji came to mind, although it’d been awhile since they’d talked. Her answers were polite, but perhaps would have been more accurate to another part of their lives. There had been a time when the two of them were inseparable, although she was quick to remind him they were pretty much “best friends” now. As she affirmed it, Miyeon was grinning ear to ear, and hoped it was mutual. His replies back seemed to affirm as much, but as usual he had to go… There was no abrupt end this time, rather he seemed to be tempted to linger. It was just after she’d found something that she started getting a round of private messages from Seven with various lines of what she recognized as coding. For a few minutes the phone would jingle with a message from him as a new line came through. Eventually she laid down to read the scroll of text. It took a moment, but she got the general gist as him writing command code for her to sleep followed by something that looked more like console commands.

707- So a sleep command prompt didn’t work either…

707- Maybe…

707 – setrelationshiprankplayer <606> <4>

707 - …

707- setrelationshiprankplayer <606> <3>

707 – setessential <606> <1>

707- It’d be easier to focus if I could do that.

Miyeon bit her lip as her blood warmed. The hacker had joked about 606 before… There was always a reason with Seven. He wasn’t “random” at all, despite what everyone else seemed to think. His scale of reality was different. Most people were at ground level, among the trials of daily life and their own world. He was an orbiting satellite who could see the whole picture and occasionally the distant stars. A lonely little prince on a world of his own intellectually and from what she gathered physically…

707- So~

707 - Y r u still up?

She left the messenger on all the time so it wasn’t like he had cameras on the inside, right? The realization then occurred to her that maybe he could tell because the lights were still on.
Before she could help herself, the girl snapped a shot of her in her pajamas and sent it before turning the light in the apartment off. Had it been anyone else, she might not have been so open. But Seven was in a category of his own; he saw her every day. In her mind it was more like virtual slumber party rather than anything in appropriate, although the realization of how it would seem quickly came to her.

“I’m laying down now – God Seven.”

There wasn’t a reply but he’d seen the message.

“So something funny… I’m scared of the dark. When I’d sleep at night at home, I’d always leave my laptop or something on because my imagination would get the better of me. There’d always be monsters, or I’d be afraid that I’d die in my sleep and no one would ever know… So again, thank you for everything.”

707- *gasp*

707- God 707’s monster hunting service activate!

Her phone seemed to be a bit laggy.

707 – I see the problem~!

707- Meowie-on + creepy pasta = sc4r3dy c4t

707- POOF!!!

707- No more scary sites you~!

He was kidding right? The girl quickly checked through a few of the “scary” sites and threads she frequented only to find they actually had been disabled for her. Rather they now redirected her to a website dedicated to an illustrated children’s book featuring a cute baby lamb.

“SERIOUSLY!?!” she texted back in a flurry while audibly venting it.

“--; I wasn’t even reading those.”

“Yet…”

The first reply she got was a picture at around eye level like something out of a dramatic movie with his brow furrowed speculatively. She could only see the top of his head. There was no doubt that he had reviewed her history for awhile back, although it was hard to be angry with him… The hacker had his own appeal… His irises were a bright gold, his complexion smooth and pale, but he looked tired despite the playfully exaggerated expression.

Poor thing…

Rather than just laying there, Miyeon forced herself back up and turned the light back on. She got just to the door before taking a deep breath and opening it. As always, Seven’s camera blinked it’s crimson light at her. So far away, but somehow so close, there was a man she’d never met but who she trusted with her very life. A funny, kind soul who knew how to cheer her up and annoy her… As usual there was no one else in the hall to see her in her pj’s as she gave the habitual little wave to the camera. Her body naturally stayed close to the door frame, hugging it if only for the want of physical contact with something. It was cold and hard… It smelled of paint and metal… She wanted something softer, warmer that could wrap around her. Hugging herself to fill that void and to
maintain some modesty, the girl texted, “I’m going to be working on arranging for entertainment for the party tomorrow with Zen, so I’ll be leaving around 9:30 or so to meet up with him. I know you’re going to be busy --- even if you should be in bed --- but if you wanted to check in – this is the itinerary.” She sent him the address to the first stop. “I’ll keep you posted with the details of where we go if you think you might be able to come.”

707 – I can’t. ﹏;

707 – But Zen’s like a knight in shining armor – he’ll keep you safe IRL while Yoosung keeps you safe in LOLOL.

707- With his scrub armor.

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor – I need the defender of justice!”

707- my disciple…

707- T_T

707- I like hearing that, but I’m more of a “tell the knight where the bad guys are type”

“Maybe if I keep saying your name – you’ll appear after the 706th time.”

707 – :O You’ve discovered my dark secret!

“It wasn’t hard, just had to use console commands. :P… Still not sure what game those were from. Although anyone who can stare at code or script for more than 5 minutes without falling asleep has a super power.”

707- LOLOLOLOLOLOLO

707- ur right

707- I’d rather be One Punch Man though.

“I’d rather be able to shoot fireballs or teleport. But being that powerful - you’d get bored of that quick. :/”

707- Nah!

707- There’s this group called Hackers against Hackers that’s been after me for awhile.

707- Never gonna catch me~!

707- messing with them

707- so

707- much

707- FUN!

“Should I invite them to the party?”
707- omg
707- omgomgomgomgomgomg
707- O
707- M
707- G
707- DO IT!
707- I CAN TOTALLY MESS THE HELL OUT OF THEM!

“Then you’ll have to come to the party, right?”
707- was gonna come n e way ;/
707 – but…
707- This is going to be GREAT!!!

She couldn’t hide her smile.

“Send me their info – I’ll put the invitation out before I meet up with Zen.”
707 - OK!
707 – Although… I’m a bit nervous.
“Hmm…? You don’t want me to send it?”
707- No – I do but…
707- Knowing you’re going to be out with “the perfect” man tomorrow makes me worried that…
707- u should be in bed already.
“…Is that all?”
707- …
707- OH!
707- Dress warm!

He logged before she could object, but the girl knew he was likely still watching the camera feed. Seven was, after all, her security detail. Giving her usual little wave, Miyeon retreated back inside, turned the light out, and flopped down on the bed.

She hadn’t had a chance to check the forecast yet, but considering the time of year, that advice seemed a bit odd. Didn’t Zen ride motorcycles? Sleep eventually came, although it was a dreamless rest when she did. Her mind kept posing questions that part of her was sure she’d never get an answer to. Everyone in the group had their own puzzle, and even if she didn’t have all the pieces, she could at least make out the shape. Seven on the other hand felt so familiar but so different. What did they truly have in common? Just thinking about it lead her into a restless sleep.
Before the girl knew it, morning had come and the initial alarm came and went. After hitting snooze button once… then twice - the next time her alarm went off, it was blaring the opening of a rather notorious boy-love anime. There was only one person who could’ve and would’ve done it… As annoying as it was, knowing the hacker thought about her and felt comfortable enough to tease her made her heart warm. His time was precious, and yet, he’d taken a few minutes to just mess with her. The jerk had even changed her background and some of the icons on her phone.

It was already 8:30! There was still time to get ready, if she skipped breakfast.

707- 8D

707 - Don’t b late 4 ur date. :*

The phone started playing the theme again, this time with Seven actually singing it – intentionally poorly. She sent a picture of herself just sitting up, her hair a mess from tossing and turning the night before, rubbing her eye, and still sulking as proof that she was up and awake.

‘IT IS NOT A DATE!!! >_<*** I’M UP!!! CUT IT OUT!!!”

707- omg that picture…

707- … I just thought of something I shouldn’t have.

707- @_@

707- Gonna get some delicious sleep now~! Good luck!

“Wait! Are you sure you can’t come?”

707- T_T

707- I really wish I could.

707- But no.

“…You’re probably really tired… ;-; Poor Seven… Sorry I’m being so whiny and needy.”

707- You’re not. You’re nervous meeting someone new.

707- If you do get really worried, you know you can call me.

“ I feel a little better… What if “the beast” is unleashed?”

707- Then God Seven will protect his priestess’s purity from the wolf who gives maidens heart attacks. 8D

“Pinkie promise?”

He sent a picture of his hand, pinkie outstretched with his thumb forward. Studying the image revealed slender yet strong looking fingers that looked perfect for someone who was a surgeon or a pianist… They were well-kept. To say he had beautiful hands would’ve been an understatement.

707- Stamped, copied, and signed too!
“God Seven. Sweet dreams~! May flights of HBC chips and kittens lead you to bed.”

Miyeon practically flew through the house getting ready. Time was short so breakfast was skipped in lieu of attempting some variation of “dressing” up. It wasn’t so much for Zen but the other performers that would be there. Things were kept simple to her usual “natural” look, a modest amount of vanilla-sugar perfume infused bath products on top of a light spritz to bring it together, along with an outfit that bordered the line between business and casual. A simple skirt, a lacy blouse that was belted, and a simple bolero with a fun color to top it off. She braided the length of her hair that tended to hang over her shoulders back and joined them in the back with a cute bow. For shoes, she chose function over fashion, going for a basic but comfortable pair of sandals to match the bolero’s bright color. There wasn’t much in the way of accessories due to money, so she went with a simple locket that her brother had gotten her. It was a lovely but simple little thing with a segment of butterfly wing under class, looking like an organic gem. Putting it on made her feel a little more confident strangely enough. The last piece was a simple purse to match her skirt with it’s neutral color.

On the way out, she gave the camera a little bow before dashing to the elevator. Getting on the bus to meet up with Zen at the theatre they’d agreed upon would take a little, which allowed her to catch up on the group chat along with checking in with everyone. V still hadn’t posted a date even after the talk with Jumin the night before… Every mile that passed her heart began to beat faster. Soon she’d be meeting one of the up and coming idols in the country… An idol who knew her name… How many people would already be gathered around or would be looking at them? How many would be wondering who the plain girl next to him was? Swallowing became tough as she just thought about all the sideways glances and little lipstick frowns that would be cast her way. Part of her desperately wanted Zen to like her… To find her beautiful. Another part of her was even more terrified by the prospect of what happened if he did. The scenarios left her pale and cold up until the realized her stop had come. Taking a deep breath, she got off the bus, and didn’t look at the theatre just yet. Knowing Zen, he would have likely been on time or likely early since he seemed so early. His private message to her seemed to confirm this.

She wanted to call Seven… But he was sleeping. He’d joke – take her mind off it – or tease her until the indignation would get her through. There was one thing that helped though. This was all for the party – the party to show him how much she appreciated the mischievous hacker. If it was for him and the people important to him - Miyeon could be strong. Yoosung needed a reason to smile… Zen a chance to shine. Jaehee a change of pace. Jumin a chance to make connections and to see his friend… All of them wanted and likely needed to see V again. She wasn’t Rika… But she could do it.

Holding her head up high, the girl strode purposefully to the theatre. It really was warm
out… Once she was past the swinging doors and into the air-conditioned space, there was already a line of potential entertainers lined up. She did her best to nod and greet them, although their attention was on a man just a little taller than herself. His motions with his hands while he spoke were sweeping and attention getting. There was no mistaking his manner as anything other than someone in charge, the way he held his clipboard further accentuated this.

“H-hello, D-Director Minn…”?

Miyeon felt her head lowering in deference to him.

“And after tha---- a moment, please---- hello there! The high school is the third theater.”

“Sorry…? I… Ah… I am the party coordinator – for the RFA.”

The director blinked at her a moment before smiling broadly. “Ah! I expected someone a little older. Zen! You didn’t tell me she was a student!”

Her heart stopped as a tall, silvery haired figure emerged from behind one of the doors. Pictures really did no justice to the being before her. He was tall, well muscled, yet graceful… To call his skin smooth would’ve been a discredit – molecularly flawless would’ve been more accurate. His red eyes were searching and wide with anticipation before locking onto hers.

His eyes widened with something like approval before the beautiful creature smiled – a melting, sincere smile.

Something broke…

It was like staring at the sun. He was just too bright. Such a lovely thing belonged wild and free, or among the stars, not near a potato like her. Reflexively she dropped her eyes to keep from staring, while her foot moved backwards. Flames felt like they were lapping her cheeks. Her tongue was about ten sizes too large for her body, her skin numb, and her head felt like Seven had hacked into it – took all the info – and left only the base OS for her to survive.

Oh god!!! He was coming closer!

She had to say something? Was her mouth hanging open?

“Z-Zen! H-h-hi! Hi!”

Real smooth… Could she just die now? The headlines already in her head – Rising Star Causes First Casualty!- Seven’d probably laugh himself to death too…

The actor stopped just a few steps before her, taking her hand into his own for what she thought was a shake.

“My dreams didn’t do you justice… It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miyeon.”

His strong, lovely hands lifted her own little paws up until the perfectly sculpted arches of his lips pressed to her knuckles then with care he turned her hand palm up and kissed her wrist. It tickled as the skin met and his breath flowed over her exposed forearm. Miyeon was too petrified to move and could only steal glances as the pounding in her ears was making her dizzy. Braving another glance, their eyes met as he lifted his head.

He even smelled handsome!!! WHY!!? Something felt like it was going to catch on fire.
Where the hell did the AC go!

Was this one of those fateful encounters? She didn’t believe in love at first sight, but there was something going on… The girl suspected a high probability this was all a fever dream. Maybe she was back at the apartment terribly sick and this was just an intense hallucination. The girl’s knees felt weak enough and her body hot enough to be sick.

“Thank you…” she managed in a small voice as every muscle in her body had the consistency of pudding now. “You didn’t have to wait long did you?”

Eun-Ji wasn’t going to believe this if they ever talked again…

He gazed at her fondly before an almost boyish smile took hold as he stood his full height. To call it imposing to her was an understatement. Her head barely came up to his shoulder. Maybe if she just focused on that perfectly chiseled chin, she could function.

“We didn’t have to wait long at all, you’re actually early,” the director noted giving the both of them a sly little smirk. “We got a lot of people to go through though. Let’s get cozy and I’ll have my producer call the first one in.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Zen affirmed, giving the girl a little tip of the head towards the theater. “C’mon.”

“Yeah – okay.”

For the next two hours the three of them along with some of Zen’s fellow cast went through performer after performer making pics. There were lots of talented people, but the question came down to what fit the event. Miyeon did her best to illustrate the feel she was going for, although the main issue was still going to be scheduling. Some of the potential guests who would be interested in performing also came, including a Taekwondo group that could also double as security. The final bit was a string group that was running a little late due to a little trouble with transportation, but it was well worth the wait.

An elegant woman, tall with a sensuous figure, and wavy tresses of copper came on stage wearing a rather eclectic looking outfit. There was clearly some Korean in her heritage, but there was something clearly “other” judging by the fact there was no way her hair color was bottle… Her eyes were green like jade, so strikingly so that even Miyeon could see it from a few seats back. Zen’s gaze still drifted back to her with his lovely smile, but once the woman began to play everyone was spellbound. She did about a minute on her violin. The piece started off somber and slow, but ended with a breakneck flurry that sounded too fast for any one human to have accomplished. When she stopped, her red, cupid lips curled as she winked up at the audience.

“Devil’s Trill always a crowd pleaser, am I right?”

“Wow…” Zen murmured.

“That was beautiful, Siobhan,” the director cooed.

The girl was overcome. How much was it going to cost to retain someone with that much skill?

“So when and where?”

“We don’t have a date yet,” Miyeon answered.
“Pardon?” the red head called from the stage.

“We don’t have a date yet,” Zen affirmed, his voice projecting much better than the girl’s meager squeak. She thanked him softly, only to get a melting grin in return.

They were surrounded by unearthly beauty, there was basically a mermaid on the stage, and yet his eyes still fell on her like that… Her stomach lurched then growled, making Miyeon turn just as red as the exotic woman on stage’s hair.

The actor gave her a little concerned look before the director thanked everyone for coming then concluded the audition, giving her a copy of the list of performers and their availability. It was beyond generous and after thanking him, Zen took her by the hand and guided her out.

“How about lunch?”

“We’re supposed to meet that sugar sculptor in thirty minutes,” she reminded him in a small voice.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, there are probably street vendors on the way. My treat!”

Miyeon was reluctant to take him up on it, but he wouldn’t be denied. Rather, he guided her directly to his motorcycle and handed her a helmet. Before she could even question him, Zen had taken his seat on the machine and gave a nod behind him. “We’ll make better time this way.”

She’d already sat next to him for hours, the two of them talking with each other and the director… This was more than the girl was ready for, but she couldn’t deny being intrigued by the concept of riding on a motorcycle. With care Miyeon fastened the helmet on and drew a little bit of laughter from him as she tried to get on. Her short stature necessitated him leaning the bike over a little for her to get a leg over. Doing as directed, the girl held onto his sides through the leather coat and white t-shirt he’d put on, although she could still feel his well muscled form under the fabric. At first she was barely holding on, but the second he started the engine, her arms wrapped tightly around his narrow waist. Between her legs was the vibration of the engine as it purred, against her body was Zen’s body, and under her hands were his perfectly sculpted abs.

Jaehee was going to kill her – if they didn’t wreck and die.

Her knees buckled in as he kicked off. Soon the overwhelming aroma of his leathery, spicy scent with hints of sweet tobacco mixed with the petrol of the engine as they started to move. Miyeon simply tucked her head down and closed her eyes as the world flew by them. The air fluttered the fabric of her garments almost like extensions of his searching hands along her body. Their hair could’ve been war flags for the way the strands trailed behind them. Eventually she felt comfortable enough to hold her head up and look over his shoulder as he used his weight to maneuver them. It was like being a bird flying close to the ground until they hit traffic, which he wove through masterfully.

They were able to park relatively close to the confectioner’s shop, and as expected, there were a few street vendors offering up anything from goldfish cakes to skewers. Considering the argument a few days prior regarding pizza bread, the decision seemed to have made itself after a bit of joking between the two of them. “Pizza” goldfish cakes were the marriage of the best of both worlds. The two of them ate on the way, talking between bites. Perhaps it was the fact there had already been so much contact, but looking at him was growing increasingly easier. Zen was still the down to earth, regular guy he was in chat. His flirting was toned down a little, but he wasn’t shy…
Once they got to the confectioner’s he was already asking what sorts of sweets she liked so that he could potentially treat her while they were out. Miyeon did her best to sideline or change the line of discussion… They got along well enough, but she didn’t feel comfortable with such generosity just yet.

The shop was enough to leave the both speechless.

It was chock a block with brightly colored containers organized by color into a storewide rainbow that stretched along the walls. The middle displays were filled with various forms of cakes and edible wonders crafted from sugar. Everything from forest scenes made of icing and cake, to a centerpiece in the store of a chubby unicorn made of marshmallow and fairy floss. The owner and creator of these marvels was a tall, lithe creature with fluffy pink hair and a wardrobe that just screamed pastel goth. The voice was melodic, but undoubtedly male. Zen was a little flustered by this, as it made him unclear of how to address the owner. In her letters back and forth though, Miyeon had gathered that this was a woman for all intensive purposes – or at least – Nuri was a rainbow unicorn that defied those conventions.

Her staff seemed to match the freedom in that regard, all of them seemed to have a “look” with vibrant hair colors that were beyond the standard blacks and dark browns.

“Welcome! RFA party planner and THE Zen, right? C’mon back, let’s talk about this party!”

Miyeon did her best to explain the general theme, which itself seemed vague to her but the confectioner seemed to just “click” with it once the actor gave his interpretation.

“Usually this sort of thing doesn’t come cheap. But if C&R clientele are going to be there, it can’t hurt for me to be a little generous. It’s a charity party afterall. And a good party needs a damn good piece of art!”

“It would be a good chance to make business connections,” Miyeon affirmed with a smile. “Although I wouldn’t want you to put yourself out.”

“Not at all! I think that lovely business woman from C&R said it’s tax deductible, so really I have nothing to lose. You said Mr.Han really likes his cat, right?”

“He does.”

“Send me a picture of her. I got this idea that’s like fresh, right? I'll sketch it out – you’re gonna love it!”

“Please not a cat,” Zen sighed.

“What’s wrong, honey? Not a feline-fan?”

“He’s allergic,” Miyeon noted.

“It ain’t gonna be a real cat! But I guess you just can’t deal, huh? Well butterscotches- was a thought- but I guess pandering that openly would be a bit pitiful wouldn’t it? How big of an area do I have to work with?”

“As much as you need, but we will have Chef RamG there too.”

“OH MY GOD!!! I LOVE HIM! I’m thinking maybe something more traditional then – not every day you get a chance to try to impress one of the best, you know? You guys do pure
water projects – so something with a fish and maybe a phoenix since this is the rebirth of the group – fire and water – death and rebirth. The red and gold there will work nicely for it too!"

“Sounds a little dramatic… But I can see the appeal.”

“I’ll sketch it up before I do it, sweetness. Too bad we just can’t have HIM model for us. I could recreate the “Birth of Venus” but with Zen made of white chocolate…” the confectioner motioned towards the increasingly pale actor.

“…Yeah… Maybe another time,” Zen actually looked a little uncomfortable under the eye of the artist.

“When does it need to be done?”

“We don’t have a date yet sadly, but I will let you know when we have one.”

“Please do, Peaches! To be honest, there’s a lot of competition in this market… There’s some biddy running a shop called Sugar Cube that honestly is just… Ugh… And you know how people are… So I don’t get many opportunities to really participate in stuff like this --- I didn’t spent nearly a decade in Europe mastering this stuff not to be able to use it, you know?”

“People are judgmental, but you have my word that you’re on the guest list – even if you are contributing.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“We’ll let you get back to running your shop…”

“Hold up, peaches! Before you two go,” Nuri interjected, “A treat!”

The both were given a bag of chocolates ranging from childish combinations to more mature things such as chocolate covered, crystalized ginger along with a single large fairy floss flower about the size of their heads to take with them. Zen, being a star, was subject to some special treatment of having pictures taken with the staff to show he’d been there before they were on their way. Rather than immediately pop back on the bike so she could be dropped off at the bus stop back to the apartment, Zen and Miyeon took a little to walk around and window shop while tearing bits off the flower.

They talked about mythology and literature. He knew his characters in and out, although it was pretty clear that he was engrossed with her ability to explain their motivations. Lately he had been preparing for a role that he wasn’t sure about as it seemed a little too aggressive for him, but after looking over a bit of the script together, Zen felt much more confident about it. Afterwards they simply watched people while finishing up the last bit of the cotton candy.

“You should come on set with me sometime. I’m sure everyone’d love you and how you break things down.”

“Sure! Although it’d have to be after the party.”

“Yeah… To be honest, I was sort of nervous – like a teenage boy with a crush all over again.”

“…You don’t have to flatter me,” she chuckled.

“I’m not,” his voice was direct. “We get along well, don’t you think?”
She nodded, but didn’t offer a verbal response. There was too much of a risk of her imagination running wild for her to really process any of it. Part of her just wanted to be back in the apartment under Seven’s watchful eye. Hopefully he had a good rest.

The two of them got back onto his bike and he took the scenic route back to her bus stop. As she tried to get off the bike, her short stature worked against her. Miyeon tripped, landing cheek first in the actor’s arms. His heart was pounding and reverberated through her body. There was a distinctive change to his scent that made her blood warm with an unfamiliar want… Her hands lifted to his chest to help her steady herself only to feel Zen’s fingers rest over them. The surprise lead her to looking up…

There was a tenderness, but intensity, to his expression as their eyes met. She was paralyzed… The cage of her chest tightened to where not a breath or pulse escaped. His eyes closed and his lips were drawing so very close. She felt so dizzy… Part of her desperately wanted to just wrap her arms around his neck and give in, but the second she felt the space between them narrow to just below an inch – a disappointed pair of gold eyes came to mind…

Miyeon turned her head side and drew a shuddering breath into oxygen starved lungs.

Seven…

Why was she thinking of him?

The confusion deepened and left her feeling as lonely as she had before she had joined the group… The seemingly endless days stretched out on her bed in a silent house with no one knowing or caring about her. It wasn’t the same but… It made her heart ache. God knows Miyeon didn’t want to feel this way.

Zen’s red eyes widened as she glanced back at him, before a look of reproach came to his handsome face. His perfectly formed mouth broadened into an insecure smile before he let out a half hearted chuckle.

“Sorry…”

“It’s… okay…” she assured, still feeling weak as his arms were still around her.

“…I’m such a jerk… I almost forgot you’ve never had a boyfriend… Your first kiss should be more special than something like this,” he noted, his voice feigning confidence that he clearly lacked in the moment. “I got carried away. You probably don’t think of me that way do you?”

“I don’t know… Maybe?”

It was an honest answer.

“It’s just a little too soon for me, just yet… I think,” Miyeon explained, carefully stepping back onto her own feet. “…I’d like to get to know someone more before that…”

“Right…” He said that with a smile, but there was clearly disappointment on him. “We’ll take our time and see where things lead.”

“Thank you, Zen.”

His scarlet eyes softened with something that was beyond any human concept of gorgeousness. There was an appreciation of her, and what he took to be something “old fashioned”.
A girl who hadn’t kissed anyone at that age was a rare thing indeed. It didn’t stop him from smoothing the hair from her face. It felt nice, but it something about it was just “wrong” to her on the inside.

“Text me when you make it back to the apartment, princess. Okay?”

“I will. Be safe getting home.”

Giving her a little nod, the actor pulled his helmet back on and after a little wave drove off. It was a little while before the bus arrived, but the whole way back Miyeon was in a state of shock. His scent was all over her making her feel both lust and a tremendous want to shower. There was still a short walk back to the apartment complex, but she only made it a part of the way before a sense of panic came to her. Ducking into a café, the girl ordered a bit of iced coffee to try to get her airways to open up before finding herself dialing the number that was becoming so familiar…

It rang…

She hang up.

Miyeon dialed it again, this time holding it shakily to her ear while fidgeting with her straw.

*****

The hacker had only gotten a little over five hours of sleep before doing his work out routine, taking a shower, and then settling into split his attention between the job that had been assigned to him and looking at 3D printers. Vanderwood hadn’t been by yet, but there was so much footage to go over from where they had bugged the hotel. He sat with his feet propped up on the desk with it turned up to 1.5x speed while munching on chips.

It was evening when his phone rang with the ringtone he’d assigned to Miyeon, nearly making him fall out of his seat as he shot up to answer.

“Miyeon? What’s going on?”

‘…Hey. I’m sorry to bother you… I know you’re busy… But is it okay if I call upon the defender of justice for just a little?’

His throat tightened. There was a troubled wavering to her voice, that made him pause the footage. It was wonderful to hear her sweet voice rather than the droll tone of the politician they’d been eavesdropping on. Hearing her sound upset though… That made the joyful beating of his heart deepen and grow raw.

‘Connecting…!’ he whispered, beating a hasty retreat to the bathroom for some privacy in the event his handler showed up. There was a puff of air before he heard a sniffle.

Was she crying!?

He felt so helpless and desperate… If he could make her laugh… That was all she needed… He needed to be 707 for her.

‘…Request - Status report - Subject Miyeon : Is the subject secure?’

‘Subject is physically sound, but shows signs of emotional trauma… Guilt, confusion, and embarrassment.’
'Grave situation indeed… Is suspect Narcissus the culprit?'

'…Yes.'

His pulse was slow but intense as his mind imagined the reasons for the unhappiness in her voice. The actor liked her and was passionate. Though Seven was sure Zen wouldn’t force himself on her, there was another part of him that didn’t put that past any man. 'Erm… Has the 'package' been breached?'

'No… But there was an attempt to osculate…'

Osculate? So a kiss then… Why did he have a sick feeling…?

'… Was there a direct hit?'

'…No…' she murmured. 'Evasive maneuvers were implemented…'

Relief…

'Query: Why did the subject evade…?'

'I felt scared…I mean… A normal girl would've dreamt of being there… It's not that Zen isn't a great guy… But I've never even kissed someone before and… It felt wrong… Like… really wrong… He was really understanding… But he looked so hurt… Now I feel all weird…'

'Maybe you're allergic?'

There was that lovely chuckle between sniffles. His heart fluttered with victory.

'…Yeah!…' a soft little hum came from her. 'It's strange… I was so scared... I wanted to hear your voice so much it hurt…' her voice softened. she sniffled, 'I'm almost a little jealous of you, you know… You can help people without them taking it the wrong way… But because I'm a girl, it gets confusing. You care about everyone so much you skip meals and barely sleep to protect us… You’re so kind, Luciel… I love that about you…'

Something hurt… It was a deep, heavy ache that made him feel hot and dizzy and his skin tingle. It was a deep, painful joy that let out a dull ache as it settled. This was something he wasn’t supposed to feel. ‘…Do you have a safe way home?’ he caught himself. '…can't leave, but… I could call you a ride - maybe I can stay on the line until I see you on the security feed…'

'…I've already bothered you enough... I mean you work for scary people, right?'

'…Miyeon… I chose to be where I am…' he answered darkly before catching himself. 'It's good money so I can buy more cars!!! I'm fine! So don't worry!' She was sniffling. 'Please...' he wanted to cry too. 'You're working on the party…! That's all I could need! I'll get to see everyone! We'll have lots of fun - we'll prank Yoosung and those damned hackers! It'll be great!'

A shuddering breath escaped her before she hummed in agreement forced a laugh.

'Hey, Luciel … Let’s start the first martian cat rescue. Okay?'

'Y...yeah...! With little space suits with paws. And every day we'll make astronaut ice cream sundaes - whole weeks even!' he answered brightly until the end.

His heart was so full, it was hard to breathe. The realization hit him hard in the gut. It wasn’t a lustful or selfish want. Rather, Seven felt a deep longing for innocent intimacy… Something
irrationally hopeful, simple… Desperately the hacker wanted to be by her side, to see the world through her eyes. To get lost in silly thoughts. To laugh. To hold hands when scared and to wipe each other's tears. To share, wholly, without reserve, without shame. To be safe… warm… accepted unconditionally…

Most selfishly he longed for a home built from that feeling... Where everyone could come together, where he could see Saeran again… a real family. He could even picture the smiles of his and Miyeon’s children. His heart could feel the warmth as Miyeon's sweet voice sang lullabies. He could imagine the softness of their babies' chubby little hands in his own and their bright, curious eyes… A happy home with every day bringing little changes as they grew. They’d do all the things he’d wanted as a child but never had the chance to… He wanted to know who they'd become and to hold them high as undeniable proof that he was real… That he loved and was loved in return.

To watch them start their own lives, his own hand tight in the beautiful bride he’d taken… A whole life in the flash of a thought.

Yet these were all things he could never have; he didn't deserve them… With how he’d grown up, he didn't even know how a healthy relationship was supposed to work. He could never love anyone normally. The only family he had, he’d abandoned… Hell, even now like some deranged pervert he was watching her through CCTV, eager for even a glimpse. Luciel could tell himself it was only to make sure she was safe, but the truth was he cherished even the brief flashes of her. Those rare moments out of the 1440 of a day were so very precious.

God help him…

He swallowed the sorrow down but found it wouldn't move… Selfishly his heart ached for things that were so commonplace yet so out of reach for him. If she got involved with him, they’d be out of reach for her too. But long as he didn't let it go any further she'd be safe. The problem was that his entire OS was corrupted, the more he accessed the files associated with her, the worse it got… He just didn't want to hit ESC, kill the current program, and start fresh at a new assignment yet…

In the past it was easy enough to avoid these situations. He’d get reassigned if someone got to like him or got too close. It hurt less and less, but this was different… Why?

... Because for once, someone seemed to understand him… Or at least, she made him feel like she did even if she knew nothing about the real him.

The part of him that processed outcomes knew that they were compatible… Subconsciously, he was already laying out the skeleton of a plan to run away with her. But to give in meant damning her to a life of hiding with him… The fear of her being taken, raped, and murdered would be constantly over him… Miyeon was already in enough danger because he got lazy. That damn hacker was still out free because he was too sorry to focus on his agency work so he could focus on the hacker…

That left staying and setting boundaries… But somewhere within him, little Saeyoung was still very much alive and finding ways around his security like he always did. The imp would let her in to the darkest parts of him with her warmth. He could maybe continue putting her with someone else, but increasingly the thought of seeing her with anyone else was just troubling. He really would run and hide if she ended up with someone in the group… From the sound of it, she didn’t want that either.

It wasn’t really him she liked though, it was 707…

There wasn’t any harm in just playing and enjoying it while it lasted, right?
Each of these came like lightning in quick waves as he spoke, yet he didn’t give any of it away.

“Do they even freeze dry cherries?” she asked through a sniffle.

He rambled on about how they could maybe do it using molecular gastronomy as the girl made her way the rest of the way to the apartment. Once her dear, lovely face showed on the camera he felt so much better. They chatted a little with her outside the apartment, although it was drawing to a close.

“… I hope V sets the date soon.”

“He will,” he assured, feeling the unspoken intent behind those words.

“Thank you for letting me whine at you, God Seven.”

“No problem! Chatty kittens are the best kittens – meow~!”

“Meow~!”

Her little hand pawed in the direction of the camera, before a familiar, heartbreaking expression crossed her face. Just like the first picture he’d ever seen of her, there was that bittersweet, melancholy little smile.

“… It’s going to be really lonely after we hang up,” she noted. “… Hearing your voice always helps though.”

“You know I’ll be here; if you get so lonely you can’t stand it, just come out and give me a wave. I’ll wave back.”

“Aye… Good night, Seven.”

“Sweet dreams, Meowie-on.”

They both disconnected, but the girl didn’t immediately go inside. Miyeon bit her lip before slowly reaching her hand out and up. It wasn’t a wave… His body felt stiff as a deep sadness welled up within him. He could never touch her… But he wanted to… He wanted to so badly it was tearing him apart.

His fingers, slick with grease and salt, rested against the screen. Hard, electric glass met his skin. Seven did his best to transmit as much warmth as he could muster from within himself to let her know she wasn’t alone… That he was with her as a vibration, a photon, a wavelength – mind, soul, and heart.
Mystic Messenger- Parity : Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Short and sweet... There may be some triggering / upsetting things in this short chapter though. So proceed with caution. Saeran's mind isn't a happy/nice place.

Chapter 13:

Though blessed with wisdom and foresight, the savior, like all chosen, were shackled to a physical world. The lot of them were prisoners to the corrupted false world, filled with deception, and mankind’s sins... The savior told Saeran that his birth was no accident; his pain was not in vain. He was ordained: chosen to receive the gift of true paradise. Over a decade of starvation, physical torture, and misery from the monster who birthed him had served only to strengthen his spirit for the battle to come. Savior needed the strength of his soul and mind, not his body... It was her who showed how his brother had betrayed and abandoned him. Through that despair, he found the light once she’d awoken him to his purpose.

“A good blade is made from battered steel,” she reminded him as she’d beat him.

“A strong blade must be tempered,” savior spoke, as he was branded.

“A perfect blade must be tested,” her dulcet tones echoed in his thoughts as he stood over the wide eyed, gagging body of the creature whose womb spawned him.

He had helped guide others into salvation, absolving their sins through pain and the drugs. How they always fought to hold onto their sinful ways... Perhaps he was sinful for liking the way their screams echoed. In those moments where their despair would lead to tears, he felt the greatest joy. It was maybe pride, knowing he was stronger than them, or perhaps relief that they would see the light. Early on it scared him, these days it was a normal Sunday service. Once he’d held the scourge with reluctance; now it was boring and other ways had to be devised. Others were content with the usual beatings. He’d since had a chance to show his creative side. Results were quicker with his converts than anyone else...

But Savior had a plan that had been years in the making... It was his mission now to act. He was so very impatient to see it realized. Dutifully he’d been watching the messenger app since he understood enough code to interpret what he saw.

The RFA had shown its true colors by remaining inactive after savior woke from her deception. While she actively worked to save the deceived, the blue haired liar maintained the group with his brother serving as a loyal servant against truth. Without them being more active and public, it was very hard to find leaks and openings. He had tried so many methods, going as far as to follow the future chairman of the C&R company into other countries and monitoring the movements of the members until it became clear that it wouldn’t be enough.

In those moments of doubt when he wondered why the savior cared about such a den of vipers, Saeran would remember how much damage they could do and all the fun they had at the expense of those not aware of the ruse... They were powerful people who savior wanted converted
They throw parties now among this corrupted world, and do not see the eternal gala in paradise, Saeran… They are deceived. We must… awaken them. For their power used for our cause is better than wasting an opportunity to save others.”

Savior was kind… But even she understood that there was no room for traitors in paradise. The invitation to the eternal party was denied to his mother… and denied to Saeyoung…

. In his brother’s worthless life, Saeyoung had done only two things worthwhile…

- He taught him how to read.
- Bought him ice cream…

The pale disciple idly held the warming spoon between his lips as the frozen cream melted, allowing the sticky, sweet flavor of chocolate and cherry spill onto his tongue. When the solution to “how” was solved, he had been eating birthday cake flavored. A flavor he knew only after he’d already had several such days without as much as a smile… Now he could have cake whenever he wanted… Which was most days.

He had read once that twins often have similar tastes. It was only natural he wondered if this applied to food as well as people. While Saeran had no feelings of that regard for any human; he appreciated a pure soul. Savior had given him lists of prospective converts, but he had happened upon the girl quite accidentally. Quite literally, he had bumped into her, spilling his ice cream while he had trailed his “replacement”, the savior’s former cousin: the one Saeyoung had replaced him with... How he despised that bottle blonde in particular for taking his place at his former brother’s side…

Rather than curse at him or sneer, the girl immediately apologized and bought him a new cone, going as far as to have an additional scoop added. They spoke briefly then as she was doing outreach for an animal rescue.

The girl was aesthetically pleasing with good facial symmetry, bright and pure eyes, and a kind spirit. Those were the sorts one wanted to spend eternity with. Plus the thought of what her screams would sound like and how vibrant her eyes would be when afraid titillated him. He wanted to conduct an orchestra of her agonized shrieks by terrorizing her every nerve under that smooth, fair skin. There was a strong, stubborn spirit in that frail body, so he’d get to have lots of fun until she saw the light… Perhaps once she was converted, that girl would love him for awakening her and be a grateful and dutiful assistant. The thought of taking her on as such had occurred to him a few times. Frankly the thought of maybe “taking” her had occurred to him too…

There had been so many opportunities, Saeran soon found… Her family was dead… So like him, she was all alone – left by a slut of a mother and abandoned by a brother whom she loved dearly. Maybe he’d help her track her mother down so she could have the satisfaction of carving her displeasure into her… Bring the bitch bound and gagged to her as a present. Some pleasures just had to be experienced.

Miyeon Ko, however, was a skittish creature who always looked over her shoulder or stayed home. It was almost endearing, like watching a stray cat who would retreat to a hole in a wall, but it made properly introducing himself after that meeting quite hard… He wasn’t shy, but something felt like it was missing… He then realized that if he found her so intriguing--- that the devil would like her too…

It seemed like a sign when he saw her name of possible converts due to the fact she had
helped several animal rescues and that a member of her family had been a former disciple.

He understood how to breach the defenses his brother had set up then. A modern Trojan horse wasn’t going to work... But the ancient version was. It was simply a matter of getting Miyeon into the RFA. She would be an unknowing accomplice, being innocent as she was, there was no chance suspicion would last for long. How could she ever give away something she didn’t know she was guilty of? It would give him a direct in, assuming she was stupid enough to do as he asked… Surprisingly enough, the girl had one of her bold moments and her helpful nature won over her anxiousness.

Waiting afterwards had been a pain, but there were stirrings of life within the group and a definite increase in activity. Sinful creatures thinking with their bodies… Yet little Miyeon dutifully carried out the role Rika had once been delegated and seemed to be doing so masterfully. This properly secured her invitation into paradise once he had briefed the Savior on the progress. The girl would be useful in recruiting and motivating others…

She looked pleased, albeit impatient.

His idiot brother allowed Miyeon to move about freely which gave him a way into the systems when her phone would re-sync or connect other wifi spots giving him an easy in. Figuring out the algorithms became much easier once he was able to confirm when they changed. Her trip out with the blonde had given him so much data, and while she’d been out with the actor, he gathered the last of the data he needed. It was even better stupid brother couldn’t keep away from directly playing with her phone. There was a laziness she brought out in him…

It was within hours after she’d returned to the “Ivory Tower” with its seemingly impenetrable defenses that Saeran had what he needed and more… Victory was so very close… Tempering his desire to move ahead was hard as the thought of seeing the look on his brother’s face as the life ebbed from him made patience nigh impossible. For now it was enough to know that he had been right to pick her.

Saeyoung liked that girl…

There was no mistaking it…

He felt no personal malice towards that woman, quite the opposite, but the thought of doing something “fun” to her to prolong his brother’s misery before putting him down like the vermin he was grew on him. Subjecting the girl to pain would only purify her, afterall… It was for her own good, but it would hurt Saeyoung so deeply…

Saeran could rip off one of those cute, cotton candy pink nails from her delicate hands for every member of the RFA. How prettily her little fingers would bleed as he plied them from the skin, a shrill high shriek echoing as that idiot would beg him to stop… Even though he wasn’t strong, it wouldn’t take much for him to overpower her. Weren’t virgins were supposed to bleed when their “cherries” were popped…? Maybe she tasted like the cherries in his ice cream… However sweet she was, Miyeon couldn’t be any sweeter than the look of anguish that would be on his brother’s face seeing the girl he loved deflowered before his own eyes… They were twins, afterall. If she liked that lying bastard’s face, she should like his. As identical twins, THAT part of them was probably the same too…

Not that what she liked made any difference to him. If she came while he did it though, that would only affirm that the girl Saeyoung loved was really his… Saeran’d never fucks anything though… Not that he wasn’t curious. It was supposed to be a pleasant experience, but it wasn’t one he’d bothered with simply because of lack of real desire. Quite simply, there were more important
things to do.

Under those circumstances though, it could be amazing.

The only thing “sweeter” would be breaking both Miyeon and Yoosung to be his completely before the three of them killed Saeyoung together then went to paradise together - a happy family save one traitor… He could even have that girl bear his child without any anesthetic while “707” would be forced to watch while being fed glass… That bastard could maybe then understand a fraction of the Hell he’d endured. But the savior’s plan could not wait for such a thing, and one more innocent child didn’t need to be brought into this wretched world.

All the same… Saeyoung would hurt.

Smiling with the warm spoon in his mouth, Saeran began the divine plan…
Chapter 14:

“…Handle it – Now."

The line went dead.

A tendril of slowly coiling, silver smoke erupted into a cloud as an exasperated sigh escaped Agent Vanderwood. He didn’t want to be “that guy”. When he’d first joined the agency, the handler mentoring him had been “that guy”: the sort who micromanaged his wards and immediately resorted to violence. The gang he’d been in before had their share of that… He told himself that he would never be “ that guy”… There was proof that 707 had been tinkering on it in bits which was why he’d kept the visits to every few days, but the deadline was within a few hours, and there was no “product”; it wasn’t like him at all. Ever since his 20th birthday, Seven was less like himself…

They had an “understanding”. Operative word: “had”.

When Vanderwood had first been given the assignment of being his handler, it was a promotion of sorts to what appeared to be an easy ward. He knew that the boy had come from a rough spot, and had a brother, and to that degree he tried to show compassion. 707 at 15 was beyond studious, thorough, and most importantly: obedient. His skills in the field needed work, but he learned quick. Seven excelled at what he did. Because of that, the older agent was perhaps not as harsh on him because the boy made it clear he understood his place and was always eager to serve. If Seven did his work and didn’t stray too far, Vanderwood allowed him what leniency and freedom he could. He turned a blind eye to the RFA and had even let Seven come home to Korea one Christmas while they were in the US for his schooling… He helped misroute the ping of the tracking they had on the boy, with the agreement that if the hacker got caught, he’d disavow any knowledge… That was BEYOND generous. If he were “that guy”, the first sign or mention of it would’ve gotten Seven tasered and his ankles broken for even suggesting it.

On the drive over, Vanderwood kept replaying the conversations they’d had since accepting the job. Maybe it was a lack of communication or understanding? Seven a genius with multiple languages mastered… So that wasn’t likely. Seven did know that if they didn’t get this done that there were legitimate risks to their safety, right? Was he not being clear enough?

Giving lectures and threatening someone weren’t fun, but if he didn’t motivate the hacker somehow, they’d both be in trouble… Not the kind that he could protect them from either. Better a little bit of an asshole now than having to beat him senseless later or having to put him down… Even if he was a pain in the ass, he didn’t want any harm to come to Seven. The boy was great at what he did, which meant profit. If he could just be made to understand the gravity of what he screwing around could cost them– the issue would resolve itself… Right?

As the older agent parked alongside the road and made his way up to the door, it was already asking him questions. The security system switched passwords at midnight meaning he’d just missed being able to use the old password, which was a Bible verse. Today, it was back to Arabic… 17 languages apparently wasn’t enough for the agent. Nope… He had to go for 18th.

Where the hell was that amount of motivation on this job!?

Vanderwood listened closely to the question and fiddled with the dictionary trying to
properly annunciate and retain the syllables being relayed to him by the feminine voice. Eventually
could piece together enough to answer the question. Once inside, the older agent was greeted with
the usual squalor. The work area and house Seven used to keep so clean were now almost always
covered in chips and soda… Pants in the floor… Grease stains from where the hacker’d been
working on his car on walls and in the bathroom in weird places.

Early on these messes were infrequent and only occurred when he was given a rather large
stack of requests to complete in breakneck speeds. It used to stress the OCD teen out, so
Vanderwood got used to keeping things clean so Seven could focus on his work. Back then, he
seemed to appreciate it and was apologetic for letting it get out of hand… Now? There was no
attempt from the hacker to even tidy up. Whether that was because Seven owned the house and
objects in them rather than renting or out of vindictiveness, the brunette wasn’t sure… Shit was going
to get real “messy” if he didn’t talk some sense into the hacker though.

Things were usually quiet, but there was no sign of struggle. A dark part of him wondered
if they’d get an extension of the fool’d gotten himself killed… Then again, he really didn’t want to
see that. His heart froze a little seeing the familiar frame draped in a strange limp position on the
couch with a huge sheet of paper covering his. There were all sorts of bits on the table that were
either some sort of model or one of the remote access devices they sometimes used. He wagered it
was useless crap. Part of him was afraid the boy was asleep until there were telltale signs he was
breathing. Taking his hand off the butt of his gun, he stood over him for a moment seriously
pondering whether it was necessary to go full out bastard or just chew him out.

Seven was snoring softly with a schematic over his face while one arm was flung over his
head with the phone just inches away. Had he been messing with that new girl in the RFA again? It
was like the agent was just now going through puberty…

“Hey! Are you SERIOUSLY sleeping right now?” he barked, snatching the blue
prints off the hacker’s face.

There was a throaty grumble from the hacker before he rolled onto his side. A moment
passed before he was softly snoring again.

“C’mon, wake up.”

Seven wriggled closer into the couch, his eyes squinting tighter. Was there ANOTHER
Dr.Pepper stain?

“Don’t make me say wake up again,” the agent warned, his voice low but more
annoyed than threatening. He didn’t have a choice did he? “Where’d I put my taser…” He
rummaged through his pockets, feeling the familiar heft of it. “Oh…” The agent pulled it free, giving
it an audible *ZAP*. “HERE it is!”

The zap made the hacker sit straight up, eyes wide and focused. “Ms. Vanderwood!” His
gold eyes flittered across the room before focusing back on the taser. “Madam, please put that away!
That’s for torture!”

“Don’t scream… It hurts my ears. And stop calling me “madam”.”

“Sir Vanderwood, then?”

“Stop screwing around,” the older agent grumbled, thoroughly done with the
antics.
There was a boyish smile as Seven beamed up at him. “No.”

This wasn’t a game…

“Do you want me to hit you?”

A tinge of nervousness game to the smile. “No!”

At least he was awake. Sighing the agent looked towards the computer and pile of files. It was a futile question, but it was more habit than anything to ask.

“Did you finish your work?”

“No!”

That annoying playful tone…

“Are you avoiding doing it on purpose?”

“No,” Seven affirmed in a more serious tone, although he stood and walked right past him. Rather his eyes were on the wiring for the security system, his phone, then his server room. “When did you come in? The question changes at midnight. But you’re magically inside?”

“I started carrying this…” Vanderwood lifted his pocket Arabic dictionary, hitting the hacker on the head with just enough force to emphasize that he was serious and punctuate that with more noise than pain. “Don’t change the subject.”

Rubbing his head, the red head dared to flash another smile,”No.”

“Maybe a few volts will jog your memory on what we’re discussing.”

The older agent began to move to follow through, only to find that the hacker’s grin dropped immediately to a more familiar and focused expression.

“Alright, alright. You’re the boss, and I’m the servant, right?”

He wasn’t the boss… They wouldn’t be working with such unpredictable clientele if he were the boss. No, he was the enforcement for the will of the people up top… He wasn’t born into that sort of position. This was his job… He was an all to necessary human resource that was easily discarded and replaced. Frankly, they both were. Seven at least had genius on his side. Vanderwood had muscle, but it was easy enough to find someone to replace him. Whoever they got to replace him though, likely wouldn’t be so forgiving to the hacker’s antics…

If he couldn’t keep his agent “productive”, they could be chopped up and sold as scrap to any number of black market organ dealers or those looking for materials for weird folk medicine. Personally, he didn’t want to be an involuntary liver donor… Seven knew what happened to people in this business. If he wanted to die, that was fine, but they were sort of in this together. Inconsiderate ass. He was keeping the boss off his back, helping protect him, and the bastard was just sleeping on the couch?

He probably had a reason, right?

“Just answer my question. Why haven’t you finished your work?”

“Because I didn’t work.”
It was the most obvious answer in the world, but as his brain processed it, his finger
tightened and itched against the trigger of the taser. This was punishment for him being too lenient,
wasn’t it? Maybe this was why every older guy who’d managed him had been such a hateful prick to
work for…

“It’s taking everything I have not to light you up like the Vegas strip right now…” he
growled.

“Oh my god! I can’t believe I didn’t finish my work! Oh no! What should I do?”
Seven mewled dramatically.

There had been a time when a slightly shorter boy with brighter eyes would’ve nodded
obediently and apologized. A kid he felt sorry for… He was still a young agent. Most his age were
out sleeping with prostitutes or doing drugs to deal with the stress. He lived clean; this was just a
rebellious stage. Focus on the positives? There had to be a reason.

“Are you acting up like this because the last job paid you in potato chips? There’s
been a noticeable decrease in productivity... Boss confirmed as much.”

“I already told you I didn’t care since I like those chips. Don’t blame Honey
Buddha,” he sulked. “But~ I ran a predictive simulation that shows if I get paid in cars, my
productivity will exponentially increase. Do you want to see?”

Did he waste time on something like that? This was Seven - probably…

“You know if they gave you anything like that it could be traced.”

“Right. Cancel that,” the red head affirmed, seeming to slowly remember his
place in the world.

Progress was progress, but he still felt anxious and out of control of the situation. The house
was a mess; his life was a mess! His brain itched until he began to pick things up to throw them
away.

“Why don’t you ask them to send you an ACTUAL maid? Empty potato chip
bags, cans… Why is your house like this ALL the time?” he grumbled until noticing the area with
the printers and laminators. “What the hell? Did you seriously shed all that paper? Do you have
ADHD or something? I can’t believe you get anything done!”

“You’re right. All this mess is just making it so hard to concentrate. You know, if
we send the boss a picture, he’ll understand.”

The boss’s words hardened the older agent’s jaw as he dropped a can he was reflexively
moving to tidy up… People who used to handle “problems” were called sweepers… Killing a target
meant cleaning. Things didn’t get much tidier than when a “sweeper” did it.

“Yeah… Great freaking excuse. He’ll TOTALLY understa___.”

As he sat down on the couch, a whiff of cherry almond, the increasingly unpleasant
signature of Dr.Pepper hit him. “Ugh!!! Your sofa smells like soda! AGAIN!”

“You mean the dulcet notes of Dr.Pepper? If only it didn’t make things so dirty
after I drink it… It REALLY helps me focus.”

Vanderwood could remember when the young hacker got his first major pay off and
purchased cases of the stuff like it was the most amazing thing ever. It didn’t take much for him to be happier then. Now it took a Herrari, and even then he lost interest once he got it. Just like any kid with a new toy. A decent pack of cigarettes and a nice coat were enough for the older agent… Speaking of which… All this annoyance REALLY made him want a smoke.

“Think I could decode all the dust flying around? The globules of palm oil from the Honey Buddha chip crumbs probably have the secret to the universe if I could just differentiate them from normal dust? I see the potato starch and honey particles all the way over here!”

“What the hell are you talking about, you weirdo?” Vanderwood barked, standing back up again. ADHD was definitely a thing – did it have a late onset? Maybe he should reach out to the boss to get some Ritalin for him…. They locked people away in mental institutions to reprogram them, force feeding him something to help him focus wasn’t nearly as cruel. That wasn’t an option now though… “Alright! Look! I’ll clean up the house, but you need to get back to work. Freaking idiot!”

“Idiot? Aren’t you being a little harsh to a genius super-secret agent, Ms. Vanderwood?”

“Living in filth like this, you’re lucky I don’t just call you a cockroach. Honestly… I don’t know if I come here to do my job or be your maid.”

“Alright Vanderwood the 3rd… I’m sorry I’ve been treating you like a maid. But… Could you maybe sweep the floors too?”

The older agent shot him a withering look. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“Not at all. If you’re not going to clean, then I seriously need to play a PVP match on LOLOL.”

“God… What? SERIOUSLY?”

Last straw…

His hand was on the taser that had been slipped back into his pocket as the agent followed the hacker up into his work area.

“We have work to do! HOW can you play games right now!?”

Seven stood still, his eyes transfixed on the screen. Matching his gaze, the agent relaxed his grip on the weapon. He recognized the warnings as belonging to the hacker’s inbuilt security protocols. Considering the high profile client they were working for, it wouldn’t surprise him. The swiftness with which the younger agent spoke to personal interest. If there was a chance of him being uncovered that could mean changing identities, moving… A whole host of unpleasant things.

“Vanderwood…”

“Were we hacked?” the older agent asked calmly, but firmly.

“…This is the RFA’s…”

That didn’t mean it couldn’t be used as a back door. Though he wasn’t the best with computers, he knew enough to be on par with the average script kiddie. It’s part of why he had been assigned to Seven to begin with; Vanderwood understood enough to make sure the job was getting done. Older guys simply didn’t bother learning skills beyond the physical, hell some didn’t even
know how to read. He knew at least 3 languages and a few martial arts. Not to mention in situations like this, he could keep a cool head…

The RFA was a luxury that was useful… Letting Seven keep in touch with them was a risk, but it also gave him an advantage. Early on, it was nice knowing he had a few high-profile targets to use as leverage. He didn’t know them personally, rather the less Vanderwood knew the better – if only for the fact that it made potentially eliminating them easier in the future. Even then, his ward was attached to them and if something happened to them, he’d be even more disorganized. That made for another distraction from work and potential breach point… The risk had to be minimized and controlled. They were, a team, if even a dysfunctional one.

“Pull up the logs.”

“On it…”

…There was Luciel Choi… The voice who had guided him through ops… Obedient – efficient.

His hand rested reflexively on the boy’s shoulder. It was no longer frail and thin enough for him to wrap a hand around but not nearly as developed as his own… The scrawny 15 year old he’d seen grow into a disobedient, disorganized 21 year old was the closest thing he’d had to a friend…

Six years ago, he could clearly remember the earnestness in the boy’s eyes as he gazed up at him. Back then, Seven came up to just a little under his nose. Malnourishment left the wiry boy looking much younger than the age the scrapped medical records had noted. His English was passable then, and though he was quick, he tended to freeze in a firefight. Vanderwood was pretty much the only choice because of his half American heritage, grasp of English, and his basic knowledge of the deep web from his early days helping hired muscle for cartels on Silk Road.

“You know who my dad is, right?”

“Yeah.”

“…You can really protect me from him?”

“Your dad’s hot shit in Korea; he doesn’t have anything Stateside… Besides, by the time you’re done with school, he’s the one who should be afraid of you. Until then, you can trust me. You do your job – I’ll do mine. Alright?”

The nervous boy smiled for the first time then…

That same smile now mocked him. There was no doubt who would win in a fight if the choice came down to either him or Seven… Vanderwood sincerely hoped it wouldn’t come to that…
Chapter 15:

Upon getting back into the apartment, Miyeon couldn’t focus on anything related to planning. Instead she showered to get Zen’s scent off her. It wasn’t that he smelled bad, quite the contrary, but it made her feel as though it had marked her. Not to mention her mind kept returning to when she’d been holding onto him from behind… She’d never wanted to embrace and push someone away at the same time so badly. Funny to think that only days before the girl had been singing his songs in the shower. Now the thought of hearing his voice left her feeling a bitter mixture of betrayal and want.

Not wanting to be alone, the girl opted instead to play a game. When she popped on LOLOL for a little, Yoosung was quick to chat with her. He had questions regarding what she’d done with Zen and even though he tried to play it off, there was clear jealousy in his tone and his line of questioning. After she’d expressed some discomfort with that, the topic of his cousin, Rika, came up. Which as lovely as she seemed, it made Miyeon uneasy. The student had been saying how alike the two of them were. It was only natural to compare her to the person that had been performing the task before, and it was clear that the student had the utmost respect and admiration for his cousin. Yet being told she “reminded” him of her seemed so odd… The little she knew of Rika, the only things they seemed to truly share were a love of animals and a desire to help others. Otherwise, the organization’s name sake seemed a good deal more driven than herself and more gregarious. Although Yoosung himself said that Rika seemed, “more cold”.

They did a dungeon with his guild which drew the conversation off such unpleasant things, but fairly soon the topic settled back on the progress of the party itself.

His tone when speaking of V’s not setting a date revealed a sort of quiet, unspoken resentment that she wouldn’t normally attribute to the student. Experience had taught her that advice did very little, but getting someone to reach a conclusion on their own and to truly “feel” it was much more effective. It was like “hacking” but with feelings. But after a point, she was too tired to continue playing counselor and discreetly logged out after finishing a dungeon with him.

It was very different when she’d called Seven. He wasn’t grilling her over what had done or who she liked, his concern was whether she was safe and then whether she was happy. There was no selfishness or jealousy, only concern. Part of her wondered if he had already closed himself to the option of anything more between the two of them… Yet the two of them flirted and joked so openly… Yoosung didn’t seem nearly as bothered by that as when Zen did it. So maybe the two of them had an agreement? Considering that they were admittedly good friends and how Seven teased the blonde, it was likely.

Did she even really like him like that?

How exactly did someone know? Was the mere fact she had to ask herself a confirmation?

Her memory was quick to recall the strained ache in her chest as the actor had leaned in to kiss her. His perfectly sculpted face and masculine scent so very close to her. In that moment, her body wanted it, her mind was utterly confused at the concept that anyone should want anything of the sort, and her heart feeling a magnetic pull to distant planet with a lonely Little Prince… With his bold glasses and bright eyes.
If Seven had been there instead, would it have been any different? She felt hot at the thought, her mind desperately working to consider what his aroma was, and how tall she’d have to stand on her toes to meet him. Whereas the actor had the scent of tobacco, smoke, leather, and natural allure – she couldn’t place what the hacker’s would be aside from maybe Honey Buddha Chips and Dr. Pepper. The potato starch mixing with the cherry and almond with maybe a spicy note. In the picture his hair had been so very messy, so there wouldn’t likely be the scent of product – which Zen didn’t need – but the clean notes in his aroma gave away.

She wanted to ask Seven… He was probably busy, and things were awkward enough…

The silence came settling back in, bringing more confusion than emptiness. Quietly her hand rested over her heart… She desperately wanted answers to things she’d never asked before and needed advice. At present the only people who would likely give it to her were the very people it involved, or people she could no longer see.

There was Jaehee, but she was likely busy… This didn’t seem like the sort of thing she could discuss with the business woman; it seemed below her. Though the older woman would likely be discreet, the thought that she’d get a lecture occurred to her. It would also ruin any respect she’d earned till now.

Miyeon desperately longed for her brother’s voice or maybe even her father’s opinion on the matter. Mr. Ko was fiercely protective of her when she was younger but relaxed with age. At a certain point, he seemed more concerned with her love life than herself. It only worsened when he was unable to hide how sick he was.

“Who’s going to take care of you when I’m gone?” he’d ask quietly with the oxygen hissing softly in the background.

“Dad! I can take care of myself,” she’d assure him with a smile.

His eyes would soften, but there would be worry there. At his core, her father was traditional man. Even if he left her enough to ensure she could at least make it through school, his dream for her was to see her happily married if only because his own marriage had been a total failure. In his mind, women were frailer creatures who were meant to be protected and sheltered by the men in their lives. Without him or her brother, he perceived her as an easy target for any number of things.

After Jun had ended his life, her father took great pains to make sure that his daughter would never be taken from him too. If anything, his involvement with law enforcement made him keenly aware of the risks that awaited a lone woman and to that end he ensured she was aware of them as well. He taught her how to use a gun and some basic self-defense. She even knew how to get out of some types of bindings – in theory. Miyeon, fortunately, had never had to use those skills, but it left her at times fearing her own shadow… With her father around, she was safe. Without him, going outside became an exercise in anxiety.

As his health and vigor declined, her father’s concerns for her future only increased. Mr. Ko’d often give her advice and occasionally point her out to doctors who looked young enough to be suitable partners and often asked nurses if they had sons that might be interested. She could expect to hear him recount her many skills to those who confirmed, cooking usually being the first.

“Most woman these days don’t know how – but my daughter… I envy the man who marries her…” and he’d usually go on describing all the things she could cook in detail until sleep came.
When his mental state deteriorated, however, his concerns grew more immediate… Looking calm, even when he was struggling for every breath became his last cognizant concern. Miyeon wore a smile for him, and he put on a calm face for her. It was the only lie they only told each other, but was a lie that had lasted since her mother stormed out leaving the two alone.

It was hard to tell what Mr. Ko would’ve thought of Seven. They both seemed to enjoy gadgets, and it was clear that whatever illicit activities the hacker was into, he made enough money to afford a fleet of sports cars. That could just as easily portray someone who was not good with money and had no impulse control too. Over all though, she suspected that he would’ve welcomed another man once he’d put them through their paces to make sure they were worthy and had honorable intentions towards her. They both had a goofy sense of humor; at least until her mother had beaten it out of her old man…

And Jun… There would’ve been a point where he would’ve good naturedly teased her and bonded with her boyfriend over games. After that boy though… He would’ve done everything to keep her from the “pain of love”. Like a big brother was supposed to, he would’ve protected her… Like Seven did…

Maybe that’s why she felt so close to the hacker even though she’d never met him… There were traces of the people most dear to her in him. Her father’s humor. Jun’s kindness… And maybe something else…

Scrolling through her contacts, one name stood out… The only person who knew any of the people her heart ached to hear from again enough to agree…

“Hi, Eun. How have you been?”

The text showed a sign of having been read, but there wasn’t a reply.

Why did they stop talking again…? This was the friend who had stood at her side while they held a memorial service for Jun. The friend who would happily agree that her mom was “the worst”. She’d held her when the blonde’s first boyfriend broke up with her, and how many times had they gone shopping to spy on the “happy” new couple? How many times had Eun-Ji offered her advice on boys or tried to set her up? What did they even used to talk about?

The vivacious blonde was probably out at a party or on a date… Doing what normal girls their age did… She wasn’t sitting in a dead woman’s apartment thinking about morbid things.

It was her own fault; Miyeon was the one who had stopped talking…

She was the weird one.

Rather than wait for a reply that likely wouldn’t come, the girl pulled the Mystic Messenger back up to check for updates. The pillow she pulled into her arms did little to soothe the stillness in the apartment. Her mood was growing too sour to focus on work, and if nothing else talking to everyone seemed to ease her mind… Rather they distracted her from. If she was helping someone else – she wasn’t feeling sorry for herself. The RFA as a collective didn’t know her with any real depth. Everyone knew something about her, but not the whole picture, except maybe Seven. So here she could pretend to be just a normal girl helping them with the party. They didn’t know about her father’s lung cancer, Jun’s suicide, or her mother’s infidelity and abandonment… They didn’t need to know that she was terrified of her own shadow. They wouldn’t see the childish things she’d brought with her to play, color, plan, and craft while she worked on their party.

If she did things well, all they would see is a successful party with a variety of interesting
guests and donators who could help others with their contributions…

That’s all they ever needed to see.

Selfishly she wanted one thing…

To see the look on Seven’s face in person as he enjoyed the party…

A calm settled over her soul at imagining a sincere smile from him. Luciel loved everyone in the group – they were now precious to her because they were precious to him. If they were happy, he’d be happy…

That was the answer…

Miyeon did love him in a sense… It wasn’t a passionate desire like what Zen stirred in her or the innocent, yet increasingly possessive way Yoosung seemed to feel towards her. It was like gravity. Something so obvious but invisible, even so the pull of it was always on her. Two bodies to never meet without a force changing their trajectory. To support and to be supported with invisible ties; apart but always connected. Before, that force had been such a hollow and destructive thing; the “black hole” of her heart that sucked the joy out of everything… A thought occurred to her though… Galaxies often had blackholes in their hearts. That darkness was surrounded by brilliant stars numbering in the hundreds or even thousands. All of those lights could have planets, and moons – all of which could have life and so many possibilities.

A dark background for the brilliant things to shine against.

All Miyeon wanted was to bring life back to the galactic cluster of celestial bodies that the hacker clearly cared so deeply about - to fill the horizon of his lonely planet with stars.

Yoosung could REALLY be a shooting star then!

A strained half chuckle escaped her at that thought. The hacker would probably approve of the whole analogy – maybe it could be the theme of the next RFA party… Or they could keep the theme for something more personal. He’d sung about marrying her on the space station. It’d be awhile before space travel became that accessible, but they’d have plenty of time to get to know each other until then… When the technology was finally there she could tell him “Yes”, then remind him of how he’d joked about it. He’d probably let out one of those sudden laughs of his followed by that long, “Ooouuuuu~!” until he would realize she was serious. At which point he’d likely stutter.

The nerd…

707- Hey, hey~!

Her heart nearly popped out of her chest. Quite clumsily Miyeon managed a reply.

“Hi hi~!”

707 - I got some of the work done!

“Yay!”

707- Thank you, thank you!

707- T_T There’s still a ton I have to get done tho. Ugh…

“I have faith in you. :3”
707- Having trouble focusing T_T

It was perhaps vain to think he was bothered by her spending the day with Zen. That didn’t seem like him anyway.

“--; Stressed?”

707- Ya

707- You must be worried too :/. All those people probably want a date.

“--; It is making it a challenge to confirm entertainment and catering without one. I know it can’t be helped though.”

707- Hmm… Maybe if I…

707- Accio V!

*V has entered the chatroom.

“:O Seven’s a wizard. Hi, V!”

V - Hello, Miyeon.

V - Seven’s on too.

707- You can call me if there’s something important.

V - I had an announcement for everyone.

V - I’ve put a lot of thought into it.

V - And I think it’s better if we hold the party sooner than later.

V - We will have the party in one week.

Miyeon dropped the phone rather painfully on her face. Rubbing her nose to make sure there wasn’t any blood, she held the device up with her free hand to see the following.

707- O.O

707- Is that going to be enough time?

V - From what I’ve seen, Miyeon has been working rather hard. If everyone continues to work together, I’m confident that we can get it done.

V - It’s also her first time throwing a party like this, so something small and exclusive might be best.

707 - ;-; That’s still a really short time frame though.

“Seven, you and everyone else have been so helpful; I know we can make this work. So I trust V on this one. Did you want me to reach out to the venue to confirm?”

V - Yes, please.

“Great! Also, If I may be bold here… V, we haven’t really spoken much, but
since you’ll be in for the party, may I ask that at some point you make time to talk to Yoosung? I don’t know everything that’s gone on between the two of you, but I get the feeling there are unresolved issues that a sincere heart to heart might fix. I know it’s been so hard for the both of you since Rika’s passing… But in order for us to grow and heal as a group, we need to heal those wounds. You know?"

V- Yes. I’ll think about it…

“It’s a tender topic, I know. ;-;”

V- It is, but you’re not wrong. I see why Jumin respects you.

The future C&R director “respected” HER?

V- Oh… Luciel, I might be going on a trip soon.

707- Just let me know when so I can make sure it’s safe.

V- Thank you. I’ll call when I’m about to head out.

707- BTW if the phone I sent you has a red light on – don’t pick up.

707 – It means it’s bugged.

V- Ah. Good to know.

V- Thank you, Luciel and Miyeon. Have a good night.

707 – Good night!

“Good night!”

* V has left the chatroom.

“It’s amazing you made a phone that can track something like that. O.O”

707 – <3

“He’s not like an agent too is he… I thought V was a photographer? ;-;”

707 – Photographers can get into some dangerous places to get good pictures.

T_T

707 - Don’t worry though!

707 – Agent 707 is on it~!

“I know you are. :3 You’re amazing like that!” The girl felt it was necessary to be more honest; the hacker could probably read her like a book… “XD I worry about everyone though. Should probably put that energy into getting this party rolling though! We both have mountains of work to look forward to.”

707 – Get a rope!

707 – And your ice picks!

“They say it’s important to have a climbing partner. :D”
“*takes hand*”

“*gets rope and camera!*”

707 - <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

707 – Jumin might have his vineyard, but we got Mt.Workntoil!

“Yep… Won’t be that scenic. But you know after, we can visit Seoraksan. I haven’t been in years. ;-;”

707- Ou~! Let’s do it!

707 – T_T When I manage to get this work done.

“^-^- Just think, party in a week. The sooner you get it done – the closer we’ll be to the party!”

707- >8D That’s right!

“Jumin and Zen won’t be all… growly with each other at the party will they?”

707- They’re sort of like cats and dogs.

“XD That’s dead on!”

707- Ya!

707- Jumin’s like a super sensitive cat.

707- Zen’s like a protective dog.

“XD I’ve never had a dog, so I wouldn’t know. But I’ve always wanted one ;-;“

707- Same here. I mean, I want both.

707 - ;-; But I can’t.

“;-; You can’t have any pets? O.o Why?”

707- My maid would kill me. ;-; “

“Hmm… You know if you ever get some down time, you could probably make a robot one.”

707- :O

707: Or…

707: A whole army of Ellys!

“XD Jumin would probably fund it. Although, ;-; I’d fear them being misused. If they were like real cats though, they would probably ignore orders. ”

707- oria ;lgh

707- XD I nearly shot Ph.D Pepper out my nose!
“Ah! Nuu~!”

707 – Ugh!

707 – Meowie-on!!!

707- T_T It burns…

“--; I’d offer to kiss and make it better, but sorta far for that.”

707- Would that actually work?

“Probably not. But it’s the thought that counts, right?”

707 – Got an idea … Gotta get back to work!

“G’night, Seven!”

707 – Sweet dreams!

*707 has left the chatroom.

Not even a second passed before the chat screen changed. Miyeon thought her phone screen was on the fritz until a familiar overlay appeared. The same one that had appeared when she had first joined.

&%aited

s0 l0ng…

I &*$%will

%$corr*&pt@#$you
My apologies it took so long to get this out. There were 5 weeks of my first semester of Radiography that really needed my attention, but I have two weeks off to focus on you guys! Chapter 16 is a beast, but we're going to be up on the infamous day 7 soon.

Thank all of you who have kept reading up until now. I know I can't compete with the upcoming V route, but I appreciate all of you so very much!

Chapter 16:

Miyeon’s phone was getting inundated with lines of code. Part of her wanted to run outside to show Seven, but there was no guarantee that he’d be able to even see something so small before it stopped. Should she try to write down or take pictures of it with her laptop to show him? There wasn’t time! She needed to stop whatever it was. Miyeon tried to shut her phone off, only to find it wouldn’t respond. With quaking hands, she fumbled with the device until the battery came out. Even though that should’ve stopped it, the girl couldn’t help but look back over the screen to make sure. Only after a few minutes did she put the battery back in and attempted to restart the phone. It seemed stuck at the initial factory screen.

A sense of panic began to settle in. The only real consolation was that even if she lost the RFA’s contact info, they still had hers. Plus Seven had the camera and a certain gamer had her in game info… Whatever happened, someone needed to get ahold of the hacker. While troubleshooting and resetting her phone, she logged onto the game.

Yoosung was on LOLOL as expected. It was hard to tell if he had been playing the game more than he normally would have or if this was his normal routine. In either case, he seemed very happy to see her. He’d confirmed that there was a strange alarm and had invited her to a raid. She politely declined but was assured he’d tell Seven about the glitch if she couldn’t get her phone working. By the time she got back on the messenger, the only person on was Jaehee.

Jaehee - Miyeon, you’re up late.

“Yeah… Did you see any weird messages in the app? @_@”

Jaehee- Weird messages?

There was a thoughtful pause. She could practically see the woman’s smooth brow furrow.

Jaehee- No, I only heard an obnoxious alarm noise about an hour ago, but nothing else out of the ordinary.

Jaehee- I thought it was just a bug or something to let us know there was now a party date.

“I hope that’s all. My phone was acting really strange; I just now got it working again… Seven has enough to work on, but I’d feel much better if he could just confirm ;-;.”
Jaehee- Speaking of Seven… Did you see what he said in chat last night?

“You mean about him marrying me at the space station?”

Sure he’d sung it in a private conversation, but her mind was bringing up any instance of his voice to calm her nerves. Part of Miyeon wanted to know what his reaction would be when he saw it, if he’d even have the time to read it.

Jaehee- What?;;
Jaehee- Did he say that?
Jaehee- Well…

Jaehee- Congratulations, but… I have no intention of risking my life to attend the ceremony. I’ll happily celebrate once the both of you return to Earth – AFTER I complain about his inspiring Mr.Han…

Jaehee- Robot cat army…
Jaehee- Seriously, what did he begin!?
Jaehee- Luciel…
Jaehee- Just wait until I see you…

*707 has entered the chatroom.

“Seven!!” she called out to him aloud even as she typed.

The rush of emotions that seeing his little icon now brought was almost overwhelming. Knowing he was up made her want to go to the camera. There was so much she wanted to tell him, although right now there were more practical matters. A woman’s wrath for example…

“Run for your life!!!”
Jaehee- It’s already too late.
Jaehee- Seven, don’t you have something to say to me?
707- Meow?

“It appears the shock has made him lose the ability to speak in human tongue,” Miyeon offered.

707- Meow meow~
Jaehee- So he’s a cat…
707- Ya-ow~
Jaehee- Shouldn’t cats your age be neutered?
707- …
707- I have made a grave mistake.
Jaehee- You should’ve stayed quiet.

A moment passed as the executive assistant fumed a little more before the hacker seemingly caught up with the conversation before he’d arrived onto the scene.

707- This… is bad.

707- THERE WAS A BUG!??!

“--; At least we think so…”

707- The world is drowning in bugs as sleepless nights go by.

707- Rather than let the sensitive one, the cute one, and the game addict meet their downfall; I must come to the rescue.

As playful as it was, Miyeon could imagine his golden eyes rimmed with dark circles. His sleep schedule was erratic at best; Seven was going to end up sick if stuff like this kept happening… Keeping positive would maybe help some of that.

Jaehee- You make it sound like you’re a superhero ;;

Jaehee – Isn’t your fault there’s a bug in the first place?

The girl wanted to remind her friend that the resident hacker had designed the program himself and likely had to rush out security updates after the initial breach. There was also so much work he seemed to have to do for the agency that even what he had done had probably been beyond generous. She wanted to say her suspicions of the origin of the issue, but Seven was on it.

707- Right now…

707- It’s an EMERGENCY!

Assistant Kang wasn’t amused, but Miyeon couldn’t help but clip in an image of an ambulance.

“Clear!!!”

707- That’s right!

707- CLEAR THE PATH!!!

707- We must destroy our enemies!!!

707- Princess, I will be your knight in shining armor!!!

Her heart nearly stopped as a tremendous urge to hold something close hit her. Zen calling her princess was normal. Coming from the hacker, it seemed to carry a different weight. It felt more sincere…

“My knight in mecha power armor <3.”

Jaehee- You two make a great couple.

Miyeon’s cheeks felt as though they were going to ignite. Was it that obvious?
Jaehee- Luciel.

707- Ya?

Jaehee- Stop being annoying and fix the bug.

Jaehee- And again, why did you mention something like a cat robot, let alone a cat army where Mr.Han could see it?

707- Well I have a very good excuse for the bug.

707- It’s something we in the industry call…

Jaehee- Don’t change the subject!

“Hacker,” the party planner clarified.

707- Exactly.

Jaehee- Oh my god!

707- This great messenger that I, Seven created, was hacked.

Jaehee- It was hacked when Miyeon joined four days ago.

Jaehee- Are you saying it happened again?

“My phone did the same thing about an hour ago as it did then. It wouldn’t’ respond to anything I did, just displayed this strange code… I had to pop the battery out of it to get it to stop. I just now got it working again. >_<'* Seven, I’m so sorry.”

707- I couldn’t believe it when I saw the log.

Jaehee- You don’t think they can see what we’re saying right now or our info do you?!

707- Nah.

707- Don’t worry.

707- Whoever it was tried to place a call using the messenger but selected the alarm instead.

707- Not sure if that was intentional or they want our attention.

Jaehee- Are you positive no information leaked?

707- Ya.

707- There was no attempt to even connect to the database.

“Seven… Is there any way to tell if it’s the same hacker as before?”

Jaehee- It certainly seems like it.

707- I can’t say for sure yet, but the proximity in time and the fact your device seems to be the breach would make that a strong possibility…

“Should I just get a new phone and you could reinstall the messenger? Or maybe I could
just use my laptop? Change all my passwords… Again… :_:

707- I already did a remote reinstallation and beefed up the security.

707- As far as who…

707- There is still a chance that this is someone else, but I don’t have enough evidence to say for certain just yet.

707- It definitely wasn’t someone randomly trying to find a breach though; whoever did this is after us for something. lolol

Jaehee- You’re positive for something that’s very serious…

707- It’s more depressing if you sound depressed!

“I suppose if they really wanted to cause harm by now, they would’ve.”

Jaehee- … In either case, I should notify Mr.Han.

707- Sorry that

707- I haven’t found anything yet

707- When u get ahold of Jumin

707- Think he’d share his guards?

Miyeon’s stomach sank. Was that necessary?

Jaehee- Do you mean for the entire RFA?

707- I think it’s best.

A prickle of anxiety made her hair stand on end as the hollow pit in her gut spread to a numbness throughout her body. Was there really that much danger?

707- We don’t know what the hacker is after.

707- But I’ll work really hard on it

707- With the help of my Supermaid Vanderwood!

“With kung fu grip and fast acting cleansing!”

707- 8D

Jaehee- Precisely how is your maid helping?

707- The environment is important on a mission.

707- Cause Ms.Vanderwood keeps the place clean, we’re on a team!

Jaehee- I see…

Jaehee- Her role is critical in this “mission” then.
Jaehee- Anyway, I will tell Mr. Han, but…

Jaehee- What are we going to do about Miyeon? Her address is still classified.

She felt like a “Trojan Horse”. By merely existing she was causing all sort of trouble, so it was probably best if everyone kept a distance. Just like after her father died… Like after Jun died… It was better for everyone to keep away.

There was one important difference though.

She had Seven watching over her.

“I have… Seven’s blessing!”

707- Yes!

707- I will bestow blessings… upon you… Miyeon.

707- In the beginning, Seven created the heavens and the internet.

707- God Seven said, “Let there be light… and long cat.”

“And lo and behold, there was light and long cat.”

707- And upon mankind, he bestowed a blessing in his image.

“Hallelujah.”

Jaehee- This is no time to joke around. Miyeon won’t have any guards!

707- In all seriousness…

707- I would like to go there myself

707- To protect Miyeon if possible.

Jaehee- Oh…

The fear induced adrenaline turned to butterflies in her stomach and a warmer surge of blood ran through her again. Was that just because he was supposed to keep her safe on V’s orders or…?

“I would bake you soo many cookies!”

707- Oh…

707- My brain is starting to race…

707- Thinking of such a warm welcome hahaha.

Jaehee- Pretty sure you mean your heart.

707- But…

707- I can’t come right away

707- ;-; I still have stacks of work for the agency.
“That’s true… ;-; You’ve already got so much. Your maid isn’t going to get angry with you is she? :/ It seems like she’s been there a lot on “overtime” lately.”

707- I can’t help it! It’s because of work. ;-;

Jaehee- If Miyeon’s location is secure, is it really a good idea to keep an eye on the feed with your maid potentially looking over your shoulder?

707- It’s okay. The info won’t leak. Ms.Vanderwood is in the same position as me.
707- Since Jaehee’s got everyone else covered
707- I need to get back to it.

“Good luck, Seven. I’ll be waiting for you.”

707- OMG it’s like we’re reading each other’s minds.

Jaehee- You two are such a funny pair…

* 707 has left the chatroom

Jaehee- I wonder if Ms.Vanderwood is even really his maid…

“It’s probably best not to think too much about it,” Miyeon replied before she could help herself. “On the bright side, we have a date for the party!”

Jaehee- Yes…

Jaehee- You’re surprisingly calm given the situation.

She had to put up a strong front.

“We have a week to get the party together, and ultimately what matters is the charities we’re helping. Guards will keep you guys safe, I trust Seven, but I probably need to go on “lockdown” for a few days so I don’t make any more work for him…”

Jaehee- That might be best… I would rather you not put yourself at risk while Luciel and V resolve this.

“Speaking of risks… Doesn’t Jumin have that flight to the Middle East coming up?”

Jaehee- Yes.

“Will he have security? He’s not going to have you cat sit is he?”

Jaehee- He always has security, and he will be taking Elizabeth the III with him as a “cat ambassador”. Likely with her own guards.

“That’s good – our Elizabeth is safe! Seven will be happy to hear that.”

Jaehee- Yes… The cat will be fine. Yet you’re unguarded. Even with Seven watching over you, I’m a bit worried. I suppose if there is a silver lining, him being out of the country should give me time to relax and maybe help with the arrangements at the venue since you’ll be “grounded”.

“True… If this isn’t resolved in the next day or two, you’ll probably have to act as onsite
manager. I am so sorry for making more work for everyone…”

Jaehee- You don’t need to apologize.

“I promise that I won’t be this much trouble next party.”

Jaehee- The fact that you’re considering staying around is enough for us.

“Maybe we can have a girls’ night out after things calm down,” Miyeon offered. Heaven knows they’d probably have plenty to talk about.

Jaehee- That sounds… Amazing. Could a thing even happen?

“Zen has to have another performance sometime, right?”

Jaehee- If not, I have DVD’s of some of his past work to share.

“Awesome! That means we just gotta make it through this week. So hang in there, girl!”

Jaehee- I will try. For now, I really do need to get ahold of Mr.Han. Try not to stay up too late, Miyeon. I feel tomorrow is going to be a long day. We have a meeting with a pharmaceutical company… I wonder if they’ll offer any samples of their aspirin; I get the feeling I’ll need it.

“Poor Jaehee… ;-; You and Seven likely are going to be the busiest of us all… Try to eat healthy and don’t overdo it on the energy drinks. B Vitamins give you the mental alertness without the crash!”

Jaehee- Oh? I’ll bear that in mind. Good night, Miyeon.

“Good night!”

She sent a message to Yoosung to remind him to sleep. There was no reply which meant either he was deep into the world of LOLOL, asleep, or angry with her for not playing with him. It was hard not to consider which of the three it was until she felt her muscles aching from trying to find a comfortable position. Rather than force it, Miyeon planned out the next day’s list of calls and e-mails to send, with a playlist on in the background that covered the challenges of building colonies on other planets. The narrator’s voice was deep and methodical, and soon she was feeling tired enough to tuck in.

The next thing she heard was a familiar jingle.

Seven!

Clumsily she fumbled for the phone and nearly toppled herself out of bed but managed to recover and sat up.

“Hey, it’s me!”

“Good morning!”

“… Morning… So I uhm… I’m sorry. Last night… You must’ve been so surprised and worried. I don’t know what to say…”

“It’s fine,” the girl assured, her voice squeaky from having just woken up. “I know you’re doing your best. Really it’s okay.”
“It’s not… It’s been awhile since I’ve seen anyone attack something I’ve made so aggressively. When it first happened, I improved security, switched up the algorithms, and changed a lot of stuff to really fortify things, but this happened again. Miyeon, I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she assured him, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“Who the hell would hack our systems?” he sighed, an uncharacteristic note of exasperation in his voice but a thoughtful hum mellowed the harshness. “You know… When I was in college, my friends and I would make apps and for fun we’d try to figure out how to hack them. We’d make all sorts of bets, like whose would get hacked first. No one ever came close to cracking one of mine. So, I’m pretty sure it wasn’t one of them…”

“You went to college?”

“Oh! Oops! I shouldn’t have mentioned that… Haha.”

“I like hearing about you…”

There was a nervous titter to his chuckle before he cleared his throat. “Well if that’s the case, I can’t tell you where I went or what I studied, but I can tell you I graduated early.”

“My bet would be on computer sciences or programming.”

“Probably best not to guess,” he said in a tone that was playful, but had a serious glint to it.

“You must’ve been glued to your desk to have finished a degree that young though,” Miyeon teased, crossing her legs under the blanket. “Not to mention these past few days… I’d be so sore!”

“My back does hurt... haha.”

“Aww… I can try to rub your shoulders at the party if they’re bothering you.”

“Ouu…”

There was a moment of quiet.

“About your friends… How could you tell they didn’t hack you back then?”

“I had it programmed when someone tried to hack into one of my apps and failed, it’d post, “I’m a LOSER!” all over their social media accounts. They’d get so pissed! They tried again and again, but they always lost. Totally got them!” he laughed wistfully. “But… That’s not why I called. Sorry I was supposed to apologize and I got distracted.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing,” she soothed. “We’re friends, I’m honestly just happy to talk to you…”

“Y…yeah.”

“I’ve been worried about you too, you know…? Whether you’re eating and sleeping enough…”

“It’s fine. This is normal for me.”

“That doesn’t make it healthy,” she chided. “Hey… You don’t think me leaving
the apartment had anything to do with this latest hacking into the messenger, do you?”

“No…” He hummed thoughtfully. “It’s hard to explain, I think this person has been trying to brute force the app for a long time.”

“You guys mentioned problems before the last party… Could it be them again?”

She slipped out from under the covers, letting her toes graze the floor.

“It’s hard to say… But don’t worry, I have a plan.”

“I trust you, Luciel.”

“Good choice! We heroes become stronger when we have someone to protect! With the energy of your trust and faith in me, I feel SUPER charged! I, 707, pledge to protect you and make sure you are safe once again! How about that? You feel reassured, right? Pretty reliable, right?”

The girl couldn’t help but chuckle with some relief. It was stupid and dorky, but the sincerity in his words reassured her.

“Thank you… When this is all over, I really would like to thank you properly,” she sighed. The bolder party of her was already uttering the next part, “Maybe at the party, I could give you a hero’s reward...”

“Ou? Like what?”

She nearly dropped the phone as the heat ran through her. Was he really playing dumb?

“Muah…Muah!” she stammered, having already committed herself to the word.

“Muah…Muah…?” he echoed playfully. “What’s that? A new form of morse code? Are you giving me a mission? It sounds like a pretty important one.” There was pained note to his voice as he said the next, “But it feels really simple and difficult at the same time.”

“Oh! It’s time for that now.”

“…Seven…”

“I have something important to tell you.”

The girl felt a little light headed, was he rejecting her?

“We can talk more about that secret code later though, okay? But now, it’s time to go on a date with my babies.”

His “babies”? His cars…

Did he need to go somewhere? Was he coming to check on her? Was he going to physically confront the hacker? Was “Supermaid Vanderwood” going to take him out in the middle of nowhere?

”Once a day, I sit in the driver's seat and ask how their day was, how they feel, and if the gas tastes good.”

That just sounded lonely… In the back of her mind, she could see him nurturing them like a
dutiful father. Her cheeks blushed carrying that over to the thought of him being a parent, and how he’d become one…

“707 will do his best to make sure you are safe. Bye now!”

The line was dead before she could reply. It stung, but Miyeon was starting to understand. It was like when her father was working. Prolonged goodbyes were a luxury that people in dangerous positions didn’t have time for. But that didn’t stop her from playing out all sorts of scenarios in her head of what was going on. Her mind played through everything from the hacker being taken to an empty warehouse and any number of horrible things happening to him or even just Seven sitting in his car for just a moment away from his “maid”. Much like a horror movie, not knowing was much more frightening…

The truth was though, she was afraid of everything…

She called out to confirm with the venue so she could at least be a little productive, but her mind was far away on unrelated problems.

Her father was very good at making her think about the “what if’s”. It made her a good judge of character most of the time. She’d learned to recognize patterns of behavior that kept her safe, and lead to giving good advice but it didn’t come without a cost. Now that Miyeon was awake and aware of the feelings she was starting to have for the hacker, her father’s voice was in the back of her head asking those very practical things much louder… Something told her he might’ve preferred someone like Zen over Seven.

Really what did she even know about him?

As she showered and dressed, she considered what could be considered “facts”.

Assuming that she could trust what he’d said, he was only 22. That was a year older than her and, if her memory of astrology was still reliable, meant he was born in the year of the pig. Seven must have graduated college young or relatively recent if he did at all. He was a genius by his own account and the affirmation of others in the group. However, he’d gotten the knowledge, there was no doubt he had to work hard. Seven also clearly worked for dangerous people doing illegal things. There were probably more accepted careers he could pursue with his skills, but job market wasn’t exactly the best for young people… Anything legal would also pay less. So, was his working for shady people a choice of greed, necessity, or just because he could? Seven already had a roof over his head… And his “babies”. So either he had a ton of debt, he couldn’t hold onto money for long, or he was building up a stockpile for something.

Speaking of which, she needed to stock the fort herself. The only protection she had was a CCTV camera, which wasn’t going to do much if she was in danger. That meant it was probably best to her to turtle up and remain prepared. After making a list of supplies and toiletries, Miyeon grabbed her wheeled bag to make carrying things easier. Only after making sure the coast was clear in the hall did she make the dash to the elevator, giving her usual little wave to the camera. Hopefully Seven wouldn’t laugh at her for it or think she was running from anything but her own imagination.

Half alert and half in her own mind, Miyeon made the trek to the neighborhood market just a few blocks down. Once there, she fell into the familiar routine engrained into her from nearly a decade of experience shopping and cooking for her father and self. She focused on versatile staples like eggs, stock, rice, and didn’t skip on the vegetables. There was a sale going on too for chicken which she took advantage of. Although she wasn’t usually one for chips and soda, the girl found herself purchasing a case of Dr.Pepper and a few bags of the chips he liked so much. The section for them had been empty, no surprise, but by chance she’d found where someone had hidden them
behind another brand. They weren’t cheap… Seven probably wouldn’t show up, but the superstitious part of her felt that if she had them on hand, it would increase the chances. If this were a dating sim, that would increase his affection with her too right? Those mechanics had to be based on some level of reality. Even if he never came there, it wasn’t for nothing. Miyeon could still drink the soda or use it in other ways. She could sauces and cakes made with it. The chips would be a great option to add crunchiness to the chicken if she wasn’t able to eat them by herself.

She checked her phone while waiting to be rung up, which was probably considered rude, but so was the woman in front of her who was attempting to negotiate pricing over every little thing. Zen and Jumin were on, but unsurprisingly, they were not speaking to each other. Once she joined the chat, however, it was quickly a challenge for dominance. The two of them made barbs towards each other but were gracious to her. Along with Zen’s smoking and Jumin’s treatment of his employees, this was so unappealing to her. The only good thing to come of it was the future chairman teasing Zen with a picture that Seven had sent of “Mary Vanderwood the III”, which was simply him in a maid outfit. Even if Zen got flustered and perhaps protested a bit too much, which made it hard not to tease the actor a little. Although now that she looked at the picture, like she’d seen it before. The venue had maids, like the one who had been crying in the bathroom… She had red hair too. But this season red was a popular hair color. Truly Miyeon hoped that poor girl and her boyfriend had made up. Maybe she’d see her at the party and could check on her. While pondering that and anxiously glancing to see if it was time for her to check out yet, CEO asked if inviting members of a pharmaceutical company he was meeting with that morning would be appropriate. She confirmed, thanking him for his consideration… That’d be an invite to send later when she got the info. Jumin left shortly after. The actor on the other hand lingered to chat with her. Later that day he had a traditional music group to meet with, which meant that neither of them would be able to help with any of the arrangements for the party. Although they both agreed that it would be a great opportunity for him.

Zen - “Maybe I should try on some of the traditional garb and take a picture?”

“Totally!”

He had to leave shortly after she got checked out and started the trek back to the apartment. Part of her wondered if she should just take the risk of organizing the venue in person by herself. If she went tomorrow and Jaehee could make it, they could just share her guard detail, right? Just getting there would be a little scary. She hurried back up to the apartment and made sure to fasten all the locks this time. Once she was sure she was secure, she put the groceries away and considered the options.

There was no way of getting around it, some things were just going to require a warm body…

She began to write out a message to the group laying out her plan for one of the next few days so that they could get the venue together. Scrolling back up to see if there obvious scheduling blocks for the other members, Miyeon stopped once she came to the picture of “Mary Vanderwood the III”. Seven as a maid lead her mind to all sorts of lurid places. Here she was trying to compile a list of what would need to be done in person within the next day or two, and in the back of her mind, all she could see was Seven’s tussled red hair between her pale, quivering thighs.

The thought of him methodically exploring her body with those beautifully dexterous hands and doing whatever he liked to her was all Miyeon could think about for several minutes. Was it the maid outfit and the fact she could see his thigh? It took a moment, but the girl soon understood. Zen and Jumin were both so very image conscience. Even the inference of being anything but masculine was enough to set them into a defensive mode. Luciel, on the other hand, could joke about himself
because he was comfortable with who he was. That was tremendously attractive to her…

Granted Miyeon was becoming very aware of how she might be perceived. The party that she was planning was much fancier than her wardrobe. With everything going on, she had no idea how she could slip out to try to find something to wear. Maybe she could rent something? That would only cover the party though. If they really did get close… Would he be okay with what was really under that dress? His only real metric for finding someone attractive from a previous conversation he’d had with Zen and Yoosung while she wasn’t on days ago was that he liked nice eyes and pink lips. These days, her bangs were so long, he’d probably never really gotten a good look at her face… It wasn’t like she was super fit either, although there were probably many traditionally minded people who would appreciate her modest chest. Jaehee was more “mature” than her in that regard, not to mention the business woman did martial arts. Her frame was sleek and powerful. Miyeon couldn’t help but feel like dough in comparison, but there was something to be said about being soft in the right places though, right?

She needed to focus.

The girl opened the glass sliding door and stepped out to the balcony for a moment for fresh air… Closing her eyes, she savored the feel of the breeze and the warmth of the mid-Summer sun along her skin. Stretching in the sunshine felt so good!

It really was a good morning, although there wasn’t that much left of it. She could be proud of how productive it’d been. Before joining, she would’ve simply slept so she wouldn’t have to think or deal with people, and her trip to the store would’ve been much later in the day… It was a balancing act between avoiding people and danger. Maybe the RFA was really good for her, that was enough to put things in perspective. There was a sense of purpose and motivation that she hadn’t had in so long. Ultimately the party was about the people who were going to benefit from the charity, it was her job to make sure those people got the help they needed.

It was simple: Help people… Plan the party… Take care of the RFA… Stay positive!

If only Dad were still around to see how much she’d gotten done.

Taking a seat on one of the plush chairs that had been set up outside, she curled up with her laptop and began to work. V had said that he wanted to keep things small, but the prospective guest list was already over 100. The newest messages seemed to infer that the “trust fund kid” was out of his meeting as well, as the pharmaceutical company had sent a message to her inquiring about the gathering. Despite the actor said about Jumin, he was good to his word.

The messenger app gave a jingle: someone was posting in group chat.

Jaehee – I came to see whether or not there’s been any progress concerning the hacker.

Jaehee- Yet 707 isn’t on.

“He’s got a lot on his plate this morning, so it might be a little before we hear anything,” Miyeon replied. “Did you get to the office okay?”

Jaehee- Yes, thank you.

The two of them discussed scheduling over the next day or two as the girl laid out her thoughts on how they could go about getting the venue ready. Sharing guards while she was there likely wouldn’t be a issue, but the assistant was still concerned about her getting there and returning to the apartment safely. Tentatively, the next day was thought to work, but before they could really
Jaehee- Seven, hello.

707- @tlj3o3j3$

The girl wasn’t sure if he was really in trouble, if it was code, his fingers were on the wrong keys from exhaustion, or if he was just being silly… Poor thing was overworked.

“i7’L830k,” she wrote in reply.

Jaehee- Stop.

707- dlkgj

707- eoipk

Jaehee- STOP!

707- ..

707- .

707- ok

“Are you okay? ;_;”

Then almost as soon as she’d hit send, the assistant’s message followed.

Jaehee- Have you found anything on the hacker?

707- ;-;

707- Not yet

707- I have so much work from the Agency!!!

That message was so much bigger…

707- I can’t focus!!!

707- Sorry, Miyeon T_T

Poor thing.

“The Agency stuff probably needs to come first. We’ll be okay in the meantime, Seven. Cheer up! :D”

707- T_T

707- I will!

707 – I’ll work harder!
Just for you Miyeon!

Jaehee- So I take it she’s secure for the moment.

Ya

I’ve been checking the CCTV

and nothing weird has happened

I’ve been looking

every 2.35 seconds

just in case something happens

Every 2.35 seconds…?

Ya

but just looking at the screen

makes me so frustrated…

“I knew I could feel God Seven’s gaze upon me every 2.35 seconds!” she joked.

We even locked eyes once, right?!

When you went to the store earlier.

Isn’t it weird to communicate through CCTV?

It was… But that was sort of what the situation required, wasn’t it?

T_T

I want to go to Miyeon and protect her myself.

It’s so frustrating this is all I can do!!!

“I wouldn’t mind. Could you just do your Agency work here? It’d probably help you focus.”

No…

I’m sure he has very good reasons why he hasn’t just done that already.

Ya

Ugh…

can’t give you a body guard… and I can’t go…

So…

I’d like to make a robot body guard for you.
707 – But that’d probably take a long time.
Jaehee – You could just focus on doing your work and catching the hacker.

707- Body guard robot.

Jaehee- Or you could just go protect her yourself like she suggested. That’d have to be more efficient than building a robot.

707- Maybe you’d like that, Miyeon ;;; ?

“You know how I feel about robots. :3”

707- Ooh~!

707- I don’t think I could build you a mecha suit though.

Jaehee- Something else you two have in common…

707- Awesome.
Jaehee- Are you even reading?

707- To be honest, after we spoke last night I was planning on creating a small watch dog just to test it out…

Jaehee- He really isn’t paying attention to a thing I’m saying, is he?

707- But I’m not confident enough to send it to your place.

707- (There was an image of a chubby, shiny black robot puppy who spat fire in what she recognized as his home.)

No way that was just Photoshop. It reminded her of Cerberus from the Chateauvania games. Did he really make it? If so… She loved it!!! She would’ve loved it even if he hadn’t made it!

“ZMG!!! SO KEWT!!!”

707- Really!? 

“YES!!! OMG I want to make smores with it! Or light up fireworks!”

707- I’m glad you like it lolololol

Jaehee- It is cute.

707- Ms. Vanderwood did tell me to just work

707- If I have time for that…

Jaehee- I agree with that…

Jaehee- But it did turn out well. It is quite adorable.

707- +_+ Right?

707- So cute!
707- SO lovely~!

707- SO ADORABLE~!!!

Jaehee- Yes, you could almost sell it…

707- It breathes fire on command though. Do you think the government would approve?

“Puppy-bot doesn’t breathe fire. ;-; That’s the spicy heat of passion! Cupid’s fire~!!!”

707- The fires of love!

Jaehee- No doubt you could sell it if that feature was taken out. You’d end up in jail for selling a product so dangerous as it is in its current state.

707- But still, isn’t it pretty?

707- I thought

707- while working on it

707- it would be perfect for Miyeon

707- since both of them are cute…!

Her heart was throbbing so loudly in her ears.

“They say that artists tend to put themselves into their work. Which means that puppy bot gets his cuteness from his creator.”

707- haha

707- You caught my cute side!

707- It’s like my great secret has been revealed;;;

Jaehee- Okay…

Jaehee- Well…

707- B

707- U

707- T

707- Making things like this won’t help Miyeon…

Jaehee- Exactly.

“It’s still pretty awesome! Plus, little breaks now and then can actually improve overall focus! The fire could be useful in some situations too.”

707- It’s dangerous though.

707- It could explode because of the gas tank.
707- I should create a version that doesn't spit out fire lololol

Jaehee- You should focus on your work.

707- Yeah…

707- I really should just work.

707- Why did I do that ??

“You’ve been so busy the past few days. T_T Maybe taking a walk outside and getting some fresh air would help?”

Jaehee- I agree. Maybe grab a treat while you’re out.

707- A treat… Honey Buddha…

“Too much honey buddha,” Miyeon replied before she could help herself.

707- Ya

707- I should

707- I’m gonna go clear my head a bit

707- and come back

“Good. I’ll be waiting for you. So try to cheer up, okay?”

707- Yup!

707- I’ll keep an eye on you even while I’m taking a break!

707- So don’t worry!

Jaehee- Is that really taking a break?

707- It is.

707- See u later!

“Take care!”

* 707 has left the chatroom.

Jaehee – Still…

Jaehee- It’s surprising he came up with a fully functional robot in just a few hours.

Jaehee – Luciel seems ridiculous at times because he likes to joke around.

Jaehee- But there’s no denying that he’s a genius

“True, but being a genius only gets someone so far, I think you guys are what motivate him more than anything. He cares so much for everyone in the RFA.”

Jaehee- He made that robot for you, Miyeon. Given a few more days, I think he really
could come up with a full-sized one.

Jaehee- He’s being very kind.

Jaehee- Oh.

Jaehee- I would really like to talk more

Jaehee- but Mr.Han’s meeting is ending soon.

Jaehee- We’ll discuss more later. Take care of yourself, Miyeon.

“Take care of yourself too, Jaehee! Hopefully he’s forgotten the cat army.”

Jaehee- I hope so.

Jaehee- Here’s also hoping that Luciel can focus again and get back to normal.

Jaehee- Good bye.

*Jaehee has left the chatroom.

It wasn’t even three minutes before her phone rang. Jumin was calling her. Weird. Maybe he meant to call his assistant? Then again there was so much going on.

“Hello, Jumin!”

“It’s me.”

His voice was matte flat but deep as ever. Something told her sleep would come very easy listening to him read. How did people in meetings manage when he was supposed to present? Was it just fear that kept them awake? Although to her surprise, his tone took on a slightly more enthusiastic one.

“As someone else who enjoys cats… I wanted your thoughts on the cat army. The body guards we currently employ are so rigid to look intimidating. Having something graceful like a cat would truly be much more enjoyable. Don’t you agree?”

Considering it wasn’t really like the executive to reach out to her, something told her he wanted to make small talk either because he was worried, or Jaehee was tired of him going on about the concept. She seemed a sympathetic party who would indulge him. Plus Seven’s posting of the robot puppy likely lit the fuse in a more purposeful way.

“It depends on which member of feline family was used. Something like a tiger might be effective at being imposing and graceful.”

“True.”

Jumin was latched onto this ideal pretty hard, and no doubt it was going to make more work for his assistant if she encouraged it. He was a man of reason though. She just had to point out why it was an impractical pursuit. It didn’t matter that it was a cool concept…

“Although I don’t think it’d be a good ideal in the long run. A cat army would cost so much when it came to R&D, energy costs, and maintenance. Compared to just hiring body guards it’d be really inefficient.”
“People can also be unreliable. With a cat army, one could control their protocols, could they not?”

“True, but eventually there would probably be a breach in security from a hacker who would misuse them. So, there’d probably a ton of liability issues from that last part alone. Not to mention the potential misappropriation of the technology for military purposes.”

“I would profit from the technology by owning the patents.”

He was a business man… Maybe appeal to his softer side?

“Do you really think Elizabeth the III would like to have the likeness of her cousins used for something so brutal?”

“No, I suppose not… Something so beautiful and powerful is to be admired, not abused.”

“There would also be potentially a PR issue, people always give credit to dogs for protecting people, even though there are accounts of cats doing the same.”

“…Maybe I could work on changing that. Perhaps if I put cat ears on the guards it would help? Although I once used one of those photo editing apps to put cat ears on the chief of security; it was a disaster. So no… You seem to be full of ideals though, Miyeon. What do you think?”

“Right ‘meow’, I think cats need to be rescued more than them protecting us. In a functional sense, they’re good as therapy animals and hosts at cat café’s. Meow meow.”

“So healthcare and hospitality are the feline occupations of choice?”

“Meow.”

“I do think this has been probably the most productive conversation I have had on this topic. Perhaps body guard cats were the wrong avenue. Robot assistant cats though…”

“Jumin, replacing real cats with robot ones just means that real ones can’t find homes.”

“You are right. This is… Frustrating…”

“Rather than make something that looks like a cat, we could focus on taking care of the ones already in the country. Elizabeth is a cat ambassador, right?” That seemed to draw a contented little sound from him. Was he smiling? The thought calmed her some. “I know a few people in at a couple of the groups I used to volunteer with that I could contact for you.”

“Could you invite them to the party?”

“I can if you like, although we might want to just host a separate charity event for them later on.”

“Hmm… We can discuss that later. I have another meeting soon, but you have given me much to think about. Thank you for the inspiration.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m glad I could help, Jumin.”

“Take care.”
“Go get ‘em, tiger!”

He seemed to make a pleased hum before the line went quiet.

For nearly an hour she was able to get a lot done as far as making calls out and working on the updated guest list as far as who had confirmed their attendance thus far. Things would potentially be ready for the next day to start the set up. Being outside really did seem to help her productivity!

Miyeon was working on compiling a tentative schedule when Seven called her again. He sounded more than a little confused and awkward, tripping up over his own words. Despite his assertion that he’d called to tell her something, it ended up in a cycle of them thanking each other until he finally chided himself for not being coherent. She worked with a huge smile on her face as he rambled on.

“I wish there were a camera in there so I could see what you’re doing.”

“You’re a hacker; couldn’t you totally turn the webcam on my laptop or phone if you wanted? Or I could if it’d make you feel better,” she reminded him playfully.

“Ou…”

“Although if you’re going to turn it on… Don’t do that without asking me first.”

“…I really shouldn’t do something like that at all.”

“As long as it’s you, I don’t mind.”

“You’re so mean when you say things like that…”

“How is that mean?”

“Don’t pretend not to know… Ugh, I have to observe people sometimes to see their patterns and when there might be an opening. This one guy shakes his legs like a chicken – it drives me crazy! But since you’re being so mean, maybe I should just watch you to see what your bad habits are so I can tease you back,” his tone was playful.

“I play with my hair.”

“That’s not a bad habit though; it’s cute… Maybe I really will hack _...” Seven suddenly lowered his voice. ” Oh… Vanderwood is coming back.

“Take care, Luciel,” she whispered.

“Adios!”

She gave a quick check over the messenger to find that Jaehee and Jumin had been on discussing a successful deal being brokered. The executive assistant seemed very adamant that he proceed with his trip to the Middle East, but the future CEO was asking if it could be moved back a month. It was too late to really put in her two cents on the whole business. Besides, it wasn’t really her business – it was quite literally theirs.

The updated list was shared to Jaehee.

She worked on the schedule for the entertainers next. Leaving the balcony glass doors open, the girl paced between the balcony and inside the apartment while confirming how long each performance would be. Even this wasn’t enough as the sedentary pattern of the past few days was
starting to finally get to her. Fortunately, there was Rika’s old printer… A few patterns for papercraft projects were printed out, allowing her to cut them out and piece them together while working. At least one simple cat pattern was completed. The glue on the dinosaur and mecha she’d started still needed to dry. Rather than print out more to piece together though, she dug out her coloring book to keep her hands busy.

Zen later popped onto the messenger share how his meeting had gone around the time she started cooking a late lunch. The traditional music group turned out to be another request to do a modeling deal which he was less than thrilled about, which she understood. There were plenty of pictures of him in a hanbok to at least make Assistant Kang happy. As handsome as he was in it, there was no denying that he was justified in not giving them an immediate answer on the job outside of the test photos. He was a talented musician and actor; looks were an asset but not the only thing. Being of the sensitive temperament that he was, the guards also upset his sense of natural harmony.

“I swear Jumin sent these rough looking guys on purpose!”

Although the actor calmed down some when she suggested he take a jog to burn off some of the frustration and to really consider the option as an opportunity. All the while he flirted in his usual way, although maybe a little more directly now. The girl replied as politely as she could in those moments. Was it horrible she wanted to leave her options open?

Miyeon about halfway through eating her meal when the curtain near the patio leapt out at her and then began to convulse.

Her voice cracked out a surprised squeak as she tried to piece together what was happening. There were downy tuffs flying everywhere. Feathers?

“Oh my god!”

A bird had flown into the curtain! Was it hurt? Thankfully it didn’t hit the glass, but just because it hit cloth didn’t mean it wasn’t injured. What would she do if there was something wrong with it? Yoosung was studying to be a vet, wasn’t he? Focus… Immediate issue: get it free…

She tried her best to maneuver the curtain in such a way so the bird would find its way out, but it was too panicked and had gotten itself wound tighter in the cloth. Continuing to move the fabric aside, Miyeon felt rather helpless watching the bird try to flap to the opening she’d made, only to twist its leg in a way that looked as though it might break it.

The poor little thing really would damage itself if it kept fighting. Could she just grab it?

It had claws and a beak…

But it would hurt itself worse than it ever could her…

Her jaw tightened; Miyeon wasn’t going to just stand by and watch that happen. Someone had to be reasonable. The bird was just a bird; that left her to be the rational one between the two of them.

“Stop that!” her voice took on an authoritative tone as she tried to grasp the flailing mass of feathers tangled in the sheer, cream colored fabric.

The bird didn’t listen.

The drab little thing made a good show of putting up a fight, meekly trying to hop away but the curtain held it down. As she got a hand on it, the dark beak made good on a threat to bite. It
pinched, but it wasn’t that bad until it tried twisting. Wincing, Miyeon maneuvered the feisty thing to where she could keep it secure against her chest while plying the cloth away. This kept its wings flat against its quivering body, which limited the risk of it twisting them unnaturally. She could feel it’s racing heart and little breaths so intensely. Its feet clawed at her until bracing against her breast. The bird’s pink mouth opened threateningly and a pair of dark eyes focused on her face, but the girl knew better than to take that as a sign of compliance. The poor thing was terrified, exhausted, and probably starting to go into shock.

She had to stay calm and work faster.

Freeing a thumb lead to the bird getting free and her having to pick it back up, although this time it was too meek to really put up a fight aside from its gaping mouth. She gently rumpled the puffed-up feathers along its head. The bird snapped at her weakly, but after a moment, it’s beak closed half way between panting breaths. It’s little eyes closed half lid as she preened it, before she continued to work the gnarled cloth off its leg. Fortunately, it stayed still now. As she tried to move the leg, the bird showed no sign of damage as it could grip on her finger and held on when she tried to move the leg.

“Doesn’t look like you hurt yourself,” she soothed, looking around for the best way to turn it loose. In the back of her mind, Miyeon was afraid of the bird freaking out and flying into another window… It’d break her heart to go through all this just to watch the poor thing break its neck on one of the other buildings nearby.

With a sigh of resignation, she used a towel to make a little bundle around the bird. Miyeon then braved leaving the apartment and taking the elevator down. There was a little park just a short way down from the building that probably had enough open space for the bird to get its bearings back. Without her phone, her pace was hastened by the realization of how vulnerable she was. The walk was to the spot of green was mercifully short, although a lot of people gave her strange looks. Children were there with their parents as it was after school, which meant that she felt she could relax some once there. Finding a tree, she carefully helped the bird back onto a branch, where it sat huddled looking none the worse for wear. She watched for several minutes until it finally flittered off – somewhat assured it’d be okay. Trotting back up to the apartment, Miyeon gave her usual wave to the camera.

Somewhat pleased with what she’d gotten done for the party, the girl then focused on tidying up the apartment and getting laundry done. In the event that Seven did have to stop by, it was best not to have a total wreck. This wasn’t her apartment, afterall… Out of respect for Rika and V, it needed to be kept as close to immaculate as she could get it.

It was already six in the afternoon by the time she’d come to a stopping point. There was no denying that she’d been more productive these past few days than she had been in the weeks after her father’s passing… She’d like to think he’d be proud of her. After a check of the replies, Miyeon settled in to check back on the chat to see if the executive assistant had any thoughts on her tentative schedule for the next day. There was no sign of her, but Yoosung was on.

“Hey ~!”

Yoosung- Miyeon!!! I completed that quest I couldn’t finish earlier! I KILLED OBERON AND GOT A LEGENDARY PIECE OF GEAR!

In LOLOL, Oberon was a very rare boss monster that didn’t die in a single encounter. He would spawn with as much HP as the last player had left him with. As the game progressed, he got
stronger as his HP would be the combined number of previous incarnations he’d been through along with the HP’s of the people who had last defeated him. Last, she recalled, it took about 50 or so spawns before he could be killed. The harder he was to defeat, the higher the stats on the gear he dropped. This was a BIG deal.

“OMG!!! I haven’t fought that guy since April! Awesome! You’ll have to show me if I get on later!”

Yoosung- I will!

“How was school?”

Yoosung- Fine!

That was a little too quick of a reply. Did he even actually go? He confirmed that he did get there by van and that Jumin’s guards had arrived.

Yoosung- I felt like a celebrity! People were acting like I was such a big deal!

Yoosung- I don’t get what Zen was talking about with his body guards, even mine looked like models.

So the “trust fund kid” really did set that up… The girl found herself chuckling.

“Oh Jumin, that’s funny but sort of mean… Poor Zen…”

Yoosung- You think Jumin did that on purpose? No way.

The evidence spoke for itself.

“I think Seven’d be proud.”

*707 has entered the chatroom.

There was such a flurry that she couldn’t even read it all as it filled up the screen.

707- Oh
707- No
707- Yes
707- Nope
707- Yup!!!
707- No
707- NO!!!

Did he set up a macro to do that? She barely could scroll down to keep up with it as he continued.

707- T_T
707- Uhm… Miyeon.
707- AAAAAAARGH!

707- I let her see my consciousness splitting!

So he wasn’t hurt or dying, just… working too hard? Had he eaten yet? The girl’s lips pursed thoughtfully; the hacker really was going to make himself sick like this.

Yoosung – So it’s okay for me to see you like that?

“It’s okay, it’s probably been a long frustrating day for you. ;-; What’s going on?”

Yoosung- Yeah, what’s up?

707- T_T

707- I can’t focus.

Yoosung- Huh?

Yoosung- That’s not like you.

Yoosung- Something must really be wrong.

707- Yeah…

707- To be honest

707- I can’t help but keep watching the CCTV feed even when it’s not my turn.

707- I keep feeling worried about Miyeon.

Yoosung- Oh

“Maybe it really is best if you just do your work here if you’re so anxious. I’d be happy to have the company.”

707- T_T It’s not that easy.

707- I would’ve gone there straightaway if it weren’t for that damn Vanderwood!!!

Yoosung- Huh?;;Your maid gets in the way??

707- No…well…

707- Yeah…

Yoosung- ;; I mean, isn’t she watching the CCTV with you?

707- Yup yup.

Yoosung- I don’t really understand why your maid is a problem.

Yoosung- We’re all worried about Miyeon.

Yoosung- But you’re the only person who knows where she is…

Yoosung- And you won’t tell us where she is so she can have guards or one of us can go
watch over her.

707- ;-; You know V won’t let me.

Yoosung: V isn’t really around and rarely responds to us anymore. I don’t see why his opinion matters when it comes to her. You’re the one in charge of security, right?

There wasn’t any reply from the hacker. Miyeon wanted to intervene but had the distinct feeling that this was something more than that. The student had Seven send her a gift on his behalf those first few days. Was there jealousy in play here or just frustration over issues that had been going on since before she joined? She felt like a little girl in the closet during one of her parent’s arguments again…

Yoosung: Sorry, that wasn’t fair…

Yoosung: You’ve got a lot of pressure on you.

…A sigh of relief escaped her. They weren’t going to argue…

Yoosung – Maybe you could send that puppy bot over to her?

707- The puppy robot?

Yoosung- Yeah!

Yoosung- You spent all that time making it!

Yoosung- If you show her how to use it, it could protect her a little bit!

She wanted to hug the blonde so much.

“To be honest, I would love that!”

Yoosung- See? You just have to show her how to use it safely!

707- It could explode… It’s dangerous.

Yoosung- Couldn’t you just take the gas tank out? Or like replace it with something less dangerous? You could just give it to her as a souvenir!

707- It’s not a souvenir.

707- I made it because I couldn’t focus.

Yoosung- Come on~

“Maybe you’d feel better knowing I had it and that’ll help you focus? I know I’d feel safer having it here!”

Yoosung- Haha! See she wants it!

707- Hm…

Yoosung- If nothing else proof of feelings for her!

707- Feelings for her!?
Yoosung- Ya!
707- You think…?
707- I’m just so nervous;
707- and feel worried
707- and wanna make gifts
Yoosung- Seven ;;; Seriously, what’s up with you?
707- and I can’t focus
707- and I keep wanting to turn on the messenger
707- and watch the CCTV to see if she’s in the hallway
707- and want to call her
707- GAAAH~!!!
707- I feel like I’m going to explode!!!
Yoosung- Seven ;;;
Yoosung- Are you serious?
707- I’m going crazy
707- My concentration should be my gift!
707- Maybe my brain is melting
707- because I had too much caffeine?!
Yoosung- Caffeine doesn’t melt brains!!!
Yoosung- You like Miyeon.

She wanted to die… Whether from happiness, embarrassment, or for fear of hurting the others in the group she wasn’t sure.
707- My brain isn’t wired to have those sorts of emotions!
Ouch…
Yoosung- ;; We’re friends.
Yoosung- I’ve never seen you act like this before. Being so weak.
Yoosung- Getting worried, wanting to make gifts, and all that...
Yoosung- You have feelings for her.
707- H A V E F E E L I N G S ?
Was Luciel denying it because it was true or because he didn’t want to hurt anyone else’s feelings? He’d went through that effort of ordering the pizza on Yoosung’s behalf before… Just a few days ago he seemed so keen on shipping her with the student. Whatever the circumstances were, right now, Yoosung was obviously the more mature of the two of them… It made her feel more than a little guilty watching the conversation, let alone feeling as though she was coming between them. There was already enough stress without this too, but maybe it was healthy to get it out in the open?

Yoosung- I’ve never had a girlfriend.
Yoosung- But I’ve read a lot of relationship advice books.
Yoosung- When you really like someone
Yoosung- Your brain becomes focused on them -
Yoosung- So you keep starting at your phone
Yoosung- Can’t focus because you keep thinking about them
Yoosung- Wondering what you can do for them to make them happy
Yoosung- it’s like an addiction
707- ya
707- but I read expert playboy
707- it didn’t mention anything like that.
Yoosung- That book is about being a playboy ;;
Yoosung- Lots of shoujo manga covers it too
Yoosung – Honey and Butter is a good one!
707- No way. Yoosung is recommending ME books…

“Books aren’t really the same thing as real life experience though,” Miyeon typed. She was going to explain that thought more; human relationships were more complex, but before she could finish that.

Yoosung- :D
Yoosung- See!? Miyeon’s ready! Lololol

The girl was too stunned and terrified to even attempt correcting him.

707- Uhm…
Ouch…

Yoosung- If you really have feelings for her
Yoosung – Then I support it 100 percent! haha
707- How am I supposed to react here?

…She felt sick…

Yoosung- You two get along really well, don’t you?

Yoosung- She always jokes around with you.

Yoosung- And you both can talk about weird science things @_@.

707- haha

707- well we’re just playing around;;

It was getting really hard to breathe. Was someone squishing her to death?

Yoosung- And you made the puppy robot.

Yoosung- I’ve never seen you make a working robot even just for fun!

707- Well no that’s…

707- I couldn’t calm down and was all over the place.

707- It just put the parts together and created itself

“God Seven’s blessing spoke puppy bot into being, like the myths of old,” she typed a little sarcastically, as it was starting to sting with how much he was objecting now.

707- Greek Seven mythology!

Don’t be so playful about it! – she thought bitterly to herself. It was hard to be annoyed with him though… Jerk.

Yoosung- Stop saying ridiculous stuff!

Yoosung- Dude, you made that robot ;;

Yoosung- It’s obvious you like her

Yoosung- All that’s left is to ask her out

Yoosung- the start of a romantic relationship!

Yoosung- I haven’t even gotten close to that.

Someone was going to be a very lucky girl one day. Why couldn’t it be him that she liked like this? A sense of guilt deepened. He really deserved someone much better than her. Whatever happened, she’d do what it took to find him someone amazing!

707- lololol

707- Romantic lolololol

…She wanted to punch him. Her hand clenched tightly enough on the phone to make it pop. Maybe it was the source? Yoosung was his friend. So far, the blonde had been advocating for her. It was time she “fought” her own battle instead of just sitting in the corner dumbfounded.
“…What’s so funny about my feelings?”

707: …

Yoosung: Miyeon ;;

“If someone is important to you, you make the effort to be honest with them.”

707- I want to live in a world where that’s possible…

Yoosung- That’s totally possible in the world we live in!

Yoosung- So ask her out!

707- …

Yoosung- What’s wrong?

707- I don’t do things like that.

Maybe she was misreading everything?

707- I’m going to spend my whole life staring at a computer, lol

707- Romantic relationships aren’t for me T_T

…It was his job wasn’t it?

Yoosung- What do you mean by that!? ;;

Yoosung- That makes NO sense!

707- Yeah…

707- I don’t think it makes sense either.

…It was so obvious… Whatever he wanted didn’t matter because of the agency…

707- I don’t know why I made that puppy robot.

What had he told her before about acting like she didn’t know? She wasn’t stupid.

707- Should I just throw it away?

“No!”

Yoosung- NO!

“You’ll use it for something eventually!”

707- I doubt it;;

Stubborn, jerk!

Yoosung- It looks fine!

Yoosung- ;-; You know, maybe you could talk to Zen. He probably gives great advice on
707- On robots?
Yoosung- On relationships.

707- Oh

Yoosung- He’s the most experienced when it comes to this sort or thing.

707- Well…

707- It’s been awhile since he’s even had a girlfriend
Yoosung- Well, that’s because

707- GAH!!!

707- So I made a robot. Big deal.
707- I made a Tripter bot for Zen too.

“Tripter bot for Zen?”

707- Ya!

707- It spread’s photo’s of Zen around
707- Only the good ones!
707- Hundreds every day

707- So more girls can have heart attacks looking at his handsome face!

She felt too tired to even try to bring the subject back to how he felt… The hacker was clearly done discussing it too considering how hard he was working to put the conversation on a detour.

Yoosung- For real!?

“Of course you’d do something nice to help your friend. :3”

707- yup!

Yoosung- Why are you just now mentioning this? :-

Yoosung- Did you ask his permission?

707- I sort of forgot after making it
707- my pure, innocent heart

707- only wished the best for Zen

Yoosung- T_T

707- Seeing him get more popular
707- Makes me feel good!

Yoosung- I like him getting more famous too.

Yoosung- But don’t you think you should’ve asked him about it before going behind his back to make something like that?

707- What are you talking about?

707- I just told everyone now

707- So it’s not like it’s a secret anymore.

707- I just sort of forgot to mention it until now. It’s not like I tried to hide it or anything.

Only to distract everyone from another topic… Lying by omission was still lying. She sighed, flopping onto her bed feeling more than a little defeated at this point. What was it she liked about him again? It was still hard to be angry with him. As far as the Tripter bot went, Miyeon was pretty sure he was being honest in that he had forgotten to mention it. His thought patterns could be spastic.

“It’s like they say – the right hand doesn’t know what the left does.”

707- Exactly!

707- I make the world a better place by catching hackers~

707- Zen makes the world a better place by purifying it with his beauty.

Yoosung- I don’t know about that ;;

707- The facts of the matter is

707- I have a heart that is so pure and firm like glass

707- that I can whip out

707- robots and stuff lol

707- There’s no way I could have lovey dovey feelings for someone.

She wasn’t sure what hurt worse… If he was lying to himself or to them. Eitherway, Miyeon was feeling depressed and just wanted to lay down and not think.

Yoosung- Seven

707- Yeah?

Yoosung- I don’t think you’re being honest…

707- Honesty is a luxury for me lolol

Putting “lolol” after it didn’t make it funny.

707- What if I go out of my way to be honest

707- And something bad happens?
It was the agency then… At the very least that made sense, although he could’ve just said that rather than drawing everything out and denying it like a petulant boy being confronted about a crush in school. Miyeon wanted to throw the phone aside just so she wouldn’t have to read it anymore.

Yoosung- Seven! Alright, I get it. Just promise me you won’t throw the robot away.

707- Oh right!

707- I was supposed to be working, wasn’t I?

707- Bye Yoosung!

707- Take care, okay Miyeon?

*707 has left the chatroom

Of course, gone like a flash… Stay gone…

Yoosung- Omg;; we didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye.

Yoosung- Are you okay?

She didn’t even bother writing a reply. The girl buried her face into the pillow and wanted to go home. Was she really that stupid?

The phone vibrated again in her hand.

Yoosung- He’s being really weird.

Yoosung- Don’t you think?

“You’d probably know better than me… You’ve known him longer.”

Right now Miyeon just wanted to be left alone… Maybe she would start dating someone else in the RFA. It wasn’t like she really knew the hacker. They’d talked a few times and had a lot in common, but that wasn’t any guarantee of a happy relationship. If she couldn’t trust him and if he wouldn’t communicate with her openly, there wasn’t really anything to build a future on.

The remnants of her lunch felt so sour in her gut, and the hollow feeling she had before joining the RFA returned. Maybe she wasn’t good enough?

Yoosung- This isn’t like him.

Yoosung- To just flat out deny everything once the topic came up.

Yoosung- …He plays pranks on me all the time, but I don’t think this is just him playing around.

Yoosung- I’m pretty sure he likes you, but I don’t think I’ve ever known him to have a girlfriend or flirt. So maybe he’s just really shy? I wish he’d just be honest.

She wanted him to get hit by a truck… What was it about the student that made her not feel quite the same way? …They didn’t connect the same way, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t find common ground outside of games. He was going to school to be a vet which spoke to him being kind and smart, plus he’d stood up for her… Then again, he compared her to Rika so often and was
still running from his problems just like she had. They were probably too much alike.

Yoosung- Miyeon…?

Yoosung- Are you okay?

It wasn’t like they could really see her curled up under the blankets and sulking… She could pretend like everything was okay, if not things would just be made worse. Quite easily, she slipped back into wearing the fake smile she’d put on for her father after their mother left. Miyeon didn’t want to be a burden or complicate things more. Everything was fine…

“Yeah!”

Maybe this was how slugs felt when someone poured salt on them.

“Seven probably doesn’t want to complicate things more than they already are right now.”

Yoosung- Maybe…

Yoosung- How do you feel?

“Right now, there are more pressing things like: finding the hacker and the party. I still got a ton of guests to get back to. So I’m probably going to log out to work on that to make sure it’s the best party ever.”

Yoosung- OK!

Yoosung- For what it’s worth

Yoosung- I think you two would be good together

Yoosung- You have similar senses of humor.

Yoosung - You’re really good at games!

Yoosung- And you’re smart and understanding

Was the blonde really okay with that though? Who was he trying to convince? He was such a good friend. It must be hurting him too; Seven better appreciate that boy. Miyeon couldn’t take knowing how much it probably hurt him to be a supportive friend against his own interests.

“Good luck in LOLOL and grats on the legendary gear, Yoosung.”

She tossed her phone out of reach and just laid hugging a pillow. For a few minutes the girl tried to parse out how she felt and why. Eventually Miyeon was just numb, and her gaze fell on the wall. How long would it take him to get there? What if she left and didn’t come back to the apartment and just finished planning from her house. Seven had threatened setting up security around her family home, but there was no guarantee that he actually knew where she lived.

Hopefully that bird was okay…

What would Jun say now? Probably pet her hair and give her that sad little smile that he would give when he’d try to cheer her up in the darkness of her bedroom closet. When their parents would argue at their loudest or when storms would get bad, she could always retreat to where the clothes and doors would block out all the sad and scary things. Jun didn’t hide away like her though. When their mother found out about that boy and raged at him. He stood firm. She forbade him to see
that boy… He found ways to sneak out through her room. It wasn’t until that boy broke his heart that he snuck out one night and didn’t return.

Jun wouldn’t want her to hurt like this.

Miyeon wanted to feel the weight of his warm hoodie over her again, his scent heavy with chlorine after swim practice and woody notes, and then the embrace of his his lanky arms wrapping around her frail shoulders. She’d be so upset and crying till her sobs were just hiccups, and he’d hush that by putting his headphones over her ears.

As a girl she probably relied on him too much… Then her dad relied on her… She wanted to go home to her dad making his “famous” steamed egg, the one thing he could cook without setting off a smoke alarm. Even if she knew how to make it, it’d never taste the same as what her daddy made.

Truthfully, she could never really go home.

Even being with someone wouldn’t fix the fact that she would be a stranger coming into someone else’s family. Jaehee probably understood some of that, but at least she had family that took her in. Miyeon literally had no one that wanted her.

The core of her being ached with such a profound sense of loneliness… It sucked the energy right out of her. There was no point in pretending that she’d ever get away from that.

Stupid Seven…
Stupid Yoosung…

Her eyelids felt so heavy…

She wasn’t quite asleep, but not quite awake… A state that was so familiar in the time since her father had died. It was dark out before Miyeon opened her eyes, but the comfort of the blanket and numbness was greater than her desire to do anything. Whatever she had to do, could wait till tomorrow… It was already dark out.

Her phone rang once.

…She didn’t care.

Miyeon laid letting it continue to ring for a minute, only pulling the pillow in her arms closer.

It started to ring a second time.

…It was probably Seven.

If she didn’t answer, he’d really start to worry.

Sitting up, her sight was bleary but the girl able to make out the glow of her phone near the foot of the bed. With a yawn and rub of the eyes, Miyeon yawned an answer.

“H…hello…?”

“Babababam Baam! Seven Zero Seven safety check system activated!”

He was being playful again as he sang the first part and ended with a very precise
annunciation as though they were in the military. Did things really need to change between them? It wasn’t fair to punish him for her feelings.

“Answer every question asked from this moment. It’s dark outside. You won’t be able to see very well, but please check whether anything seems strange. Is anyone standing outside the window or suspiciously walking in the hallway?”

He was still worried about her…

“S_s…sorry… Gim–me minute,” she murmured wearily. As asked, the girl did look around. Everything still looked clear. “The coast is clear, captain!” Miyeon answered dutifully.

“Good, soldier. Keep your eyes wide open and look around your surroundings!”

“Aye.”

“Next question. How was your day today?”

Did he really want her to answer that? It was probably best not to press the issue earlier. Seven made himself more than clear that he wasn’t going to give a straight answer. So neither was she... It was probably best to just pretend that conversation never happened for all parties involved.

“Umm...There was that bird that came in through the window earlier though – which was a little scary.”

“Ah, I think I saw that. The bird is fine; the bird will not hurt you. You must always beware the hacker who disturbs your safety.”

He was still speaking as though they were in a war movie.

“Aye– that damn hack-,” she broke into a yawn.

“... So cute,” he sighed. “ER… Sorry I… I called because I didn’t see any activity from you and the lights were off; I got worried… But you were probably just tired considering how late you were up. I guess I should be happy you feel safe enough to rest.”

She hummed a sleepy affirmation. “Well, you are watching me every 2.35 seconds.”

“Yep! Ugh… God… My head hurts because I keep thinking about what could I do to protect you. You know if I really put myself into it and don’t sleep, I could have you a real robot body guard done in three days. But...If I don’t finish what I’m doing right now... You could be in more danger... So I can’t stop working on this. But then what if I can’t focus and… This is so damn frustrating…”

He really was a different person when it was just the two of them.

“Maybe you’re the one who should’ve been taking a nap.”

“No... I need to catch that sneaky bastard hacker! I’ll try harder,” he assured, his tone becoming a little more playful towards the end.

“I know you’re doing your best, Luciel. But… Please take care of yourself too.”

“Are you worried about me?”

“What gave that away?” she chuckled a little bitterly.
“Miyeon, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“No, I don’t. But I’m pretty sure if it was as easy as just “not” doing it, you would’ve been able to focus on what you were doing hours ago.”

There was no reply.

That was probably a bit harsh on her part…

“…Did you at least eat something that wasn’t chips earlier?”

“Ya - I ate something warm.”

“You didn’t just microwave honey buddha chips did you?” she asked a little more pointedly.

He laughed nervously. Busted.

“Seven…”

“If it makes you happy I’ll…” There was a pause and his voice lowered to a whisper “Sorry… Vanderwood’s coming again…. Adios!”

One of these days, she’d be able to say a proper goodbye to him. Hopefully with a place that had a REALLY satisfying door to slam in his face…

After freshening up a little, the girl attempted to catch up with the messenger. Zen and Jaehee had apparently gossiped some about the conversation they’d missed by only an hour or two. The actor was quick to agree with the student’s assessment of the situation.

“The way I see it, he’s 100 percent interested in her!”

That was probably why he hadn’t done his usual check in call…

God… Why did Yoosung have to bring it up in group chat!?

Thankfully Jaehee seemed to have some scruples about the situation and steered it away from that and more on how the red head had yet to finish finding the hacker. That lead to some information about his job. Apparently him being guarded about that part of his life was nothing new, but the executive assistant was concerned as to how his “feelings” were impacting his ability to function. Both she and Zen agreed it was probably best not to get involved more than they were. There was bad news on the actor’s front as well as he didn’t get one of the roles he’d been working on despite posing for them all. The girl was glad Jaehee was at least there to comfort him about it. Something told Miyeon that simply knowing there was a bot that spammed Zen’s selfies that she didn’t know about before was going to give her plenty to do that evening.

At least someone was going to have a good night.

About an hour after that, Yoosung and business man had apparently chatted. Although she knew the executive had been scouting for capable help, the thought that the blonde had been considered was a little surprising. Jumin, as candid as ever, was clear that he was worried that the younger man seemed to have fallen off his previously ambitious academic career. Yoosung attributed that motivation to his family, namely his mother and Rika. That lead to the two of them discussing family, but Miyeon skimmed until the end. It was a tender topic for her still, but something about the way Jumin left saying he felt, “inspired” about the hacker’s kind act for Zen left her a little unsettled.
If Yoosung was a cat, it wouldn’t surprise her. What did he have planned for the student?

Whatever the act of kindness was, it was probably not going to be “nice” enough…

She was grateful but annoyed too.

Whatever happened, she was going to try to regain a good attitude and make sure the party was a success… Like she’d told herself earlier in the day, the party was about the people they were helping, not her personal life. To that end, Miyeon made some comfort food and curled up in bed with her laptop with a steady course of spicy noodles, chocolate ice cream, and some funny cartoons. It was almost midnight before she bothered picking up her phone again for fear of ruining her improved mood.

707- Miyeon!

“How’s work coming along?”

707- Oh my god

707- T_T It’s almost midnight.

707- How can the day past by so meaninglessly!?

707- I wanted to take care of the hacker fiasco

707- but I couldn’t even finish all the work for the Agency

707- It’s embarrassing T_T

“You’ve had a lot on you. ;-; There’s always tomorrow though. I really wish you’d consider what we talked about earlier – getting some rest and starting fresh.”

707- I’m so sorry T_T

707- You must be an angel to encourage someone as pathetic as me…

No, just a stupid girl she griped to herself.

707- I feel like time flew by exceptionally fast today.

707- But I’m glad that Yoosung seems to understand me

707- I am really thankful for that

707- But

707- if you think about it

707- Yoosung is not like me

No kidding… But there had to be a reason for that. There was always a reason why someone did what they did. If she kept the questions open ended, there was a chance she could find out more.

“Oh? How is he different?”

707- He has parents who scold him
707- and can complain about them
707- I
707- can’t do that, haha
707- haha
707- hahaha

His half truths hidden behind a smile; it was painfully familiar.

“Did you run away from home?”

707- It’s not like that, haha

There was something, before she could type out another question…

707- I hope I get to tell you about it one day.

707- If I ever get to

The girl sat back a little, feeling as though she understood better than she had all day.

707- Don’t let your spirits get down
707- and don’t start guessing about me lol

“Why not?”

707- Because you’ll get hurt if you do
707- I don’t want you to get hurt…

“I’m already a little hurt from earlier,” she clarified.

707-…

707- Miyeon, I’m serious.
707- So many things can happen
707- I don’t want to complicate things more than they already are
707- If everyone starts guessing
707- Then people are going to start having complicated thoughts lol

…Typing LOL didn’t make it lighter…

707- Like people saying how I’m living vicariously through Zen and stuff like that…

707- 707 is just supposed to laugh stuff off and make fun of everything

What about the person behind that screenname? No one can be perfectly happy, and anyone who said otherwise was lying… Experience taught her that.
707- That’s me!
No it wasn’t… It’s who he wanted to be…
707- Thankfully not that much is happening
707- and with God deep inside my heart,
707- I
707- am
707- Seven
707- Zero
707- Seven!!!
707- …!
Neither of them really believed that… He could fill up as many chatrooms as he wanted with the assertion, but repeating it didn’t make it any truer. She just had to keep trying. Eventually, she’d have a clear picture of the person between the lines.

“Do you really believe in God?”
707- Really the only thing I can take in this world is the God I believe in.
707- God never changes.
707- I need to remember my place.
707- I shouldn’t desire things I can’t have or deserve.

“Nonsense! You can have anything you want if you’re willing to work for it!”
707- lolol I really hope that’s the case
707- What’s wrong with me.
707- Even when I can see there’s no immediate threat
707- I can’t shake this feeling that something bad is going to happen
707- It’s like my brain is malfunctioning or something.

“Sleep deprivation can lead to feelings of depression, forgetfulness and paranoia… Not to say that your concerns aren’t justified, but…”
707- It’s not like that…
707- It’s like I have a memory card that can’t save anything
707- And when I turn the battery off
707- I lose everything and have to start from scratch.
“Sometimes letting go of everything and doing a fresh boot isn’t a bad thing; systems run faster after being reformatted! Then again, you’re a person – not a machine. You can change and be whatever you want to be as long as you’re alive and have the will to do so.”

707- It’s not that simple. I don’t know what I’m really like or want to be like…

707- I might forget… who I was.

707- Who I am now…

707- I…

707- I just want to go to the moon.

707- On the moon

707- I wouldn’t be a secret agent!

“I guess we’ll have to start that cat rescue on the moon then! :D We’re slingshooting to Mars after that though!”

She quietly crying again as she sent it. Miyeon felt like such a child… There was a reason why he always recommended such farfetched and unlikely things. It was because as impossible as they were, to him it was still more probable than having anything like a normal life. It took her smashing her nose into it to fully appreciate how hard and cold being a “secret agent” was for him. The hacker that put her into the group could’ve been taking a roundabout way to get to him. Even after everything he’d done, they’d managed to get back into the system, proving that they not only knew their way around his system but also could find breaches into it easily. He could put up as many defenses as he wanted, but once they knew where the holes were, it was useless. That meant no one was safe until he had a chance to truly make something new. That was something he couldn’t do as long as he was busy with the work for the Agency. It didn’t help that “Vanderwood” now knew what she looked like and would probably recognize the outside of the apartment. Sometimes threatening someone directly was not as effective as going for the people around them. She was a young girl… She knew what people in criminal groups did to young girls… Seven no doubt knew too, which was why he was pushing her towards Yoosung so hard before. If she was someone else’s girlfriend, he would be able to let go of his feelings and move on… That hurt so much worse. Her poor dear friend…

707- Will that day come?

707- I’d love that...

707- I’d love to go with you!

707- Right now I really have to get myself together

“Yeah… You’ve got a lot of work to do yet.”

707- Yeah… For the agency

707- Then I have to start trying to track that hacker again.

“That damn hacker! It’s all their fault!”

707- That’s right!
707- I’m a mess all because of that hacker!
707- I’m gonna get going
707- Tomorrow
707- as long as my engine is on
707- I’m gonna finish everything!
707- I will protect Miyeon!

“I can already feel the blessings of God Seven upon my puny mortal shell. It tickles… Thank you for protecting me, God Seven!”
707- haha
707- Thank you for that!

“If it gets too tough, remember I’m here – if you get worried you can always give me a call or a message.”
707- Oh…
707- That’s part of the problem though. I can’t stop thinking about you… Calling you or seeing you…
707- haha
707- Erm… I’m talking nonsense again…
707- Bye!

*707 has left the chatroom.

Holding the phone to her chest, the girl sat in darkness feeling the heat of the battery slowly fade…
Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies for this taking as long as it did. I started my Radiography courses back in August, and it has been crazy!!! We're about to hit that glorious day 7 though. I hope everyone is as excited as I am! Finally get to put some Saeran in the mix!

The V route is out now too! I am so sorry that I missed V and Miyeon's birthday to get this posted, but it couldn't be helped.

You guys are the most patient and amazing readers anyone could ask for. Thank you for your patience, your support, and in general existing in the same universe!

Chapter 17:

Seven sounded productive enough with the rapid drumming of his fingers across the keyboard, but he wasn’t able to focus on Agency related things… Money laundering and tracking down an informant, along with the 14 other side projects had running congruently, weren’t even a consideration. He was doing some of it to be fair, along with tinkering along with a schematic. More than a few connections to work related functions… The strange e-mails that Jaehee and Zen had received early that morning were already being analyzed.

For the past three hours, he had been listening to the recordings from the hotel room they’d bugged while Vanderwood watched the CCTV for him while going over the other recording. Luciel could hear the targeted agent and diplomat in his headset droning on about women without coded language, yet his mind was fixated on the voice that wasn’t there…

Miyeon’s voice was different on that last call. There was no mistaking that she was annoyed with him… Although it had been texted, he could feel the vibration of the words echoing through his hollow heart.

“…What’s so funny about my feelings?”

…Nothing… Which was part of why he tried to be so glib about it… If he could pretend it was just meaningless flirting, that allowed him a degree of detachment from the pain that the reality of their situation. Their communication was already way above what the agency would allow. They could be cordial and have meaningless chats; nothing more.

But the more Seven tried to focus on everything else, the more he wanted to break away from his handler and just go to the apartment. Unless something catastrophic happened, the sound waves coming from her phone were as close as he could ever get to being at her side. Thus, he’d been goofing off by changing things on it and making improvements to her laptop’s processing speed to see if she noticed… Till the other day, that had been enough for him. Yet something had driven him to make the black and red blowtorch with a face.
Puppy bot was a mistake…

Thinking back, his thoughts were really a jumble when he made it. The only real logic used was how to put it together; his feelings were the rest. Mainly fear and selfish desire. Eventually, he’d have to look away from the CCTV, sleep, or step away to use the bathroom, and something could happen to her. That thought terrified him... He might’ve just brushed it off if there wasn’t an itching at the base of his brain that told him that something was very wrong with the situation. So, he put the pieces together, because there wasn’t a way to solve the rest of the RFA’s problem just yet. Thing was, it wasn’t like he could actually give it to her unless the situation deteriorated, and by that point, he’d have to go guard her anyway.

The agent imagined the moment they would meet more than a thousand times in the past 12 hours. Hopefully that wouldn’t be until the party… Those honey colored eyes would be wide with surprise, then recognition, before that beautiful smile emerged. She’d probably wrap her arms around his neck with a cute little squeal. Giving her the robot dog would’ve sealed the deal... Seven’s ears got hot as the thought of what was under those baggy clothes, and how soft she’d feel. Maybe after a few glasses of champagne the two of them would find a quiet corner and he could blame stealing a kiss on not feeling like himself. Something told him that her lips would be just the right combination of salt and sweet. But he still wanted to test them, along with every other inch of her.

The robot puppy seemed to be judging him with its aggressive, triangular eyes.

Seven wasn’t fooling anyone; Yoosung had even pieced together what it meant. When the topic came up, he was caught off guard and did his best to deflect and buy time… Were it not for the fact he’d lost the right to be ashamed a long time ago, he’d been embarrassed by it. Instead he doubled down because there had been his original plan… Miyeon was supposed to like Yoosung – so he’d not be depressed; the two of them would be so sickeningly happy that Seven could find some peace. He could justify reaching out to her… watching her… protecting her by saying it was for his friend.

His truth didn’t matter; only what it looked like… Eventually it would be true enough.

Like usual though, nothing was going according to plan. Seven tried not to think about what he’d said, except that he saw no activity for her online for hours. He got worried…and she didn’t pick up the phone. When she did finally respond, he’d tried cheering her up by returning to their usual banter, but he could hear something different in her tone. There was a forced cheer that felt too familiar and painful. Once the call ended, Seven kept hearing it… He reread the chat with Yoosung, and found that for some reason, her voice in his head sounded just as flat now. Desperately he wanted to fix it, but he couldn’t just call her. He’d tried playing with the sound settings of the bugged hotel room to get them to sound more like her, but it didn’t help.

The Ph.D. Pepper lost its flavor…

Long after midnight, Jaehee and Zen had discussed it further, which he was tempted to delete from the chat logs, but that would only make it more obvious that they weren’t wrong. Jaehee did her best to tread respectfully on the topic. It was Hyun who surprised him… For someone who seemed so dense, the albino was rather perceptive when it came to people, even if it was to provide reasons to be cautious of 707… He was a friend looking out for a friend…The information he gave was innocuous on its own, but when presented together did paint a different picture. It wasn’t enough to blow his cover as an operative, but it did attest to the secrecy in his life. Not to mention the whole “living vicariously” statement… They weren’t wrong, but he didn’t want to acknowledge it. Even if Seven did things like make the Tripter bot and was protect the RFA ( rather poorly at the moment), he also had stolen funds, helped criminals, and destroyed lives with just keystrokes. These
weren’t things anyone needed to know. No one needed to know anything about him, at all…

Lying and hiding things were not things he enjoyed, but sometimes it was a necessary evil to protect those who could be harmed the most… Seven’d had a lifetime of practice. He’d gotten so good that even Saeran couldn’t fully understand him at times, and they were two halves of the same whole. Those days, it was best if his brother didn’t know how he gotten the food he’d share or the faces of the men in dark suits that made him change up paths to and from the house. He had to be kept safe and ignorant for his own good. So he told him only the good things and found ways to shelter him from the rest when he could. The only person he could be open with was V, and even then, only on certain things. It was all about knowing who to trust with what, and even then Seven trusted himself least of all…

Because he knew the sort of person he was…

When he was little and went to confession, Saeyoung always described his sins so vaguely to the priest… God already knew what he had done and why and would forgive him. The older he got, the more he realized confession was for one’s own peace of mind and was potential risk to his safety as a child hiding from his father’s men and later in the agency… It had been so long since he’d confessed anything, and the wrongs he’d committed were so numerous and heavy now. Yet Miyeon could easily lift them enough to peek underneath at the cockroach hiding beneath. The question was how?

He’d read about how there were multiple forms of intelligence when trying to describe his own genius… Out of 9 distinct categories, his own strengths were primarily logic and linguistic based. These were easily tested and had secured his spot in the Agency. There were other, less obvious forms of brilliance though. Among these were things like kinesthetic and musical genius. With her ability to read others, the new RFA party coordinator was likely gifted in the realm of interpersonal intelligence…

That was another reason they could never meet.

Being face to face would give her an advantage that hiding behind a screen now protected him from. Although, during their last chat, it was obvious that she saw through him and knew when to go in for the strike. He had no counter to sincere compassion… There was no algorithm he could compose to close that opening in the firewall of his psyche. Out of a million girls that the hacker could have chosen, he’d picked the one who could open and read a person like a book.

It was a matter of “closing the book”. If Seven could figure the situation out quickly, there’d be no reason to talk to her so much so he could put some distance between them. He could sort things out on his own time. Nature could take its course and someone else in the RFA could…

No… No…

The thought made him feel so empty. He didn’t want that… If she fell in love with Zen, he’d probably plaster the messenger with pictures of them happy together… Yoosung would come to him for advice… Jumin would lock her in his apartment or something weird… And Jaehee… At least that was one thing not to worry about…

A growl escaped him as he frantically scruffed up his own hair in frustration and stomped the floor. It felt like he was going to split in half!

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Miyeon only skimmed over the previous conversations from the night before and morning,
skipping parts involving what others thought of her and the hacker, and instead focusing on the
things that would be safety concerns… Those thoughts invariably lead back to Seven and how much
strain he must be under now. There was no “V” supervising the situation, and Jumin’s flight was
leaving that morning meaning that things would be pretty squarely on his and Jaehee’s shoulders.
She’d been up most of the night working on a list to help the older woman prepare the venue as it
would be impossible for her to go herself… Now she was burying herself in any sort of work to keep
her mind off things and was avoiding the chatroom.

If she stayed busy, there wouldn’t be time to think about things…

This ended up becoming offers to help guests in ways outside the party itself. Miyeon
found herself making calls out to help with accommodations and arrange for transportation for guests
who would be coming into town exclusively for the event. For some she event went as far as helping
to arrange proprietary gift arrangements for when they arrived at their hotels catered to things she’d
found out about their interests. When her phone rang, she didn’t even look to see who it was –
answering was an automatic reaction to getting things done as timely and efficiently as possible.

“It's me, Zen. Is this a good time?”

The girl’s heart froze in her chest. “…Yeah, just working on stuff for guests. Is everything
okay?”

A soft sigh escaped the actor. “I’m fine! I just…” There was some hesitation in his voice,
but he stilled himself. “I know I said this before already, but I'm really good at giving relationship
advice, so just tell me if you're struggling with something.”

“I’m fine… Really.”

“That’s why you’ve not been in chat for more than a few seconds at a time
today?”

“I’ve been working on stuff for the party…”

There was a dissatisfied grunt from the actor.

“How do you think you two will get along when you meet him - Seven?”

“…I think I’m going to focus on the guests,” she answered. “And he should be
too since he’s a member of the RFA.”

That reminded her that she should perhaps message Jaehee to see about locating her an
appropriate dress to rent for the party, since she didn’t own one that was nearly “fancy” enough.

“Yeah? Okay, so like, I’m just going to put this out there. It's completely up to
you who you like. As long as it’s not that trust fund kid… He’s just… no… Just no… But Seven’s
not a bad guy,” Zen’s voice was gentle as he continued, “I can totally tell that he's into you. But
considering the life he's had so far. I'm sure he's never felt like this towards anyone. So, I think he's
just super confused.”

“…Or he’s just playing around.”

“Seven is a weirdo who does a lot of strange things, but he isn’t the type to play
with people in that way,” Zen noted thoughtfully. “You’re a good girl, so might not know this, but
men aren't honest creatures to begin with. Seven – he’s probably one of least honest ones out there,
especially when it comes to stuff like this. He’s normally so secretive. Like, he seems happy, but you
can tell something is off. You know, before you joined, he’d spam us with these weird fake adds and play tricks on Yoosung… But since you joined he’s been different; I don’t think it’s just because he’s been busy. You’ve gotten him to open up a lot, and it’s so obvious that he really likes you.”

“He denied that though,” Miyeon interrupted.

“A guy like that will deny being interested at first, but once they get deep into it, they will go crazy! Which… I think is what is happening now. Like that puppy robot – who builds a robot for a girl? Most guys go for flowers or something. He’s totally like a little boy with his first crush!”

To anyone who didn’t know her geeky interests, it probably was strange… The truth was, it was thoughtful considering that the hacker knew how much she liked things like that. Thinking about it now just made her mad.

“I appreciate you trying to cheer me up, but really it’s okay.”

“You say that, but you’re not a good actor,” Zen noted softly. “Jaehee and I talked about it last night outside chat too, and about Tripter bot he made… And about how he got all sentimental and stuff – he’s NEVER done that before. But I guess he has a lot on him between all the stuff with the RFA and as much work as that Agency gave him.”

“It worries me, honestly.”

“Yeah, they do sound like some scary people… I don’t even know how someone gets to work for someone like that. I used to hang out with this biker gang when I was younger and bounce at clubs, but I can’t even imagine what working as an agent is like.”

“I could see you playing a good one in a movie,” she offered.

“Like James Bond! Maybe Seven can give me tips so I can try method acting for it! But yeah I just… Was worried. Honestly, there may not be any answers in liking and loving someone, but whatever happens, I hope I can give you guys some useful advice. So at least you should come to me and ask for help if you’re struggling with it, okay?”

“Seven doesn’t like me like that… That’s not even something I have to worry about…”

“…Why would you think that? Do I need to beat someone up?”

There was no mistaking the intensity of his tone. He meant it. Miyeon could only let out a brittle laugh.

“Maybe Seven…”

“When he finishes finding that hacker. Get him to admit how he feels too.”

“I’m not even on the same level as you guys. The fact that I’m even being allowed to stay and help with the party feels like a mean prank. Plus I have no ideal of how to be a girlfriend to even a normal guy – let alone someone in the RFA. There’d be all these expectations, and I wouldn’t know what to do!”

Zen laughed.

“It’s not funny!” she mewed.
“So cute!”

“It’s not cute!”

His beautiful laugh only deepened, which only made her angrier.

“…Please don’t laugh! I know it’s stupid, okay? But it’s scary to me,” Miyeon noted, the frailty coming through.

“Did something…bad…happen?”

“Nothing like that!”

“…Something must have happened.”

She thought about it for a moment.

“My friends used to come to me for advice when they were fighting with their boyfriend or girlfriend… Or after they broke up… Mom and Dad didn’t get along great before they got divorced either…”

“…So all that sad stuff shook your faith in love? If that’s true, that’s really… sad.”

“…Please don’t feel bad for me, Jaehee’ll get mad if I make you frown.”

“I’ve been in dramatic performances before, but I should probably use some moisturizer after this call just to make sure… You know, you still haven’t told me how you feel about Seven.”

“I can’t like someone I haven’t met,” she answered softly.

“There are stories about people who fell in love even though they only wrote each other letters. I think I have the script around here somewhere…” There was the sound of shuffling before he sighed. “I guess, what I really want to say is that, if you two really do like each other, I want things to go well between you. Seven is probably really lonely, although he’d never admit it. After seeing what you two said to each other last night… I don’t want to see you end up hurting each other if you two feel the same way. It’s bad enough to see that in my musicals…”

“Reality isn’t a musical.”

“No, it’s not. The stakes are higher in real life… I thought a lot after I got home the other night, about how scared you looked when I went to kiss you… It drove me nuts trying to figure out why, and why I wasn’t good enough.”

“Zen…”

“After meeting you and listening to you now, I know that when you do fall in love and have your first kiss it’ll be after careful consideration,” he laughed nervously. “I REALLY want that person to be me…! But I can’t force you to feel that way. So, I’ll put my faith in you and support you, because you’re both my friends. And if after you meet, it doesn’t feel right, I’ll be here.”

Miyeon’s body was shaking. “…You really are the perfect man. You know that?”

“Ah… It’s true. I am, but it’s hard when I want to be selfish.”
“... Is there anything I can do to thank you?”

“After the party, let’s go see a movie together,” the actor offered.

“...As a date?” there was a stammer in her voice.

“As friends! But if you change your mind, and can’t resist me anymore, then you have my word I’ll treat you like a princess!”

“I don’t need all that…”

“When you say things like that, it really makes me want to -,” his voice ebbed.

“…Ugh… Director guy is calling…”

“Good news about that role I hope.”

“Me too! I really need to get this, but -…”

“Good luck, Hyun.”

He made a surprised choke. “Haaa! Just call me whenever you need to, okay? Hope you have a good day!”

The actor at least gave a proper good bye instead of just rushing off the phone. Truthfully, Hyun was being beyond kind and patient. His actions were so much more earnest and had gone past just harmless flirting. It didn’t feel real to her though.

There was no denying that he would be an amazing boyfriend for someone. He was driven, hardworking, and compassionate. His being handsome was just a bonus, but if they ever did end up together, people would immediately assume it was because she was shallow. Other people’s opinions ought not to matter, yet they did... Not entirely for selfish reasons. His career was so innately tied to the court of public opinion, a drab little thing like her would only burden him.

Given enough time, she could’ve established ties in a proper way. The situation at hand wasn’t allowing for that though. She wanted to be at the venue helping Jaehee get everything together. In another world, maybe the other RFA members would be there to help them arrange and set things up. The next party, if she was around for it, would probably allow for it more. This time though, she was a captive. That wasn’t so unusual for her…

For months Miyeon had been content enough to waste away in her room without a word to anyone. There she was free from social obligations, pitying glances, and the attempts to cheer her up while feeling like a burden for being so strange and melancholy. She’d wanted to enter the RFA without that past, to be that bright girl that she’d played for her father for years, but things were getting so complicated again. Her intentions had never been to be anything other than a friend… Even when Miyeon tried to distract herself, everyone else seemed to bring it up…

It took her back to her father’s bedside with him worrying over what her husband would be like and lamenting never having the chance to meet him. Immediately after Jun’s death, no man would’ve passed the test for her father’s approval; she was his only little girl... He never said such a thing, but she could see the anxiety scored into the lines of his face when she mentioned a male friend or going anywhere with Eun-Ji. His cheerful demeanor would take on a sharpness when he asked about such things. He’d already lost one child and a wife due to relationships gone sour… He would not lose her. He worked so long and hard to provide for them… She didn’t dare shame him by being anything other than obedient and dutiful. It was such a deeply ingrained part of her that throughout middle and highschool, when such feelings were starting to develop, that part of her was
still left in elementary school. Truly she still didn’t totally recognize when people flirted with her unless they were overt about it. Even then, it felt like a cruel prank or insincere. Eun-Ji used to tease her about it. As she got older and her father made her more aware of the dangers in the world for young women, she’d recognized the looks given to her more. She envied her friends for being able to so proudly accept them and admired the efforts they took to become beautiful. They only made her want to hide more and more. It truly had been a luxury to be alone and to pretend that she had no feelings or attachments. How sorely Miyeon missed having the freedom to do so…

Where she was now, the strings binding her to the RFA threatened to cut into her. The more she struggled, the more her tender areas would be exposed. There’d be a certain point when she wouldn’t be able to pretend, and they’d be so disappointed in her. The fear of that was worse than any hacker.

Maybe that was how Seven felt?

She had the ability to return to her family home, curl up in her bed, and sulk when it was all done… He didn’t. Wherever he had been before had to be worse than where he was now for him to even consider being there, right?

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Hours had passed so fruitlessly, all he had accomplished was tracing back the e-mail through nearly a hundred spoofed IP addresses. It was endless! There had been an attempt to get some of the agency work done, but every successive failure in finding the actual source of the letter made him double down on the effort until it became an obsession. Seven was practically leering over the computer, the intensity of his glare threatening it, but getting nothing back. The tapping on his mouse gave away his threadbare patience.

Computers didn’t feel pain, fear, or frustration.

He’d gone through nearly three bags of chips now. There wasn’t even a point in trying to hide the sound of his munching as he’d finished listening to the bugged hotel room hours ago. If anything, the hacker was biting down all the harder to try to get the sound of Miyeon’s voice out of his head. She’d been on the phone all morning without a word to him and had been avoiding chat. The only trace of her was the digital footprint.

Maybe she’d realized what he was trying to convey the night before and thought the separation would help him focus…? Chances were she was just hurt. If the girl understood and was giving up, logically, he ought to be glad as it’d keep her safer. So why did he feel like this?

His oily fingers gradually slipped away from the keyboard as he looked at the lines of code. Instead of typing, they anxiously ripped up paper… Within a few minutes, he had at least three roses made from empty Honey Buddha chip bags and lined paper. Just like puppy bot, the parts just sort of came together.

“707, are you really going to be like this?”

The hacker answered in the affirmative as his brain was on autopilot, too many subroutines… She was working hard, but there wasn’t the usual little pop outside to wave. Was she really that mad at him? He should apologize… Or do something nice… She wasn’t even playing LOLOL so he couldn’t even watch her there.
“What? Yes? Hey, you look at me! And stop eating those weird chips! You haven’t finished a fraction of the work you were supposed to do today. What am I going to tell the boss?”

More words – what language was being spoken again? Korean… Miyeon spoke Korean! Maybe that’s why he was having trouble remembering her voice, he’d been listening to English for hours, then Russian… Vanderwood’s brow was arched at him in a way that threatened to slice him in half.

“I’m going to finish it. The day’s still young~! Have a positive mind and some hope…!”

“Oh, all you did was fool around today and now you’re giving me advice?”

Maybe if he was a little honest with someone it’d help?

“My delicate heart doesn’t feel ready yet~! Is everything fine at the apartment?”

The older agent wasn’t having it. Rather, he was already pushing him aside to look over the “work” that he’d gotten done and his desktop. His scowl deepened. “Is this all I get for practically living at your house to clean your room, feed you, and stare at that damn CCTV feed? I’m not blind! Ever since that messenger was hacked, all you’ve been doing is tracing that hacker and tracking that weird email the whole day. You think I came here to volunteer as your maid because I have so much free time?”

“Ma’am. Can I say something?”

The stink of smoke, leather, and nicotine lessened as the brunette began to make his way to the couch where he’d sat his kit. He meant business this time.

“Agent Vanderwood.”

“What...?”

Seven gazed earnestly into his eyes from his chair… As far as handlers went, Vanderwood wasn’t that bad; he’d let him get by with stuff before. It was just a matter of helping him see what was in it for him.

“If you just talk to the boss and stall some time, I can finish all the work for the RFA first and then really focus on the work for the agency. I can’t get things done because I’m trying to do everything all at once...!”

“No.”

“Why?!”

The older agent rubbed his brow with agitation. “We’re already past the deadline! You knew how risky this job was when you agreed to it! The higher ups are already pissed. You know that they can take us off the face of the earth without a trace, right?”

“Yes. You are right, Agent Vanderwood.”

“So please understand the gravity of the situation and focus! I know you’re worried about the RFA and that girl. Because you were young when you joined, I’ve never mentioned the RFA. But that doesn’t mean that other people aren’t going to start looking into what
the hold ups are if this isn’t done like – NOW. They might take away those “distractions”. You feel me? So you HAVE to finish this by today.”

The stories he’d heard about past operatives running into such issues filled his mind. It wasn’t that he didn’t know; he often just tried not to think about it. Jumin had a good security team, but that wasn’t going to stop a motivated sniper… If things did go that bad, it’d probably come down to him dying while making sure every trace of his interaction with the RFA was wiped clean. There were protocols for that per V’s request, but none of them were instant. If they were found out before then though, there would be next to nothing he could do aside from maybe leaking identities and getting innocent operatives hurt. His fingers were wriggling one of the roses to the point the paper was soft and had made it go limp. When did his life get so complicated?

“I know you can't help but think about the RFA... But we have to be alive first! No, Agent 707?”

Really, the older agent wasn’t trying to be an ass about it, but that didn’t stop him from feeling resentful… Vanderwood was being honest; truth was an ugly thing. That was why he was his handler and not a field agent. At his core, the guy was too soft and honest to do anything really bad. Not like him… That was the sort of thing that could’ve gotten Saeran and him killed years ago.

“Yes... We do.”

“Now you're answering properly. You've always done so well. Seriously, what's with you? You can't focus and then you create that weird robot.”

“You're right... What's wrong with me?”

“I don’t have time to make that list… But here’s what I can do to help get your mind on track. If things go South, what will be the use of the RFA or that charity party? Assuming they don't just kill you or lock you away in a mental institution, they’d reassign you, they'll give you a completely new identity with a new handler. You’d never see that girl or any of those people again. You know how excruciating that can be.”

Words from experience…

“You're right, Agent Vanderwood.”

“Good. I'm glad you seem to be thinking reasonably about this now. Let’s take a break, I'll make a fresh pot of coffee, and we'll get back to work, okay?”

“Alright...”

All he could do was keep making flowers and looking at the screen…

“Don’t just sit there on your ass watching that CCTV feed - I'm serious! Go outside, get some fresh air, and come back in 10 minutes.”

“Yeah, sorry…”

Seven slowly forced himself up onto two feet. His legs felt as though someone had replaced the bone and muscle with water and sand. Each step was weighted and seemed to slosh around. A glance at the chat revealed that while everyone else had been on, Miyeon was just the occasional blip despite frequent calls out and use of her email… She was working so hard too. After using the restroom and dousing his head in cold water, Seven went out to the garage.
The temptation to just get in the car and head there to see her itched so intensely along with
the sense of dread he felt. Something was going to happen… He just felt it. There was no logical
reason for him to feel like that. It was more logical to fear the Agency, but the tension in his gut said
that the threat was coming from somewhere else. Vanderwood had cut his remote access to the
CCTV feed which tempted him to go back in, but doing that would only mean he’d have to get back
to work sooner.

…He wanted to hear her… No… To experience her… To confirm that she spoke Korean
and not Arabic or Russian. He didn’t even know what he spoke anymore. The number was dialing
as he left the garage and stepped out into the sunshine for the first time in days. He could only watch
as the data relayed that she was still on a call. Then finally, a disconnect. Only a few days ago he
called her so easily and freely. It’d been so fun, now he felt so anxious.

When she picked up and greeted him, her voice was less “Miyeon” and more professional.

There were so many things he wanted to say, but what came out was as incoherent as the
hacker felt.

“Good afternoon! It's me, Seven. I came outside to do some work. But... Your
voice just sounded a bit weird.” There were words he forgot, he was sure of it… What language was
he supposed to use again? “Uhm... I'm just walking on the streets but I keep remembering your
voice. I keep hearing it and I don’t know why...”

His hand covered his face as he had no idea what the hell he was saying anymore!? The
point was to hear the girl… Not to ramble like a moron, but Seven was too tired to even attempt
hiding how he felt now.

“…Luciel. Are you okay?”

He didn’t want her to use that name, no matter how sweet it sounded. The picture he’d seen
of her and memories of the CCTV helped him imagine the way her lips moved to form the sounds of
it. What color of pink had her lips been? They looked so lovely…

“Yeah! There just has to be some sort of special frequency to your voice,
because... I keep wanting to hear it... It’s weird, right?”

She hummed softly as if considering his words. They were speaking the same language,
right?

“My voic...”

A sneeze cut off the word, followed by another, and another.

Three perfectly adorable little sneezes! His weariness ebbed as a smile finally broke.

“Haha, so cute! Yeah! I wanted to hear that sneeze too... Umm... I haven’t seen
you on much today so I was getting worried... You’re not feeling sick or anything, are you?”

“I’m fine. What were you working on outside?”

“Oh! Well... Madam Vanderwood said I needed some fresh air…”

He could hear her sigh with relief. “Do you feel better?”

“Yeah! But now that we’re talking... God... This is so strange... I suddenly felt
super-hot! Amazing… Maybe I record this call and run it through one of my scanners to see what about talking to you wakes me up… I want to figure out the cause. Oh! I must sound like a creep right now. Don't worry. I know what I said, but I haven't recorded your voice or anything!!"

“I wouldn’t mind… I’d prefer you just call if you want to hear me though. You could still come by and work here if you’re really that worried.”

Her voice was so sweet and honest. There was nothing she could do for him, but every ounce of her little body was straining to reach out to him through the wire. He could barely contain himself… The scared little boy him wanted nothing more than to hide his face against her and share every last horrible thing. But he couldn’t ever do that… It would only hurt her knowing those things, or… Worse.

“What if you get involved in strange things because of me? If something happens and I get caught, and they find your voice file in my hard disc, they’ll target you. That’s why I only save things inside my head,” his voice ebbed. “I have a really good memory…”

“I trust you to keep me safe, but who is protecting you… Luciel, are you in danger right now? Cough twice-”

“No, I’m okay right now,” the hacker assured. “I just don’t want anyone else to be put in the line of danger because of me or guessing about what I do because it’ll just make things harder for everyone.”

“Vanderwood isn’t just a maid, is she? If you want out I could contact Jumin, and we -“

Damn she was sharp!

“NO!... uh... I’m sorry... For yelling... But please don’t do anything like that for someone like me… Miyeon, good people like you have to stay in this world and do good things. You can't get wrapped up into a bad situation because of someone like me. Didn't I tell you before - hackers are like cockroaches.”

“Please stop talking about yourself like that! You’re not a bad person, Luciel! You’re so smart and talented… You really could be the Defender of Justice if you wanted! Yeah, you’re… a liar and a jerk sometimes…But you’re not doing those things because you want to, right?”

The truth was, there was a part of him that used to like the challenge. It was a prideful part that enjoyed victory and being less than gracious towards those he bested. It was so good to be feared, even if people didn’t know his face or name… In some way, he wasn’t a scared little boy – he was like a force of nature. Another part of him was so insatiably greedy and liked the money, but only for a short while. Yet this girl wanted to believe in him… It was like listening to his younger self chastise him for becoming the very thing he didn’t want to be. Desperately he wanted to be that person she saw him as, the lie he’d built up.

Maybe he had too much of his mother in him… At the very least, he had the decency not to bring children into such a horrible world… It was bad enough that his only family was out in it where he could never see him again. He’d made a deal with God to give up any normal life in exchange for his brother’s. Instead of two lives of mixed blessings, he wanted to be the one cursed and for Saeran to have every blessing. This was a test… A test he was almost too weak to resist. His greed and pride were so clear now seeing someone who pure and kind. This angel with no concept of wickedness thought only to reach out with pure intentions, she wanted only to lift him out of his
lot and hold him up high. Yet all he could think about was pulling her into the filth with him...

“…Haha I am a liar and a jerk, aren’t I…?” he answered with a pained chuckle. “So, don’t hang out with hacker and secret agents- especially ones who work for intelligence agencies. No instead, for someone like you... A man with a good, honest job... A normal background... That would be so much better…”

“No… All I need to be happy is who is kind. Someone who does stupid things to my phone and thinks I don’t notice… Someone who is thinking about me as much as I think about him – and his stupid glasses.”

Seven’s heart was throbbing so loud that hearing was nearly impossible, yet every word short circuited his reason. She said other things, but they were muffled by the shock of hearing such sweet words directed at him. His keys were in his pocket… Warm with their sharp ridges against his increasingly sensitive fingertips. He could drive there right now, wrap his arms around her, kiss her, and tell her everything. She liked him too, so it was okay, right? That’s what TV shows and cartoons said was supposed to happen when people confessed their feelings. But he could never… Never ever do that… If they met, he’d REALLY be in trouble. She hadn’t said those words though…

Please don’t say you love me, or even that you like me!

The hacker practically ripped his own hand out of his pocket, instead it dug into his scalp as though trying to pin his sense of reason into place. Each pulse of blood carried a bittersweet mix of adrenaline and life back into him. It was like driving a car super-fast down a curvy road. The sensations were amazing, but the second he lost focus, it’d be the last thing he’d feel.

“Aaargh…! I think my head is overloaded,” he stammered, “I keep saying weird things... I just wanted to hear your voice because I couldn’t focus, but I'm pretty sure this only made things worse. I’m so sorry… I really need to hang up-“

“Luciel, please wait - I-“

“No! Shh!” he interrupted her. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly before continuing. “Just… Could you just... say good bye for me. Just once?”

“Yes you won’t hang up before I can say it this time?” she asked with a little indignation in her voice.

“No, so… Please say it for me.”

“…Promise me it won’t be the last time you hear me say it,” her voice was a little bolder.

“I…” Seven faltered as there was no way he could guarantee such a thing, but if it made her feel better and let him go before temptation won out, he’d agree… “I promise…”

“And promise me that you’ll ask me how I’m doing tomorrow.”

His throat was tightening up. Why was she doing this to him?

“Okay… I promise to ask you how you’re doing tomorrow.”

“Pinkie promise me, Seven!”

…Stop being so damn cute and innocent!
“O…okay… I pinkie promise.”

“Scanner promise it when you get back inside!” she ordered firmly.

God love her… He wanted to kiss her a thousand times, until her lips would be too numb to utter anything that could torture him like this!

“…I don’t know if I can do that. I’ll stamp it though… Okay?”

“Fine…”

Was she really sulking? So cute… He wanted to see her pouting! For the first time in hours, things felt something felt closer to “normal” between them. There was only 5 days until the party… That didn’t leave him much time to get control of himself. For now, though…

“I don’t have much time left before I have to get back to work… Can I get my goodbye?”

“Will you call me later tonight?”

“…If I have any updates, I’ll let everyone know in the chat.”

“Luciel, if you get anxious and have trouble focusing, please just call me. If there’s even a chance I can help you just a little… Please.”

“Yeah…”

Whatever it took to get her off the phone, but truly he wanted just to keep talking so he could have undeniable proof she was alive and happy. More than anything he wanted to hear her laugh and see her smile again… His stupidity was threatening to rob that from him forever.

“Okay,” there was some skepticism in her tone, but the following words made him close his eyes as the warmth in them settled him. “Thank you for working so hard for us. We’re safe, so focus on what you have to do. So please don’t worry and goodbye, oh God Seven.”

“Hearing that up just woke me up completely. Thanks. I can focus on work now. Umm… I’ve got to hang up for real now…”

“Okay. Goodbye till then.”

“Goodbye, Miyeon.”

He’d curled the tightening cord of his hoodie around his finger so snugly that his fingertip was turning purple. Tucking the phone back into his pocket, the hacker finished his walk feeling somewhat refocused on what needed to be done. There was a girl with a sad smile that he’d never met, who had faith in him… It didn’t matter what happened to him, as long as that girl remained innocent and bright. Checking over the data revealed that finally there was success on tracking down the source of the e-mails, all thanks to one that was still unopened in Yoosung’s box.

Within hours Seven had enough of the GPS coordinates to know that it was in the mountains. He was waiting to get access to the satellites before attempting to reach out to V to let him know the progress. Still no answer… He could at least leave the information in the chat but his eyes caught enough of what he’d missed to require him to read more.

Jumin had called Yoosung’s mother to visit him. He was almost jealous he hadn’t thought
of doing such a thing himself, but Seven knew where the line was. The chat was so lively after that
tough! Miyeon, bless her, was doing her best to comfort the student, soothe Zen’s vicarious outrage,
and cheer up Jaehee. He felt so relieved to see her acting a little more like herself… There were
traces of so many people that were so dear to him in that girl… No wonder he thought so tenderly of
her.

When he finally joined in, Seven did his best to share what he could about what he’d found
and what his plans were. It was no surprise when Miyeon and Zen volunteered to go with him to the
coordinates. There was no time to argue it for long as he smelled the acrid miasma of cigarettes
before hearing the gate open. He said his goodbyes and was working on putting his phone away
when…

The older agent was back.

His fingers were fast enough to hide most of it but the overworked CPU was slower than
usual, leaving the RFA work up as the older agent came up.

“Zero Seven.”

Oh God… Lecture time… Maybe if he acted like it was just him checking it for just a
minute…

“Hey.”

If he pretended, he was super focused and getting back to the Agency stuff he had in the
background… His handler might just…

“What happened to that deal we made before? Do you really want to make me the
bad guy here? What was that on the screen? That’s about the RFA, isn’t it?”

No point in lying now. They were down to the wire; prime negotiating time.

“The lives of everyone in the RFA may be in danger, Agent Vanderwood.”

Those weary brown eyes didn’t waver with compassion or concern. He wasn’t going to
budge on this. Damn!

“Our clients can put people’s lives in danger as well, Agent 707,” the older agent
answered. The aroma of cigarettes was slowly replacing the sweet cherry, almond notes of
Dr.Pepper. “I don’t know how much danger your RFA is in, but is their situation worse than ours!?”

They’d worked together long enough for him to be able to read his handler. This wasn’t
just annoyance; he was afraid. The tall, burly guy that scrawny fifteen-year-old Saeyoung used to
look up to was actually scared… Not much truly unsettled Vanderwood, so seeing that little line in
his brow so deep spoke to the gravity of the situation. They really weren’t going to get an extension
on this.

“I shouldn’t have accepted that client…”

“You should’ve said that three months ago before we accepted the payment! Not that
it would’ve mattered,” the older agent sighed. “The boss would’ve made us take the job anyway,
but you should’ve given them an extended deadline before the deal was made – instead of being a
cocky bastard! It’s too late for us to renegotiate this now. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Seven anxiously tugged on the cord of his hoodie and bit his lower lip. “God…”
“Look, you REALLY have to finish this by the end of the day. I’m serious. You have to be alive to help the RFA, no?”

“Right.”

With his point made, the older agent began to tidy up some to leave him to work, although he was making calls out to other agents to check their progress on other assignments. Progress was painfully slow, even with as much computing power as he had. The number of scans and protocols he was having to run now to make up for time were making working on anything else so hard. Even when he dropped doing all other work to just the RFA and the project with the deadline, there was no speeding up the conversion of the data packets and decryption processes. Eventually he got bored watching the slow pace of it and used his phone to work on side preparation until he caught side of Miyeon outside the apartment. His initial instinct was to call out to find out just what the hell she thought she was doing, but Vanderwood’s eyes were already burning a hole through him. She was back within 12 minutes and 49 seconds with a shopping bag in her hand, which alleviated some of his worries, but it stirred other ones.

“Gotta step out for a little. Keep working, okay?”

Seven merely hummed and did a good job of being obedient until checking chat. Jumin had touched down safely and was going on about the ancestry of cats in the desert…

The executive had mentioned a cat army before, which sent the hacker’s mind back to work. It didn’t take long to pull up the blue prints he’d tinkered with before to modify them. It took only a few changes to change out the gasoline lines in favor for something more surveillance and utility based. The 3d printer did a decent enough job of making the outer body and there were plenty of parts left over from the initial attempts with puppy bot to give his hands something to do now. He’d still poke around on the computer to do his Agency work, but pretty soon, his mind was fully engrossed on the little body taking shape in front of him.

Puppy bot was too dangerous. Miyeon needed something that was cute and functional, without the risk of exploding in her purse or arms. He could think of nothing cuter than Elly. Besides, he couldn’t find a picture of the cat she had as a little girl. If there were pictures of little Miyeon holding that cat, he might’ve died from how cute they probably were.

This robot wasn’t soft like Elly, but it’s adorably chubby body was white like snow, with two topaz blue surrounded cameras to act as eyes. Not only would he be able to see through them, but past models he’d run for previous robots, allowed the algorithms to recognize and react to many common obstacles to walking. Soldering them in place was mercifully easy. There were adaptive, self-learning programs that he’d borrowed from MIT, NASA, Poogle, and Japanese robotics programs along with a few homebrewed solutions to provide an algorithm for speech and mobility. All of it he had been working on for years just for fun. The personality was bright and bubbly, perfect for cheering up a broken hearted or scared girl if something happened to him.

At some point, he’d need to speak with her so that it would imprint both of their voices as the administrators…

Holding it up, Seven really had to admire his work. There was some concern about its little paws being too slick, but a little rubber on the bottom made them just as soft the real thing while adding some traction. It was a pain in the ass to get the mechanisms for the retractable claws working with the repurposed gas lines, but it was well worth it. Pleased with his work, Seven tied a cute yellow ribbon around its neck.

So cute… If Miyeon liked puppy bot – she’d LOVE this! He might need it before her
“What the hell did you make while I was gone?”

“Huh? Oh. A cat robot. I made it for protection. I couldn't help myself after Jumin gave me the idea.”

“That's for protection? The way I see it, it won't be able to protect a single ant.”

Considering he hadn’t really tested it and given it time to start running to adapt, he had a point.

“Oh... I know, right?” he answered with some hesitation. Vanderwood was leaving “lecture” mode and would probably be a real threat soon. It didn’t matter how soft he was. When it came down to it, he had killed people before… Maybe that’s why he had come back in. “I made another useless thing again. What's wrong with me? I guess I don't value my life.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. But my life IS valuable. I should just sell you out to the boss and save myself.”

He probably wouldn’t be able to put a bullet in Seven himself unless there really was no other way to save himself…

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Go ahead? Are you serious?”

They’d worked together how many years now? They were practically family at this point. No wonder the agent hesitated. Poor toothless bastard… If something really did happen to the hacker, there was a chance that Vanderwood wouldn’t be long after.

“I'm getting tired of this now... I get that the RFA... no that girl... is in danger. But you do realize that you have to be safe to keep her safe, right?” the older agent sighed.

“...Yes. You know, Agent Vanderwood...”

“What?”

“I'm tired of your lectures,” Seven noted brightly.

“God... You're so much trouble. Lemme cut straight to what the boss told me when I called him just now.”

Shit…

“The boss?”

“The client is starting to ask where the product is; this isn't one of those types who calls in or small talk either. They apparently have a few friends who keep professional sweepers on the payroll. While you've been screwing around, Alice found that there was movement of funds from one of their accounts to one of those “friends”... Plus Ophelia has gone dark. It's not just us who will be in danger if you keep stalling. The entire agency is at stake here! You realize these people have wiped out entire operations before, right?”

Why the hell had he been so lazy and not properly researched the people giving him the job to begin with? There had been progress on it, but this wasn’t helping… Bad enough that hacker was
after the RFA, but now these people could be too. Maybe he should warn V and start the scrubbing protocol. A whole other list of worries entered his mind, making him curl his legs up onto his chair. Scenarios and possible outcomes were playing out.

"Are you listening to me right now? This is an ultimatum. If things are not done by tomorrow by the VERY latest, your personal safety will be put under threat! Do you understand?"

Understanding wasn’t the issue… Logically, he understood and agreed. This was something deeper, more primal. His intuition and feelings weren’t going to be reasoned with.

"I know... I know, but... I can't focus. I can sense that the hacker is going to do something soon. If something happens to Miyeon..."

"Feeling? You're not going to feel anything tomorrow if you don't get your shit together!"

"You don't understand just how anxious I am."

"I'm not stupid, Seven. It's that girl. Since she joined, you've been skipping out on your work to talk to her-"

"It's not like that!" he objected. "I just want her to be safe where she is. She's... important to me."

Shit!

"Did I hear something wrong? Important to you?"

He actually said it… Dammit!

Vanderwood shook his head, before slamming his hand against the wall. “No! No! No! Don't even go there, Seven! You haven't forgotten why people like us don't develop close relationships, have you? You know how filthy this field is! Let's just say you two start going out. At anytime they could give us a job that will require a complete and total wipe and relocation. That’s excruciating enough without leaving some innocent girl wondering what the hell happened to you! Wondering if you’re dead or just ran off with someone else. Not to mention the things that happen when someone slips and makes a mistake, like this crap you’re pulling right now. They’re probably already locking onto our other agents to prepare for a take down, what makes you think that they won’t be able to track down that girl even if I don’t mention her? Do you KNOW how many times I've seen pissed off client's hurting the "important one" just for revenge? They won’t just rough her up, Seven. They will make a fucking red room - sell her to the highest bidder to do whatever they want until there’s nothing left while you watch before taking turns on you!”

“I know... I know!”

“Really? If you do, then stop acting like a fucking amateur! I told you before that we’re ticking time bombs – it’s not a matter of if we’ll go off but when! If you really care about those people the best thing you can do is stay the hell away from them! That way no one innocent has to get hurt...”

“Time bomb...”

“Please, Seven. If you really care about that girl - best thing you can do for her is to discard your feelings, cut your ties, and work! You’ve done so well up until now. I know you’re
young… I know it’s hard. But this isn’t a game. I don’t want your or that girl’s blood on my hands… But I’m not going to let other people die because you couldn’t get your shit together.”

There was no mistaking the desperation in his handler’s gaze. Seven merely nodded and turned back to the computer to attempt to get something done while both puppy bot and cat bot stared at him. He managed to make some progress, although it was getting quite late. Vanderwood brought him some take out but was keeping himself busy with the remaining audio logs and CCTV… It was hard to know whether he was watching now to appease the hacker or to try to figure out where the apartment was.

Eventually his muscles ached too much to bear, so Luciel pushed the seat out and stood. His entire back was tense and popped, drawing the other agent’s gaze. It wasn’t annoyance this time but focus. He was becoming less ward and more target with a high chance of flight risk. Would he take him out at midnight or would he be allowed to finish the job before he was punished?

“Bathroom…” Seven murmured shuffling past.

There was no objection. Letting him go saved the unpleasantness of cleaning up improvised options later… Vanderwood certainly didn’t need to know what bodily function he was handling, which gave him some time to himself.

There hadn’t been any more progress on finding the hacker as priorities had to change. The uncertainty of how the night was going to play out and his exhaustion lead him to conclusion that was time to make his peace. If his handler took him out at midnight, he didn’t want there to be unfinished business. Seven sent V a message with enough to let him know the situation and how to proceed if something did happen before popping onto chat to give a status update. Miyeon was on and greeted him as warmly as ever.

He sat in the quiet of the dark bathroom with just the glow of the screen. There was nothing dignified or beautiful about any of it… When he texted her about the “shithole” he worked in, it was literal. It shouldn’t have surprised him when his phone began to vibrate softly after he left the chatroom.

His hands were still wet when he picked up the phone… Of course she’d call him after a conversation like that. The screen with her name was the one light in this miserable place.

“Hey, it’s me…”

“I know…” He’d recognize that voice anywhere… “I’ve acting strange these past days, huh? Maybe I’m starting to come down with something,” he chuckled wearily. “Earlier you told me to call if I felt anxious… But since you called… Can I complain a little? You’ll listen to anything I say, right?”

“Of course! I’m super duper ready to listen to anything!”

”Haha! Thanks for being so enthusiastic.”

Seven sat on the bathroom floor with his back to the wall… There was a good chance this might be the last time they’d talk… It was as close as he’d ever come to really feeling her warmth for himself or holding her. There was no priest to hear his sins, only this angel. Quietly he began to rub his silver cross for strength. Folding his arms around his knees, he held the phone close to his ear and spoke softly.

“I told you that we’d talk about that “code” later on didn’t I…?” Seven began.
“… I really like you, Miyeon. I like that you’re always so bright and warm. There are so many days when I don’t leave the house or look out a window at all, but every time we talk, I feel like I’m sitting under the sun.”

“Luciel…”

“Just listen for now,” he soothed. His long fingers ran through his hair. “So awhile back, I got this mission. The plan was to lure the enemies outside, while they were distracted, we’d go in – get the intel – and get out. And, you know me. Swift 707! Success at once!... Or that's what was what I thought…” Slowly he relaxed his legs, letting them stretch out some as he rested fully against the wall. “When I gave the clear to all the other agents and was about to leave, the enemies came back. So I hid in this boiler room and waited for the perfect moment to leave. I waited... and waited... But they just wouldn’t leave! Do you know how long I had to wait?”

She didn’t even attempt to answer… There was no doubt his every syllable was being fully processed.

“Three days...” he uttered. “Three – long - days I hid in there. It was so hot, and I was so thirsty… I honestly thought I was going to die. And like anyone, I started to wonder about what I’d leave behind... Wondered what the point of all of it was. You know, all the hacking work I do, my duties as an agent... All of it is anonymous. No one really knows that it was me who did those things. Even now if something happens, and I die, I'd just disappear without a trace and they’d find someone else…”

“…That sounds so meaningless and miserable.”

“Yeah... Which you’d think that the hackers who’ve tried to track me down and attack the agency would at least know a name, but they really have no idea of who I am. I’ve changed identities a few times - been all over the world to keep there from being any trace… But I couldn’t let go of the RFA… You know, the only thing I wanted was to have a place where I could laugh and get away from my reality for just a little. 707 – that person in the chatroom isn’t real either… Something tells me you already knew that though, I can hear it in your voice and the questions you ask me sometimes. The more we talk, the more I’ve been thinking about who I am. Why do you think that is? Maybe it’s because, when you get down to, I’m just this hollow shell...”

He sniffled and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“I was so distracted by that thought earlier, I was typing your name while coding. I had to go back and check pages and pages to make sure I hadn’t done it before too… If I leave the slightest trace of you with these dirty hands of mine, you could be in even more danger.”

Seven swallowed hard and sniffed harder to try to level his voice out again.

“You’re such a good person, so honest and pure. Something tells me you've been like that since the day you were born... Not like me... Everything about me has been wrong from the start. Do you think it’s because I know that, that I ended up here?”

“Don’t say that about yourself... No one is born wrong… You said you’re where you are because you didn’t have any other choice.”

“You really are so kind. There are so many things I want to tell you, so you’d understand but... I shouldn’t... So many questions that I wanted to ask you too, that I shouldn’t ever ask. I’m so sorry. Especially to you, Miyeon.. I was wrong to convince V to let you join… And to threaten you so you’d stay… If I’d just let you go, you wouldn’t be in any of this mess. I’m so
fucking selfish…”

The cross was digging into his palm.

“How can I be so happy when I your face on the security feed and when you call knowing the danger I put you in…? Now something could really happen to everyone because I wasn’t good enough… Even now I’m doing something stupid… Agents are never supposed to be on the phone this much or this long, but here I am again… What am I doing? I shouldn’t be doing this… Christ… I’m sorry. I feel like I’m just saying weird things all the time… Scaring you when it’s my fault…”

She tried to reassure him softly, but he couldn’t hear anything as Seven stifled a sob into his arm so she wouldn’t hear it. He forced himself to swallow down the tightness in his throat… Truthfully, death didn’t scare him anymore. There were things worse than death.. Like failure… Or innocent people being hurt because of him. He took off his glasses to rub the moisture from his eyes before putting the phone back up to his ear.

“…Can you hear me?”

“Yeah…” he sniffled discreetly, letting his glasses hang limply between his fingers. Tilting his head back helped the mounting ache in his head…

“…Nothing is going to happen to us with you working as hard as you have. So wash your face off with cold water… Get a cold drink… Think about how relieved you’ll be when it’s done… Luciel, I know you can do this. Just focus on the Agency stuff first – I promise you – we’ll be okay! Jumin’s got one of the best security teams in the country… And your “maid” would probably want to use me for collateral or something anyway to motivate you… Right? So I’m fine for now. There’s security on site here at the apartment, and I can always head to C&R offices if things feel weird. I trust you, Luciel, but you can trust me to take care of myself a little too, right?”

…No… Anyone who’d download a mysterious messenger app and enter an apartment was probably a little too naive to be trusted with something like that. She and Yoosung were both too innocent to really comprehend what sort of threats they really faced. The rest of what she said did make sense, but this was his responsibility. This was what V had hired him to take care of, and Seven couldn’t afford to make any more mistakes. He didn’t want to see her bruised, bloodied, and defiled like some of the victims he’d tracked down for previous clients in crime organizations who were looking for lost family members who’d been caught in the crossfire… The mere thought of her gagged cries made him want to wretch.

Forcing himself back up onto his feet, Seven sat his glasses on the bathroom sink and did his best to rub the pain from between his eyes.

“I’ve got to handle this before anything else can go wrong… Call me if anything happens.”

“I will. Good luck and please be safe, Luciel.”

“…Hanging up now… Good night.”

The light on the phone blinked out with a button push. Setting it aside, he held his head under the cold water of the faucet for several minutes. His ever breath and pulse was counted as the young man tried to implement some of the meditation techniques he’d read on. If he didn’t stay alert and awake, there was a good chance he’d never be aware of anything again.
The only person who needed to suffer was him… This was his penance for his sloth, his
greed, and his lust… For the promise he’d faltered in… For the first time in many years, he prayed.
For the protection and happiness of the RFA. For forgiveness for losing his path… And for strength
to finish things or at least to face death with grace. He would bear his sins and the punishment they’d
bring alone, happily.

Kissing his cross, Seven tucked it back into his shirt.

There would be no more mistakes…
Chapter 18

Sleep was impossible for Miyeon after the hacker hung up. The girl kept checking her phone and computer for any signs of him sending covert messages to ask for help. It was stupid, as he’d probably reach out to V or Jumin for something like that, if he bothered to at all. Calling him was also out of the question if things were really that bad. All she could do was keep watch while her imagination played through the potential horrors that had befallen him… Right now he could be hurt… He could already be dead… Someone could be digging him a shallow grave and tracking everyone else down… Her body felt numb… And here she was useless again. What could she do? Should she call Jumin? Seven wouldn’t want her to, but… What if things were really that bad? Miyeon wanted to trust the hacker; he knew more about this situation than her. But… What if something really bad happened because she didn’t tell someone again? Was there really nothing she could do? It would be her fault again… What was she supposed to do?! The frustration and anxiety built in her as nausea.

Dad…

Jun…

Now Luciel…

Was it just people who were important to her that died? Reflexively she hugged her knees tighter and held her throat as each breath became closer and more frenzied as the pounding in her chest intensified. It was her fault… Tensing, Miyeon’s back was hard against the head board as she covered her head and bit her lips and choked back the tautness in her throat… The memories kept rushing in of things she ought to have done… They told her that they were fine; she believed them. Why did she believe them? How was keeping her from the truth protecting her? They were dead, she was alone… Now Luciel… What was she supposed to do? Her slight tremble was now a quake. She was drowning!

Big brother! Please…

I can’t breathe!

I don’t want to die!!!

Jun, save me!

I’m scared…!

What am I supposed to do?

Jun wasn’t going to hold her anymore. He wasn’t going to wrap his hoodie around her or share his headphones with her. He was dead; she was alone… Miyeon was always going to be alone because everyone around her would die. It would be her fault… Why didn’t she do more when Jun started giving her things and talking about “something only he could do”… How he’d make things “better for everyone”… How was this better?! The world would’ve been better if it’d been her jumping off the bridge, not him! Daddy’s coughing… The blood tinged tissues… How tired he got
and how pale he started to look… Miyeon knew better! Why had she believed him when he insisted he was okay? It was her fault for believing that lie… No matter how good she was, it wouldn’t be enough… And now, she was going to suffocate on the bed and no one would help Seven!

\textit{What am I supposed to do!?}

That question echoed in her mind until she felt faint. No one was going to answer her. No one ever answered her… No one was ever going to answer… She had to help herself…

A strained sob finally broke as her reality settled back in albeit a little woozily from how light headed she felt. Thinking a little more clearly, Miyeon was able to control her breathing, tilting her head back to make the most of the cool air in the apartment. The nausea and eased as the girl marshalled some composure back.

Still nothing in the chat room…

She clutched the phone to her chest to help steady her heart while stepping out onto the balcony for fresh air. The breeze felt amazing, although her dizziness soon drew her to sit down. Reflexively Miyeon began to stroke her own hair to soothe herself while looking out at the sparkling lights, smoothing it before gradually braiding it to keep her hands busy. It’d been a long time since she her anxiety had gotten the better of her like that…

The last time was when she realized Jun was missing, and then when they found his “good bye” note.

The girl rocked and continued to braid her hair.

… She wasn’t going to let that happen again… No one else was going to die because of her complacency…

A numbness settled over Miyeon’s mind, allowing her to think things through coldly and clearly. Lack of information was the biggest issue… She didn’t know enough. No one else in the RFA knew enough either, except for V, and she had no direct contact to him. Any plan to rescue him would have to be done without him knowing, outside the messenger. Jaehee and Jumin could be trusted, but Luciel wouldn’t want to burden them. Plus, what could be done to ensure his safety after he was out. He’d mentioned before that other groups would probably be after him and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Her fingers and joints were starting to feel sore from the repetitive motion of braiding, then undoing her handiwork. There was nothing drastic that could be done yet… What could she do now? The hacker’s voice was in her mind trying to answer that question.

Miyeon understood what he meant about her voice sounding weird now, as “his voice” in her head was all over the place. Usually it was the roller coaster like cadence with that extra little nasal twill thrown in there. He had let his real voice slip before in passing, but nothing like this… There was no doubt that the person on the phone was the real Luciel, not “Seven” talking to her…

That was assuming Luciel was even his real name. He’d changed identities so often, but… That didn’t mean he really changed. Whatever name he used, the man she spoke with was still the same selfless, kindhearted person who wanted only to make others happy because he knew the pain of despair. The person who “liked” her was the same person who would rather hurt himself than see anyone else hurt… The details weren’t known to her, but there were glimpses if she really thought about everything they’d talked about. His past didn’t matter as much as his future though. If he really wanted out, she had no doubt that he could find a way to achieve that. Maybe he was working on it
and they’d found out?

She had no way of knowing and likely never would. Seven didn’t want anyone to worry about him, which by his stupid logic meant that keeping everyone in the dark would keep that from happening. Miyeon knew well enough that ignorance was no defense… He was probably too stubborn to reason with on that front though; she could only control herself.

What could she do directly?

The RFA was supposed to be his escape, and as much as she wanted to confide in someone what Luciel had told her, it would be wrong. Even if she was subtle about it, people would talk about it. That would probably lead him to checking in less and less, with only the necessary update message before hiding away… That would alienate him further and make him less likely to open up for help… For now, the best thing she could do was maintain the status quo and be supportive. There would be plenty to make light of and keep things cheerful considering the situation the CEO to be had gotten Yoosung into… One thing was sure though, Miyeon resolved to talk to Jumin and V for a more vigorous solution in private after the party.

Please let him stay alive and safe until then…

That left a void with what her options should be immediately, aside from being the one-woman cheer squad for the group. Jaehee, despite her break from Jumin, had to help oversee the setup of the venue without her. Yoosung would be helping his mother. Zen would be doing auditions. She could continue to look for guests and helping them with hospitality until the party, but that wasn’t directly helping the red head. For everything he was doing, she owed him something more material. There wouldn’t be enough “Nyan Nyan” dancing to repay the fire breathing robot he’d made.

Digging through the things available to her, the ideal started to form… Over the course of that day, he’d rambled on and on about how he’d wanted to record her voice but couldn’t because of how dangerous it’d be. At the same time, it wouldn’t be hard for him to delete or destroy something like a flash drive or microSD card. Taking out one that she’d brought with her, Miyeon deleted the school work off it and began to put her plan in motion…

With care, she began to make a pop up picture book for him using the paper and coloring supplies she’d brought with her. She layered the “cover” in such a way that it could discreetly house the little drive in a hidden spot… The publishing company probably wouldn’t be happy about it, but the girl promised to reimburse them somehow. Keeping busy kept her mind from the anxiety…

As long as she was doing something… Miyeon could stay calm.

Special Security System Reset – Check
Counter measures to avoid detection – Check
Guestroom preparation - Check
Vehicle for extraction – Check
Equipment for extraction – Check
Perseverance is key…

Saeran didn’t recall where he’d first heard the phrase, but it resonated with him. Perseverance was the one virtue that did not require one to be “exceptional”. He had never been out in the corrupted world long enough to verify the depth of its depravity, but he’d seen enough to know that society only valued those who were “exceptional”. Beauty, brilliance, strength, and wealth were the only things considered worthy.

He possessed none of those things…

Well… He might be smarter than most. A few years ago, the weaker him might not have been able to admit that. No amount of mathematical prowess had ever prevented his mother from striking, starving, or strangling him when he was younger. That ability had been useful in tracking down that bastard now though… And it had been especially handy when calculating just how much “medicine” it’d take to put his mother out of his life for good.

The coroner had ruled it a suicide due to the years of substance abuse clearly present in her body and due to pressure from a certain someone… But Saeran knew better. He’d counted every bottle of alcohol, every drop of elixir, and every pill he’d forced down her throat that night. Math had been very useful then.

Saeyoung had taught him how to count by using the one book they had… Eventually, he came to understand that his brother also used this same method to determine when their mother would likely pass out. A certain number of drinks over a certain period of time would render her into a stupor, or one of those deep, gurgling sleeps that would make his brother’s face relax. Only then would his brother would loosen the rope around his ankle, and the two of them would go outside for a little. Saeran, the little fool, would happily count the steps they took aloud to his brother. At first it was because of how his reflection would smile seeing that he remembered something that he’d taught him. Although, it later became a way for him to see how much stronger he’d gotten. When Saeyoung first took him outside, he didn’t get far before having to sit down. He’d hide until his brother returned with a popsicle for them to share. Slowly his legs felt stronger and could make it all the way to the store! When Saeran could make it back home without having to rest once, they started going further out. Pretty soon, they could make it all the way to the vendor with the really good ice cream on cones!

Perseverance…

Now, he could have any kind of ice cream he wanted, whenever he liked, and however much he wanted. Provided he did well… It never seemed to taste as good now though… Maybe it was tainted with memories of that liar’s promise.

Miyeon would fix that once she was in Magenta though. He’d been thinking of her a great deal over the past few days. She was a girl who understood and appreciated persistence. There was clearly activity showing how hard she was working to make the party happen. Guests of all types were on the roster, yet all of them seemed to have something to contribute towards the effort. It wasn’t just a bunch of wealthy donors or government officials: there were artisans and individuals from various modalities who could help spread the message of what they were trying to achieve. And oh, how many guests had already agreed to come! Those who were reluctant were showing signs of being won over through other tactics. The girl understood vanity and how to play to it, along with her natural desire to please leading her to go as far as acting as their personal travel agent. She
would be so useful in recruitment and conversion! Not that he’d ever had a doubt… He’d chosen her for that very reason.

Savior and her felt so alike. They were givers, not takers… It was just that the girl was too innocent to realize how she was being lied to by the RFA. Looking over the chat logs made it all the clearer that it would be harder to set her on the right path if she continued to go down it. Not to mention, that red head was going to corrupt her… Within a week, her kindness and compassion was being exploited.

Thankfully - fortune had given him a way to save her!

The red head had been so distracted that there were openings. So much so that he finally had access to the most sacred of temples, the apartment and the special security system within. Inside were the earliest documents pertaining to Savior’s vision, as well as her paper records containing the information for guests at the highest tiers. It was what he’d been waiting for, but at any moment that annoying red head could finish whatever was distracting him and ruin everything.

He wasn’t going to tell savior, as she wouldn’t approve… The original plan was to wait until the party and offer specially crafted wine to the guests by people who had been sent to work within the catering company that had been hired. However, there were guests who would be providing wares as well, making the plan a little too open for error in his mind. If he wanted that girl and the intel relating to the higher valued guests, Saeran needed to act now. Savior would thank him and understand once it was all done.

The only real issue was that the CCTV was still in the hallway. It was a hard thing to track down. He only knew of its existence due to Savior’s account of it being installed. Out of all the defenses, it was the one thing he hadn’t gotten into. That was fine though…

Fourteen floors up would be a daunting climb from the outside. It wouldn’t be so hard to repel down from the top floor though, only 6 floors down. Getting out of the building would be easy. By the time they’d leave the front door, it’d be too late for that red headed bastard to do anything about it.

After delegating some tasks to other members of the compound, Saeran did a last check over the plan and his equipment before stepping into the car. Maybe she’d recognize him! His stomach lurched at the thought of her maybe mistaking him as the person who shared his features. That perfect moment would be forever ruined by that bastard… His fingers tugged at the mask he’d brought initially to protect him from the glass.

He didn’t want that betrayer’s name on her pure lips. No… He wanted only or her to taste the elixir of salvation. In a few hours, she’d be in paradise with him. Maybe she could be his assistant if Savior let him keep her for himself. There she could be truly happy; she would never betray him or lie. He just had to get her out of that false sanctuary.

“Don’t worry… Your angel is coming to save you…”

Seven’s body felt as limp, wrung out, and heavy as a washcloth. Proper posture had stopped being a concern as he was half laying in his hair, with his chin just barely above the height
of the keyboard. His eyes and the lids over them felt like sandpaper that couldn’t help but grind painfully against the other surface. For three minutes, he had been staring at the same page of code because his brain simply couldn’t muster enough energy to retain more than a symbol at a time. Caffeine had stopped working some time ago, yet there was still a half empty coffee cup with stale, cold coffee in it just out of arms reach. The pyramid of Dr.Pepper wasn’t going to hold anymore…

“You’re going to slide out of your chair,” the older agent nagged.

“It’s comfortable,” he murmured, letting himself slip just a little more to prove the point.

Staying up for days at a time wasn’t something new to him, but it all seemed so pointless. The odds were he was going to be tortured or worse after this. To his sleep deprived mind, none of that mattered… Only two things in the world were important, and both of them were out of his reach. Luciel had to be alive to take care of one of those things though, which was the only reason he’d gotten as much as done as he had.

Miyeon had to stay safe…

V still hadn’t contacted him back…

“You haven’t been typing since you slid down.”

“Alright… Alright…”

The hacker forced himself to sit back up, much to the displeasure of his lower back. Slouching was the only position he could maintain, although he wanted nothing more than to rest his head on the keyboard.

Vanderwood took his first smoke break in hours. That woke him up a little… His fingers moved with alacrity gained from personal interest. Pulling up the RFA security protocols and server logs was fast. The sand in his eyes was a little less bothersome as he began to review the records for the past few hours. Everything seemed okay…

The special security system was oka---… No, it wasn’t.

He reread over the log another time, his overworked brain operating at “normal” person speed rather than his usual. The numbers were definitely different; it’d been reset! A chill began to run through his blood as he began to look back. Not only last night but a few days ago too… How did he not notice!? Hacking into the messenger was one thing, information could be erased if one dug hard enough. Gaining access to the special security system was a whole other beast. It was the most complicated thing he’d ever made. If they’d made single mistake, it could’ve set the apartment ablaze with Miyeon in it. Yet they’d managed to infiltrate and reset it without him even noticing! God only knows what they were planning to do.

Should he ask her to just leave and go somewhere? They’d probably be waiting for something like that… Was it the intel or her they wanted? Maybe both? What if this was a plan to lure him out? Whatever their end game, they’d been active all over the system while he’d been busy… There was no doubt that this was the same person who had initially hacked Miyeon onto the chat. Unlike his own methods, there were mistakes that were becoming more and more obvious to him. Yet this person still managed to force their way in. Just who the hell was this person? Furthermore, why did he make the security system accessible from the outside to begin with? Stupid! STUPID!!!
The metallic tang in his mouth only worsened as he thought about how much danger the RFA party planner was in.

She was probably safer there with the bomb for now, whoever had accessed it would want the information and a possible captive to use as collateral. They weren’t the only one who could use detonation as a bluff… If those two assets were destroyed, then there’d be no point in accessing it to begin with no matter the intended target. First, Seven had to cut that outside connection and manually reset the bomb; talking Miyeon through it via phone was NOT an option. He would have to go there…

How the hell was he going to get out?

His mind was racing as he accessed the chatroom. Thank God, she was on…

707- Miyeon!!!

“Hey, Seven!”

707- This is very important – stay still!

707- Do NOT leave the apartment!

“… Is something wrong?”

707- There’s a problem with the security system

707- I’ll explain when I get there.

“You’re coming here?”

707- Yes

707- Just DO NOT MOVE till I get there.

“What about Vanderwood? Are you going to be okay?”

707- I’ll do whatever it takes.

707- so just trust me and hang in there!

“Seven, wait!”

The hacker was already shoving his phone into his pocket while trying to figure out what equipment to take with him. Moving quickly, he packed up his computer and tools. There was already a “bug out” bag in the car that he kept for emergencies. Packing up his money, Seven grabbed puppy bot and the half finished cat bot…

Maybe they would be useful for something.

Vanderwood was on the far end of the garage smoking, even though they had an agreement of sorts that he would do that outside… The acrid smell made the otherwise pleasant smell of oil and metal much less comforting. His options as to which car to take were limited by trunk space and what he could get to. At the far end closer to Vanderwood was the ideal car, bullet proof glass, in a simple family sedan style. The red car was too close to the older agent was well. White Porche convertible it was then… At least it would be fast enough to get him to her as quickly as possible.
Turning “puppy bot” on, he did his best to make the most of the distraction.

“Woof woof!”

The older agent muttered something to what was likely “the boss” on the phone.

“Woof woof! The garage is a no smoking zone! No cigarettes! Useless person! Woof!”

“Where the hell did this-?”

“I am God Seven’s creation! Woof! I was born in 150BC when my mom dog met my Arabic father robot dog and with a contract with blacksmith Alibaba-“

Everything in the backseat! Robot dog wasn’t useless! He was officially best boy! Maybe he should make treats for him if they survived this…

“No wonder it’s bullshitting …Useless crap that, Seven ma-- Seven! Why are you--- wait what the hell is in your hands!? That’s our equipment!”

Busted…

“Caught me,” he offered playfully.

“Do you really think you could leave without me noticing!!”

The agent barely got two steps before the chunky black and red puppy bot scuttled in front of him, dropping down aggressively.

“Garage is a no smoking zone! Useless person, drop the cigarette! WOOOOOF!!!”

Vanderwood hesitated for a second, which was more than enough to trigger the defensive action protocol. A jet of flame shot up the front of his coat before a second. He barely had time to use his arms to cover himself as a surprised shout escaped him. Seven had leapt into his car and was peeling back to get ready to pull out of the slowly opening automatic garage door.

“Aaargh!!! WHAT THE HELL!? WHY IS IT SPITTING OUT FIRE!?"

If only there were cameras to commemorate this moment! There was no time to waste though. There was just enough clearance for him to get through now! He floored it!

“Oh! You can’t ignore that, woof~! Sorry Mrs. Vanderwood!” Seven called out as he drove under the half open garage door.

The older agent shouted something after him, but he was already out onto the road and hitting the gas. Miyeon was counting on him. There would be hell to pay, but whatever the price, he’d happily pay it as long as she was safe… From where he lived on the outskirts, it would take time to get to where she was. Anything could happen between then and now.

As soon as he reached a stop light, he popped back into the messenger. Miyeon and Yoosung were both on, no doubt trying to figure out what was going on. The girl was on the ball as usual.

“Seven!!! Are you okay!? What were you talking about before?”
Yoosung - Yeah!
Yoosung – Seven, what’s going on?
707- Tell you later
707- Miyeon hang on a bit more
707- Contact Jumin
707- Tell him it’s an emergency
707- Tell him Rika’s apartment’s “Special Security System” has been hacked
Yoosung- What the hell!? What is that?
707- Can’t talk
707- Tell him to contact V
Yoosung- Okay!
Yoosung- Miyeon is going to be okay, right?
707- I’m going to her now

The light was green again! He hurriedly typed out the last.

707- Yoosun plz do whay I sd thnx

When he’d first selected his house, the distance from major urban centers had been a bonus. It meant that keeping track of unusual people in the neighborhood would be much easier. Plus there was so much freedom to modify things without having to deal with a landlord. The long drive into the cities were usually things he enjoyed… Right now, it was just a source of concern. He had a plan for everything, but some outcomes bothered him more than others.

He feared getting there too late more than anything…

The sound of the ringtone he’d assigned Miyeon rang out, making him nearly swerve to pick up. Soon he could hear the ambient sounds of the apartment through his speaker thanks to the Bluetooth connection between his car and the device.

“Did something happen?” Seven barked.

“Luciel, are you okay?”

“Yes! I’m frustratingly okay! Why are you worried about me when you’re the one in danger!?” he scolded.

“I’m fine, right now,” she soothed, her voice surprisingly level. “You’re not hurt, right? What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you when I get there, right now I’m driving as fast as I can, so please do not move till I arrive!”

“Alright… Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?”
The hacker wanted to say yes, but for the sake of safety, no was the better answer. He needed to start correcting things as soon as possible. He’d been tinkering with some of that when a stoplight allowed it.

“I’m so sorry… I can’t talk, so please just wait for me – and do not leave the apartment!”

Miyeon kept the phone on her as she paced through the apartment. He was coming there… Something REALLY bad had to be happening for him to come there and to sound so worried. Maybe he was on the run from the agency now? Jumin was in a meeting and not answering his calls, not that he could do anything from where he was. Jaehee could ask that guards be sent, but she hadn’t been given permission to reveal the address of the apartment.

Luciel’d told her to stay put until he got there…

Were they going to have to run the second he arrived?

Yet again, there wasn’t enough information for her to really know what to do. Quietly she began to pack her things up just in case. It was better to be prepared to go the second he got there rather than to leave everything behind. The helplessness and desperation ate at her as she began to fold and tuck her clothes into her suitcase.

How long would it take for him to get there?

There was still the game systems she brought and her things in the bathroom to pack… Plus the desk was covered with her coloring supplies and the handmade popup book she’d been working on for him. Quietly the girl began to look through the pages that’d dried to test it. Although she’d been working on the party, this had been her focus today. It was already late afternoon. Maybe it was best to just throw it away before he got there. What purpose did a grown man, a secret agent, have for something like that? The story she’d come up with was stupid and her art wasn’t exactly the best. Plus the memory card she’d recorded of herself reading it would just be one more thing to upset him.

BEEEEEP BEEEEEP BEEEEEP BEEEEEP!!!

Her body tightened as the alarm sounded, yet the girl craned her head to try to figure out the source. It stopped almost as soon as it started… She tried to process everything, but the sound of shattering glass cut through her ability to reason.

The girl turned to face the sliding doors of the balcony which had been closed but were now open with the white curtain rippling in the sudden flow of fresh air. Afternoon sun gave everything a soft orange glow, except a dark spot behind the cloth… It was an unmistakably male silhouette. The only part she could see was a sturdy pair of black leather boots and matching pants.

Luciel…?

No… Luciel would’ve come through the front door, unless he knew it was being watched. Why the window? Why didn’t he call her first?

“Gosh… I didn’t plan on that making a sound, but I suppose I failed on that.”
Miyeon felt her pulse rippling through her skin. It sounded familiar, but there was something very off about it. The threadiness of the voice… It was somehow softer and lighter than Luciel’s. Maybe it was just because she’d never talked to him in person?

“Hey miss, just stay right there… You’ll hurt your feet if you step on the glass… I’ll come to you.”

A pale hand with long, fingers curled around the edge of the curtain and pushed it aside. Before her stood a willowy, slightly disheveled figure. His wiry frame was draped in a punk, almost goth fashion with a leather coat half hanging off him. Upon his alabaster shoulder was a stylized eye. Yet there was something undeniably familiar about his brow and the cut of his visible nose above the mask. The hair was white though… And as his eyes focused on her with their mint green hue, she was even more confused. Maybe Seven was in disguise to hide from the agency? Why would he want that symbol on his arm though…? It didn’t make sense…

“Hello,” the figure greeted, one of his delicately tapered hands, cuffed with its spiked leather strap resting to his chest. “You know who I am?”

Her eyes searched him again for any clue to confirm that this person was the person she’d been talking to until it clicked. The eye… The EYE!

“The hacker…” she realized aloud.

“Clever girl…”

Before he could finish, Miyeon was already dashing to the front door. She could feel the air flow change as he drew closer, his pace unhurried. That only made her movements much harder to coordinate. Her hands reached for the door knob once the latch was free, only to feel the smooth metal slip away before the realization hit her that her feet were off the ground. A short cry escaped her as she violently kicked and flailed to try to reach out to anything to have footing again, only to feel his hold tightening around her.

“You’re scared now, but you’ll understand.”

“NO!”

The girl wriggled fruitlessly until balling up. This made him curl around her to maintain control. The two of them were soon on the ground. It was clear immediately that this was the worst position for her; he was clearly stronger! Desperately she clawed and kicked as he tried restraining her by the wrists. His weight made trying to push out from under him quite hard and soon he succeeded in pinning her, his eyes narrowing in a sadistic smile.

“It’s only natural you’re scared with all the lies those people have filled your head with… But you know, I’m the one who brought you here about that phone… And that e-mail a few days ago… It was an invitation!”

Why did he sound so happy and calm!

“Let go! HELP!!!”

“Shh… Shh…” he soothed before slamming her hard into the floor to stun her for a second. Her head was aching and swimming… “Did you like my invitation?”

Suddenly she forced her head forward, hitting him quite hard. The front of her skull stung, but it bought her a brief second as he sat up to hold his face.
She just had to get to the door! Her limbs felt detached, yet she did her best to focus enough to scramble and get up!

Again Miyeon reached out for the door handle, only this time she was stopped by a sharp pain. The hacker had grabbed a fistful of her hair and used it to pull her back up. She was soon onto her feet with a scream before the wind was suddenly knocked out of her by a punch to the belly. She couldn’t breathe! With a single hand, the stranger lifted her by the neck, forcing her to hold onto his forearm. Her toes barely scraped the ground! The world was going dark on the corners of her vision, yet the light-haired man was studying her. His grip relaxed just enough for her to stand on her toes. Spasming, her chest finally drew in a ragged breath, searing her lungs as it re-entered.

“I’ve come to take you to paradise. To take you away from the RFA and it’s false hope… To save you from those liars V and Luciel… I’ll explain everything once we get to Magenta.”

“I’m… not… go…ing… an…y…where…” she half huffed and hissed.

With his free hand, he gently smoothed the hair from her face. His brow was furrowed with annoyance, but his tone was still level.

“Sorry, but you don’t have any say. You entered the RFA because of me. You’re mine. That’s why I wanted to save you first. You’re just confused, soon you’ll understand this is for your own good.”

Miyeon began to dig her nails into the exposed alabaster of his forearm and scratched as hard as she could while wriggling desperately to free herself. His grip around her neck tightened again, only intensifying her want to fight.

“You don’t understand… This is so that all of us can live in heaven. You’ll be happy in the end too,” he urged with a wince.

“SEVEN!!! SEVEN HELP!!!”

Her cheek stung as a crack from the back of his hand quieted her call for help.

“I expected you to resist… But you calling out that filthy name is going to make me go insane… Why are you calling out that name?!” he demanded before violently shaking her. “He won’t come! Even if he did, he’d be too late!”

Her neck was going to break!

It felt like he’d stopped, yet her world was still swimming. Warm fingers brushed along her temple then along her lip. “I’m sorry… I’m sorry… You’re just confused…’” the hacker affirmed tenderly. “This is what he wants isn’t it? So you’ll be even more afraid of me. It’s okay though…”

Miyeon meekly tried to pull away, but the feel of someone caressing her hair only confused her senses more. Her knees buckled reflexively as a tightness began to form in her belly. Something was warm against her! His entire body was pushing her up against the wall, forcing her to stand on his toes while her knees were parted. A sense of instinctive terror filled her at the closeness and the intensity of his scent… The leather, the sweat… It was something that part of her wanted, but from this person and like this was so repulsive to her. She felt like she was going to throw up as the tingle of blood leaving her wrists being held above her head seemed to make the rest of her all the more acutely sensitive…

“Please…”
His hair tickled her cheek as he eased back so that they could match gazes. With his free hand, he pulled down the mask… It was a face she knew. But Luciel would never do this to her, would he…? She tried meekly to wriggle free again only to feel him wriggling around in his pocket. The muscles in her belly tightened as she tried to curl up to get away from the sensation and what she imagined was him undoing his leather pants… To her surprise he only held up two little pills. Her heart sank… This person really was going to steal her away and do God only knows what to her… She couldn’t fight if she was drugged!

“Please… No…!”

“Shh.”

“SEVEN!!! SEVEN HELP!!!”

“Don’t… say… his… name!”

His grip felt like it was going to break her wrists as he wrenched them!

“SEVE___mmmph!!!”

A piteous muffled sound escaped her as his lips sealed around her own. It was like a kitten having its face forced into a bowl of milk… With one hand he stretched her out as taut as her body would go while his other held her nose. For a moment Miyeon fought to keep her mouth closed until the lack of air lead her to her body betraying her in a desperate attempt for breath. A stifled mew of protest escaped her while the velvet of his tongue breached, slowly caressing her own. The chalky, bitterness of the pills soon overtook the slightly salty sweet flavor of him. Her eyes burned with frustrated tears and gags of protest as she tried desperately to fight it. But a pull of her hair forced her to swallow as the pills dropped down to fill what had been a scream her throat. The strange man’s deep kiss served to explore to ensure the medicine was gone while her muscles relaxed in defeat…

There was nothing she could do.

The despair in her heart robbed her of any strength to resist… He seemed to sense this and eased his hold. His lips pulled away from her desecrated first kiss, which he sealed with a gentle peck as her hands fell to push meekly against his chest.

“…I didn’t think that’d be so nice… Your lips taste so sweet,” he observed, his tone a little unhinged. “When we get back to Magenta…” His lips pressed to hers again, just hitting the corner. “…We should do this more… Don’t you think? We should take pictures and show that red headed devil how happy we are together.”

Miyeon tried to tilt her head away, only to find his mint eyes locked onto her own. He looked so much like the pictures… Maybe Seven’d been lying to her the whole time? Her heart was slowly breaking piece by piece.

“Come with me now, while I’m still being rational,” the stranger ordered darkly, before she felt the tingle of contact and smooth caress of his mouth against her own as he pulled her a little away from the wall.

This time he was more deliberate…It didn’t physically hurt, but the more pleasurable it felt, the deeper her misery. Already she could feel the drug starting to take effect… Please just let her overdose on whatever he gave her so she’d die before he could violate her anymore. Don’t let this person take anything else from her…

“The door is open…?”
That voice…

The stranger’s tongue withdrew from her mouth slowly while the lithe body against her grew taut and ready for action… There was the sound of steps near the entry way before the door opened. Her mouth was free as the man pulled his mask back up to hide the scowl on his face. His other arm tightened around her shoulders, pulling her body close which was well enough as her limbs were starting to feel so strange.

“God that was tough… How the hell did they complicate that algorithm?”

The hacker pulled her towards the window, using his forearm to hold her throat, while forcing her in front of him.

“You… You’re the hacker, right?” Luciel observed, his tone bordering between playful and ominous.

“Shit… Shit! Why are you here?”

A jerk and tightening of the grip around her neck forced her gaze towards the ceiling. She couldn’t see him! Was she going to die without even getting to see him? Sluggishly her hands reached up to try to pry the surprisingly strong, wiry arm pinning her against her assailant… She wasn’t going to give up even if her body felt like it was going to start liquifying! He was already edging back to the window! Was he really going to jump out of it with her?

“Let go of the girl.”

“Even now, all you do is ruin my life,” spat the man holding, the contempt dripping from every syllable.

She felt the bite of glass into one of her feet, but only as a pressure with warmth flowing from it. Then the world jostled and started to go sideways as the force that had been holding her till now suddenly broke.

“Run, Miyeon!”

Her body hit the carpeted floor with a dull thud. Focusing on movement was becoming increasingly difficult, especially when she could hear the melee behind her. Eventually she found a wall and did her best to gather her faculties. Looking back, she could make out the white haired man grappling with someone she knew only from pictures and dreams.

“Luciel…”

The red head seemed to have the upper hand compared to the frenzied movements of the man he was attempting to restrain.

“I hate you… I hate you! I HATE YOU!” screeched the increasingly volatile figure below him.

Seven, on the other hand, seemed focused… Until the mask came off. There was no mistaking it now, even with her blurry vision. The face was the same. Was she really that drugged already? No way they looked the same…

Luciel’s fist had been raised but halted as his gold eyes widened. “Saeran…? N…No wa-“

The white-haired man’s grimace turned into a maniacal smile as he made use of the
opening. He unleashed a torrent of strikes with increasing viciousness; Seven managed to maneuver to block many of them although he ate a few at first. “You bastard… You ruin everything!”

“…Sae…Saeran? Oh God… Saeran!”

“Shutupshutupshutup!!! Don’t call me that! You don’t deserve to say that name!”

There was a sickening noise as his attention shifted from the red head’s face to the side of his head. Even though Seven tried to block the next strike, it was clear he was muddled. Soon the attacks moved to the ribs and sides, making the red head squirm desperately to try to shield himself.

“I hate you… Seeing your face reminds me of my pathetic life! How you left me to die!” snarled the paler, lither man. A tittering, sniveling chuckle escaped him as his hands wrapped around the other hacker’s neck.

Miyeon unsteadily forced herself up onto two legs, bracing herself against the wall. She had to do something! The world was floating around her and so wobbly though… Her hands felt nearby, searching for anything at all. Too small… To narrow… Too loose… Glasses? Why were there glasses? Those wouldn’t work…Heavy… Something heavier! Eagerly she pulled the item with heft towards her, barely recognizing it as a stereo system of some kind. The sound of laughter guided her… Unceremoniously she used the last of her bodily strength to swing the weight, making contact with the white round outline. Her limbs felt numb, so she couldn’t be sure of how much force was really behind it. It was enough to unbalance her though, and to send the two of them toppling over onto the floor. There was a strike against her cheek before she felt the world shift again. Her legs weakly dangled as the stranger pulled her back up against him, holding her limp body up by the neck again.

“Stay back! I’ll blow us all up!”

She could barely make out Seven’s outline in the bleary center of her vision, the edges of which were increasingly dark. At least they got to meet… Maybe it was the drugs, but she wasn’t scared anymore.

“What happened to you? Why are you doing this?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know…”

“Did you copy my algorithm? Christ… Saeran… When did you learn to…? Who taught you?”

“Shut up!!!”

The loudness of her voice ought to have hurt her ear, but right now, her body was slipping away from her like sand. She had to stay alert… Why though? Free… If he loosened up she could get free and… Her thoughts were increasingly jumbled.

“Why are you doing this? Rika told me-…”

“Don’t you dare say her name… Traitor. Everything you say becomes tainted, so shut up!”

“…Saeran… Talk to me, please. Something bad happened, right? That’s why you’re here. But Rika told me you were happy…”

“Liar… LIAR!!! Pretending like you don’t know. You broke your promise!
Leaving me alone to die in that hell hole… Changing your name to “Luciel”… Throwing me away like garbage… I remember everything, you can’t fool me! No… No… Not again! And I won’t let you hurt her anymore.”

His grip around her tightened.

“’I’m not lying! I didn’t want to, but I had no choice —“

“What do you mean you had no choice!? LIAR!!! You’ve always been a liar, keeping secrets, stealing! What a loathsome person you are… I hate that I share a face with you! Maybe I really should just end this now-“

“NO! Please, Saeran. Please, let Miyeon go. Then we can talk. You hate me, right? She has nothing to do with this.”

“She’s mine… I brought her here. I’m not going to let you take her away from me. I can read your mind, you know? I know how you feel about her… How you’ve lied to her… But she’s mine.”

There was a soft pressure against her ear as his masked lips grazed her skin before pressing against her temple.

“Saeran, don’t get her involved in this! Please!”

“…She’s going to Paradise with me… I’m going to enjoy making you watch our happy family grow…”

“Let…me…go…” Miyeon ordered, her voice barely audible, but her spine twisting just enough to try to get her some leverage.

“Now now… You don’t want him to see anything inappropriate, do you?”

“Miyeon! Stay still! It’s dangerous!”

His hold around her neck loosened as the hand which held the trigger to the bomb loosened to graze her breast…

“How will I play with you? You know… Before you can fully join, we’ll have to see you officially inducted, and there is training… Your body has to be taught how to properly accept salvation… and pain… I wanted to do something special for you, now that you’re in my arms, I’m feeling rather… inspired…” his voice was a sultry, sadistic croon in her ear.

“Saeran… Please just take me instead!”

Miyeon felt too numb to be angry that he was begging and pleading with this person now… Although dwelling on it was impossible due to the sudden shrill beep that began to sound in the apartment, like earlier… This time, it wasn’t stopping, it only intensified.

“What…is that?”

“I reset it and the refresh window is over! Now it’s sensing you as a stranger, Saeran. We need to get out now or we’ll all die!”

“Shit!!!” the man holding her barked, clumsily moving back towards the window, getting more glass into her foot.
The confusion gave her an opening. Her muscles were slow, but her teeth were already starting to dig into the forearm in front of her when Seven called out for her. A jerking motion jostled her jaw until she was slung aside… It didn’t feel like carpet where she fell though… The next few moments happened too quick for her to really process as time seemed to be running much slower for her. All Miyeon knew was that she had to get the medicine out of her system, and focused intently on that.

Someone was cradling her tightly… The scent of Dr.Pepper, sweat, potato, oil, and fresh rain filled her lungs. It was very different than the mix of leather and sweat that’d been so close to her before. There were things very similar, but just the fact that it was different enough calmed her. Soon the air reverberated as a deeper, more familiar voice spoke to her.

“…Thank god… It stopped.”

Maybe she was dead. There were vague memories of a fight though. Her thoughts were equally sluggish and rapid. Someone important was here… The outline of a pale face and red hair was visible, but there was no definition, but that voice…

“Luciel… Are you okay?”

“…I don’t know… I don’t think any of us are okay,” he answered, is tone more somber than she could recall it ever sounding. “God…”

His body was quaking against her side. Her hand felt too weak to move to offer any comfort… The thought occurred to her again, she had to get the medicine out of her. Seven’s hold of her was tenuous at best allowing her to try to push away… She had to get to the bathroom to get the drug out of her system.

“…Miyeon. It’s me,” he assured trying to guide her.

Her attention focused on the bathroom despite his attempts to guide her to a nearby chair. It took him a moment to understand her broken words trying to explain what she wanted, but soon the girl felt the world swaying until the cold tile floor was under her knees. Against all better judgement, Miyeon forced herself to throw up… It helped that the medicine already nauseated her. Her hair was smoothed back and the tension told her that someone was putting it back into a ponytail as she wretched. It was much gentler than having it pulled and yanked. The ambient heat next to her ebbed as the presence went through the archway of the door before returning a few moments later. Her feet were being wiped off, while she purged… There wasn’t any time for her to think about why… Eventually there was nothing left in her belly, but there were still effects from the medicine that’d been forced down her throat. She sat pitifully spitting up the bile before hearing running water from the sink.

“Here…”

A soft towel, prepared toothbrush, and cup of water were offered to her. After a rinse, a brush, and another rinse, she felt a little more human… Enough to start feeling embarrassed about the whole situation. She hid her face behind the towel as a frustrated sob escaped her. Seven seemed to think it was her feeling sick again as he prepared to help her get to the toilet in time. She could only shake her head.

“You’re done…?”

Miyeon nodded still hiding her face. She wanted to die… The medicine was making her feel strange enough, but she was feeling cognizant to know this was NOT how she wanted them to
meet. This was gross! She was gross! He’d probably never be able to think of her again without remembering this…

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…” she uttered, the towel muffling her.

Repeating it felt natural, although soon she felt herself being lifted up. He was cradling her like a child up and off the cold tile, before the space under her felt so very soft. The world was still swimming, it felt like everything inside her was going to slosh out. So heavy… Was she going to sink? Reflexively she reached out, grabbing onto something soft. The fuzzy outline of the redhead’s face was so close to her own now as she felt her limbs being laid out. Why couldn’t she make out his face? They had the same face… Was this this same person?

“…Luciel…?”

“You just need to rest for a little.”

She was afraid to sleep, even if she really wanted to… Was she going to wake up?

“T…that man…”

“He drugged you right?” he asked, his tone grim.

A soft hum of assurance escaped her, but that didn’t answer her question.

“Shit… That’s why you… I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. Just… let the medicine make you forget about this okay?”

He moved out of her line of sight, which made her panic.

“Don’t go!”

“I’m not going to leave you,” Seven assured her. “Right now, I need to get the glass out of your foot, but I’m not going anywhere, okay?”

Quietly she still reached out for him again, feeling the coolness of the air where he had been. It didn’t matter that she could feel his hands holding her foot, she wanted someone to hold her hand! The medicine left her feeling so numb, so all she could feel was pressure then the relief as something was pulled free from the sole of her foot. It went on for a little as he seemed to be thoroughly checking both feet. Was it really that bad?

“…That man… Why does he look like you…? How… do you know him?”

The care at her foot stopped for a moment, before she felt him daubing stinging antiseptic along the increasingly tender area.

“…That was my twin brother… But… You shouldn’t know anything about this… No one should,” he sighed. “Please just try to forget any of this happened. Don’t tell anyone what you saw or about that boy.”

“…Why was he angry with you? What is Magenta…?”

There was no response for a moment as she felt something tightening around her foot.

“I don’t know… And you shouldn’t think about it anymore.”

“He said he’d blow us up… Seven, he might’ve hid a bomb…”
Seven sighed. “I put the bomb in the apartment…”

“W..what…?”

“That’s the “Special Security System”,” he answered, his tone flat. “Rika was concerned about the information she kept stored here… So she had me put in a deterrent to keep anyone from threatening her or taking the information by force. He somehow accessed it… But don’t worry, I brought my equipment. I’m going to make an entirely new process so he can’t do this again, but it’ll take some time. God… I’m so sorry you got dragged into this… For putting you in danger. Nothing I say is going to make what happened to you better though. I’m so sorry… I don’t even know what to say…”

“…It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay! Sorry… I just… I’m going to make this right. I’ll protect you, just… Please don’t tell anyone about Saeran, okay?”

“Alright… I trust you, Luciel…”

He didn’t answer, although she could feel his attentions to her other foot concluding as the feel of gauze tightened around it. There were sounds at the foot of her bed; she wanted to look, but the medicine in her system was still making her sluggish. It didn’t help when the black, yellow, and red of his outline emerged again just at the corner of her field of vision, before the warmth and weight of blankets settled over her. Miyeon fought unconsciousness as long as she could, but before long the girl was out without even being aware of when the line had been crossed.

She wasn’t alone…
Chapter Notes

I am SO sorry it's taken so long to get this out. This semester has been crazy!!! Bright side, my finals are this week. Before that though, I'm dropping two chapters to hold you over until I finish those tests. After this upcoming Thursday, I'm free for a few weeks - so expect more regular updates until early January when the next semester starts. I'm posting chapters 19 and 20, so don't forget to check chapter 19 first!!!

Chapter 19:

Moments passed as the hacker watched the blankets to make sure that the girl was still breathing. There was no telling what she’d been given or how much… There wasn’t time to just sit and observe her though, there were defenses to mend and a forward offensive to mount. Only after he was sure that her airway sounded clear, did he get up and begin the process of bringing in the equipment he’d left at the door. Seven was operating on muscle memory from being in the field rather than anything rational. He could scarcely contain the quiver in his hands as he unpacked and set up the equipment. The unsteadiness made it nearly impossible to plug everything in, making him utter curses under his breath. The more he tried to focus, the more shards of his reasoning fragmented off, cutting deeper into things the agent’d long tried to bury.

His laptop was on the receiving end of his frustrations, and it took every ounce of control he had not to throw the damn thing. The quaking in Seven’s fingers was bad enough to keep him from being able to type, and even when he put on the voice commend the software didn’t recognize the strained, wavering of his voice. It forcing himself to breathe for a few moments before he gave it another try. Eventually he got the initial round of packets to start uploading. It would take a few minutes for the transmission… Every second was torture, there was no telling how long it’d take Saeran to make another attempt or when the agency would track him down. Sadly for now, being near the bomb as a deterrent was the safest place. The irony wasn’t lost on him, but was dwarfed by the guilt and self-loathing he felt for not telling the RFA about its existence before and allowing the situation to deteriorate to this point.

His ears were keenly attuned to the quiet in the apartment, but the only things Seven could hear was his hum of his computer, the ambient sounds from the street below, and the dull throb of his own pulse. The stillness was enough to make him look back over at the bed to make sure Miyeon was still breathing. Slowly the blanket rose and fell…

She was still alive; thank God.

Removing his hoodie, Seven went into the kitchen to look for things to start cleaning up the glass. The cool air felt all the better once he stripped off the long sleeved red shirt, leaving him in just a tank top… Running in the mid-Summer heat, carrying all that equipment, and in multiple layers had left him drenched in sweat that was almost dry now. A shower wasn’t going to be an option for a while, so he spared a moment to splash himself with cold water and drink. It offered some relief but made him keenly aware of where he’d been struck. His wet fingers trailed along each wound, until coming to rest at the tender spots on either side of his neck.

Saeran…
On his way back into the main room, the hacker searched for where he’d set aside his glasses. They’d been brushed aside and had finger marks on the lenses, likely from when Miyeon had tried to force herself up. The fingerprints were so small... Cleaning them off, Seven set about getting some of the larger pieces of glass cleared away from the floor before mopping the hardwood. A glance over to the bed showed the girl was still breathing and completely out.

God… If he’d been a couple of minutes later...

What had Saeran planned to do to her? Was he just going to hold her for ransom or... something worse?

His throat tightened as the emotions in him welled back up, bitter and searing hot. The man who had done those horrible things… It couldn’t have been his brother... Saeran was a soft, sad, gentle scrap of a boy. He was scared of spiders, loved ice cream, clouds, and flowers. That person wasn’t that boy, but the face was the same as the one he saw in the mirror... A little thinner… With malevolent, wide mint colored eyes...

Maybe Seven’d really gone insane for real...

No.

It had been another person; his twin. The throbbing ache of the bruises forming along his head and neck were proof enough that someone else had attacked him. He’d been trained in hand to hand combat, but no amount of krav maga or taekwondo could’ve prepared him for the shock. Seven could only pray that his brother hadn’t been hurt too badly as he’d blocked and attempted to get him unsuccessfully into a submission hold...

His eyes caught a flash of light from another missed call from the girl’s phone on the floor where she’d likely dropped it when the break in occurred. Everyone was probably worried… Picking up her phone, Seven popped into the chatroom as both her and himself, faking a conversation between the two of them to reassure the group. Zen tried to call her again after, but he turned the sound off and sat the phone aside to continue working on the more immediate concerns. Returning to the little work area he’d made for himself in the corner, the hacker began the process while simultaneously going about the rolling reset of the security system. It was only after he’d gotten a moment during a patch upload that he confirmed that the hacked version of the RFA messenger was still on her phone… That meant some minor backing up was called for before a full factory reboot with an official copy of the RFA messenger being installed… He was reaching for an external drive to make a “safe” spot for the things on her phone when his fingers brushed against the smooth, laminated surface of a book… Reflexively he took it out.

It was the one thing in his life of changing names and identities that linked him to his true self. Not that he even really knew what he’d been like then, it’d been so long... Rika had given it to him on his 20th birthday. It would’ve been an odd present for most young men: a storybook with bright, cartoony images with a whimsical story of good townspeople triumphing over an evil king. He didn’t need to read the pages, he had practically memorized the book as it was the only one available for so many years of his life. There was no meaning to the words, no, the important thing was what had been hidden within it. There was a small SD card that had been hidden between the pages, although it’d been modified to look and work like an old 3.5 mm floppy disk.

Taking it out, the hacker studied the it but resisted the temptation to look at the contents. Seven limited himself to the memory of the letter that had come with it. Rika told him that his brother was happy. Considering that he’d found documentation of their mother being dead from an apparent suicide, Seven felt some relief knowing Saeran was free. Surely Rika and V would’ve told him if he’d been having a hard time after that. Did his brother fall in with bad people? Maybe his father had
paid for him to track him down…? No… With all of the attention around him because of the upcoming elections, it'd be a stupid move. That left Seven only with the things that his brother had said and the invitation… “The Magenta” and “Paradise”… That “Mint Eye” place.

The invitation was creepy, and though Seven had already started the process of tracking the location, agency work and the battle between his heart and reason had distracted him. The old worries seemed to only be replaced with greater ones. He was on a clock that was rapidly running out of time… It wasn’t a matter of if the agency found him, but when… He couldn’t be anywhere near the girl or RFA when that happened. V still wasn’t responding to anything he’d sent. Though Seven hadn’t triggered the blackout protocol, it was an eventuality. Once this situation was handled, he’d be gone although he hadn’t decided to which country just yet… Instead, his mind was replaying the fight over and over…

She’s mine! I brought her here!

She’s going to Paradise with me!

Seven tucked the book back into his bag and focused on the screen, tilting it so that there was absolutely no reflection of the girl. Did Saeran know Miyeon from before? He’d told her about Rika, and the girl seemed sincerely ignorant of who that person was when she joined or the relevance of it. None of it made any sense, but he was certain once he tracked down the “Mint Eye”, there would be answers.

For now, truth would have to wait… Jihyun still hadn’t called him back. Seven began the arduous process of creating a new security system. He was so engrossed, despite the tension headache, that he continued to work well past dusk. It was dark in the apartment when the sound of shuffling startled him into glancing at the bed.

The blankets shifted as the girl slowly sat up. Her hair was a mess despite the ponytail he’d pulled it into earlier. He still couldn’t bring himself to look her in the face, and the second that his eyes started to drift to the delicate sculpt of her chin, Seven forced his attentions back at the monitor. He just had to focus on anything but her…

“S-s…Seven…?”

The light he’d turned off to let her sleep was flicked on again.

There was a tone of surprise in her soft voice. He’d heard her voice so many times before, but in person it was very different… Really, he could listen to it forever. Maybe she really didn’t remember what happened… That’s what Seven hoped until he saw her nervously glance around from the corner of his eye, just like Saeran used to when it sounded as though their mother was coming back from one of her trips to the bar. Miyeon remembered enough to be afraid, or maybe she was nervous with him being there.

His throat tightened as the agent in him reminded him of the hopelessness and inevitability of the situation. There was no future for them, at least, not one that would put her in even more danger. Pushing his glasses up a little higher, he drew weary breath to steel his will…

“Sorry for entering your space like this. I’ll finish this up quickly and leave.”

“It’s fine… I’m glad you’re here,” the sweet but weary voice assured him.

Don’t say that… was all he could think to himself.

“…This isn’t a social call. I’m here because you were in real danger…”
“I know. But… I feel safer with you actually here than just the CCTV camera.”

She shouldn’t feel “safe” to be near a filthy liar like him. Was this incident not enough? It hurt knowing what would have to be done, but her wounded heart was preferable to seeing any more injuries on her person. It was kinder to break the illusion that there could be anything more to them now than to prolong it. If he truly loved her, the best thing to do was to make her hate him now so she could move on and live a safe, happy, normal life. In time, he’d forget about her too… At least, that’s what the agent in him wanted to believe.

“That’s true to a point… But I can’t stay long… So, you really need to take care of yourself.”

“What about “your maid”…? You’re not in trouble with the agency too now, are you?”

Damn she was sharp!

“A little bit. But right now V and I are the only people who know where this apartment is, and I took measures to keep it hidden. That’ll buy some time until I can figure out where that “Magenta” Saeran is at and get some answers. After that, I’m going to drop off the face of the Earth and you and the RFA will never hear from me again. So, it’s really best if you keep your distance…”

Seven could see her reflected on Rika’s old monitor as the baggy sleeves of her sweater folded around her chest. Really it was a surprise she’d held anyone off for long.

“…Are you really comfortable working in that corner though? We could_…”

There was no “we”… There would never be a “we” for him…

“This suits me best. Actually if you have a sharpie, I’m all for drawing a line on the ground,” he answered quickly and with some mild agitation.

Her back straightened in a way that was all too familiar, although there was still a frail little smile in the reflection. The pink of her lips narrowed into a thoughtful and concerned pout.

Miyeon’s voice was a little more timid now, “So… That man… Your brother… Saeran? He seemed angry with you… Did something happen between you two?”

“That’s not for you to know… I can’t tell you. So don’t ask anything more and just pretend you never saw him. Don’t tell the others about him,” Seven felt his annoyance growing, as he slipped her phone with all of it’s adjustments out as far away from him as he could manage. “Actually… That goes for me too. Just ignore me and forget I ever existed.”

“Luciel…”

He pulled his headphones up. “I’ve got to work, so don’t bother me.”

There was no attempt to withhold the dismissal in his voice, but it didn’t lessen the pain of seeing Miyeon’s reflection in his monitor as her head lowered like a scolded child. She was still trying to smile. He couldn’t bear to look at it, yet it motivated him… The sooner he was done, the sooner he wouldn’t have to listen to her wounded voice or see that painful expression. More than anything he wanted to hold her and apologize for everything that’d happened, but it’d only make things harder for both of them. This was what was best… She needed to know the real him…
Mystic Messenger- Parity : Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I am SO sorry it's taken so long to get this out. This semester has been crazy!!! Bright side, my finals are this week. Before that though, I'm dropping two chapters to hold you over until I finish those tests. After this upcoming Thursday, I'm free for a few weeks - so expect more regular updates until early January when the next semester starts. I'm posting chapters 19 and 20, so don't forget to check chapter 19 first!!!

Chapter 20:

Hiding in the corner, Seven reminded her of animals that had been abused before they were brought into the rescue. Feral but more pity inspiring than frightening… They’d huddle in corners, some having never been out of a cage and knew only the security of a confined space. Others were so terrified of human contact they would bury their face in a corner. It could also be that he didn’t do well with distractions or was shy… A softer, more vain part of her was sure that he found her repulsive in person. Not that she could blame him. Miyeon vaguely remembered maybe being sick, but it was as if she were trying to pull memories from a streaming video that wouldn’t load more than a few seconds before sputtering out. Nothing felt concrete enough to call real.

The feel of bandages on her feet along with the sting of the cuts and the sight of the lingering marks around her neck made it clear that it hadn’t been a dream. There was also the stranger’s scent that lingered on her skin, making her feel queasy. Exactly what had that man done to her? Her clothes were the same, but the missing time began to burn questions with unpleasant thoughts that were nebulous in origin. Was she remembering things or simply imagining the worst? The medicine was still in her system enough to make her not so much afraid, as much as aware...

With care, she padded into the bathroom and stripped, seeing the marks along her wrists and belly. Her body felt numb and her breath stilled as she dressed down. There were no signs of her clothes being ripped or removed, yet it was hard to not second guess whether she truly remembered which undergarments she’d been wearing. By the time the girl was bare, the extent of the damage seemed limited to her wrists, neck, belly, and feet. The more delicate parts of her didn’t feel sore which was of some relief but not nearly enough to fully calm her. She didn’t want to look, but eventually gathered the will to at least check more directly. Although, she did hesitate by washing her hands first. Bracing herself, Miyeon gently grazed the cleft of her gender and with care eased to where her body might join with another before pulling her fingers back. A heave of relief escaped her as there was no sign of blood or other fluids that ought not to have been there.

Only once she was sure that her body was intact and that no evidence would be lost did the girl retreat into the shower. Miyeon scrubbed her skin until it was all red and raw to try to scour every ounce of the light-haired stranger off of her. Even without such rough treatment, her feet would prickle and sting as her weight shifted from one leg to another. Simply holding and moving the loofa made the joints of her wrists ache from where they’d been twisted and yanked over her head. It reminded her of the firmness and heat of his hips being pressed against hers. The salty, sweet taste and the texture of his tongue against her own seemed real enough… If it’d been someone she knew and loved, it might’ve been fun. But a stranger, even if he had the face of someone she liked, tainted all of it and her by proxy. To say she felt “dirty” didn’t even cover it.
Maybe that was why Luciel recoiled from her…

She scrubbed harder knowing that it futile but felt it was the only real power she had over what had happened. It was the only way Miyeon could take her body back for herself... She had to do something to keep sane. Seven had enough on his hands without her being emotional and panicking. It was bad enough that he was clearly at his limit… The more she thought about it, the clearer it was that he wasn’t disgusted by her… It wasn’t about her at all.

Her memory recalled glimpses of the men scuffling, and how desperate he’d sounded. The RFA hacker had called that man his brother, and there was no mistaking the desperation in Luciel’s voice when he’d tried reasoning with her attacker. He was offering himself in her place… But the light pink haired man’s words echoed like the memory of a distant dream.

I know how you feel about her… How you’ve lied to her… But she’s mine.

Had Luciel really lied to her in some way?

He was honest about being dishonest, in his way…

Her mind drifted back to when he’d had told her about his dream of being a cat. Being a kitten whose mother hadn’t him or his brother, so they ran away. At the time she’d held it as one of those nebulous comments he’d make. Everything the redhead said seemed to have a grain of truth to it, although one usually had to pull away layers, mantles, and planetary crusts to get to it. It made sense that being in such an extreme environment would lead to the two brothers taking up such dangerous vocations to survive. Had it been her and Jun-Seo in such a situation, she probably wouldn’t be anywhere as coherent as the RFA hacker was…

Stepping out of the shower, Miyeon pondered what could’ve driven the two of them apart. Whatever had happened, he wasn’t going to tell her now. It was all too fresh and frankly there’d been enough hurt, physical and emotional for the day. She’d only drive herself nuts dwelling on it. For now, it was best to just take things as they came… He was here with her, and they were both relatively safe. The problem would be figuring out how to keep it that way.

Luciel had the weight of the world on his shoulders trying to solve that very problem. His life was pure high octane stress, and the engine was about to explode. Anyone would be a little short tempered after everything he’d been through. Most people would have snapped already… Miyeon could feel that he was on the verge of it, but his sense of responsibility to the RFA was about the only thing keeping him hanging on. Once that duty was fulfilled, Seven was probably going to do something even more drastic than what he was already planning.

Jun-Seo had done the same… Her hands began to shake. She wasn’t going to let that happen. Not again… No one else was going to suffer because of her.

She began to brush her teeth and tongue to remove as much of the stranger as she could so that her focus could be where it was needed. Her gums bled a little, the coppery taste filled her mouth yet the memory of his flavor was still there and somehow more real. It felt like she might be sick again recalling the motion of his probing tongue. The sting of bile and tears ignited, but the girl forced herself to breath and rinsed out her mouth… She had to keep it together…

Really, she was pretty much useless to Seven… Using command codes in a game and preformatted code was not even close to being useful to the hacker. There wasn’t much that the girl could do about the Agency either. Calling the police wasn’t going to be an option, and getting other members more involved than they already were was probably not a good idea either. Even if she was a decent shot with a handgun, thanks to her father, Miyeon wasn’t keen on the idea of having to use that
knowledge unless necessary. Paper targets and bottles were very different than living, breathing hitmen who would keep coming as long as someone was paying them to tie up a loose end…

The only person that could save Luciel was himself. Till now, planning the party was a token of her appreciation, but he needed her more than something that frivolous. She forced herself to think of how she could do anything for him. The answer seemed simple enough. Someone had to mend and maintain him. Real life support class… She would never be able to hack like him or program a robot dog… But she could ensure that he had everything he needed and the morale to fight on. It was best to start with the most basic of morale boosts, good food.

Her mind fell into a familiar old routine of planning a proper meal. That didn’t mean stuffing him with honey buddha chips and Dr.Pepper… As she dried her hair, the girl’s mind began to run through options that ranged from nutritious to simple foods just to gauge his palate. There was a real risk that he was a picky eater, which meant that variety would be necessary. Making a few banchan options to see what he like wasn’t going to be hard, but the issue was likely time. It was already so late, but she wasn’t new to cooking at night. Miyeon been doing that for nearly a decade now – until her father’s hospitalization. Even then, she cooked his meals till his condition deteriorated to where it was no longer possible.

Growing up, her mother would make meals on weekends for Jun-Seo and her to warm up during the week while she worked at the hospital and Mr.Ko was working his post. A fresh, homecooked meal was a rare thing for special occasions, and those stopped entirely when the fighting got worse. The pre-made meals were even more sporadic after her brother had passed, as her mother wouldn’t even come home. Mr.Ko had tried to make up the difference when he got home late in the evening. He’d try to prepare meals, but his cooking ability was limited to rice, ramen, and gyeran jjim. While the latter was one of her favorite things, the steamed egg and rice dinners spaced out with convenience foods quickly wore out their welcome.

When her mother filed the divorce, Miyeon began to experiment with cooking on her own. She would use video tutorials online, but the results were varied. There was more to it than simply following a recipe. Her father ate the full spectrum of under seasoned, over seasoned, and burnt things even though they both knew it was horrible. Wasting food wasn’t an option, although he was giving her an allowance to pay for takeout meals instead.

It was Eun-Ji’s mother and grandmother that taught her how to cook properly... Every basic from how to properly use a knife, to how to wash and cook rice, and how to make kimchi was learned in her friend’s kitchen. Soon, her father was trusting her pack lunches for both of them more than simply grabbing take away or street food while on a case. As common and mundane as it was, it kept him happy and in her mind helped him track down the “bad guys”. It was the one thing she could do to show her appreciation for him. Providing the single remaining member of her family with a good meal was proof that she was not “useless daughter”, as her mother would often grumble…

Food nurtured the soul and body. Meals were meant to be eaten with family and friends. She’d often wondered if part of why her family had fallen apart was because of that very thing… The only time they got together for family meals had been when she was younger. Jun-Seo was the only person who sat at the table with her. After he was gone, for awhile the only company she had for meals was when she started going back to school or when she would stay with Eun-Ji. When she learned to cook, she would wait until late so she could eat with her father… He fussed at her for staying up late on a school night, but soon it became so routine… He slowly went back to himself, laughing and joking in his goofy way…

Right now, it anyone needed a home cooked meal and “family”, it was Luciel…
The girl reapplied antiseptic salve to her feet, rebandaged them, pulled on fresh clothes, and washed her hands thoroughly. When Miyeon emerged, the red head was still huddled into the corner near Rika’s old computer with his back to her, head phones on, typing rapidly. He’d apparently networked into it along with another tower he’d brought. His head shifted as she closed the door, but just as soon, the hacker was back to ignoring her.

He stopped typing and sat with his arms crossed, socked foot tapping as he seemed to be whispering something to himself. When he stopped, she asked him a question over what sorts of things he liked. No reply. Maybe he needed a moment…? The hacker hit a few keys then was back to sitting, likely looking over what he’d done. No… he hadn’t heard her. There was probably no point in asking again; it wasn’t like he’d answer her. He was busy, so it wasn’t like he was going out of his way to be a jerk. She made use of his lack of attention on her to gauge what things he might need. Did hackers need paper and pen for anything? … He probably needed something to drink and maybe a fan closer by. Soon her gaze drifted less to the space around him and more to him.

Even if it was just his back, it was the first time she’d gotten proper look at him without being under the influence of anything. The most noticeable thing was his fiery hair, unkempt and messy, which wasn’t helped by how full it was. It was cut to show off texture and to take out some of the thickness. There had been pictures of a previous RFA party she’d been sent where it looked combed down and parted, although looking at it now it didn’t seem possible. There were no roots showing, so it was natural. For some reason she really wanted to touch it to gauge if it was as fluffy as it looked… If he showered later, it’d probably puff right up without product. Maybe he’d let her touch it then!

Then there was the rest of him slouched over the screen. The hacker was sitting in just a white tank top, likely to keep cool. He was surrounded by heat as the computers’ fans were audibly whirring now as they tried to keep up with the demands he was furiously making of them. Getting an ideal of height was hard from this angle, especially with him on the floor and his posture slumped as it was. His long legs were folded, but there was no mistaking the power that they probably held.

That sentiment might apply to the rest of him as well though.

From the pictures Miyeon had seen of him, and knowing his diet, it was easy to imagine him being willowy but soft. Looking at his back and exposed arms, that couldn’t have been more wrong… While he wasn’t bulky, there was a purposeful cut to him. His upper arms and forearms were firm and well defined. His shoulders and back were much more developed than someone who just sat in front of a computer all day. Zen was definitely the stronger of the two, but there was functionality to Seven’s form. He’d probably run a distance carrying nearly a hundred pounds of computer equipment, fought, and carried her in his arms out of the apartment… Maybe that last part was a dream…

Pulling her hair up into a ponytail, the girl padded into the kitchen. There didn’t seem to be any indication of him having eaten since he’d gotten there, although his hoodie was draped on the counter near the sink. That answered what had happened to it and the red long sleeved shirt. As she lifted it to clear the space, Seven’s scent hit her. This was far from Zen’s spicy, leather, and tobacco notes. The cherry and almond of the Dr.Pepper was there but there was so much more. It was everything except overpowering or unpleasant: watery and citrus mingled with something vaguely amber, and almost peppery. Bergamot and coriander, maybe? It was probably whatever cologne or deodorant he used… Under that though was Luciel’s natural aroma and sweat: thicker, magnetic… Maybe a little like his twin… That thought pained her. How was it possible to want to be close to someone and yet to want them as far away as possible simultaneously…?

Quietly she folded the garments and set them in the laundry basket. She’d get to it if he changed; right now, there was dinner to worry about. There were options, but it was still hard to pin down
what a secret agent might eat. The concerns about his preferred flavor profile were now complicated by concepts of international tastes. He’d apparently studied abroad, so there was always the chance that the red head preferred non-native food stuffs. Abroad in an Ivy League school didn’t exactly narrow the options. If she tried anything too exotic, it might be too rich or remind him of the Agency. He needed nutritious comfort food… For now, he was “home”, and as long as he was here, she’d feed him as such.

It wasn’t anything as useful as hacking, beautiful as art, or prosperous as business… It was common, mundane… Nothing like the culinary wonders chefs made or even the joy inducing sugar treats the pink haired confectioner she’d met made. But it was what she could do.

Soon the counter was lined up with ingredients and utensils, placed orderly and in line with when each would need to be done. There was a plan. Each portion had to be done in such a way that things came out at the same time, fresh and hot. Now, she only had to execute the order of the tasks immediately before her… The little touches weren’t missed… Even something as simple as using a covered stone pot over a metal one could change a flavor. She kept the water from the first wash of the rice to thicken the soup, seasoning through every step so the flavors layered up rather than just dumping it all in at the end. Toasting the anchovies made them more flavorful before using them to make the soup base. There was care in leaving water from rinsing the perilla leaves on to hold a thin coat of flower, filling them, and dredging them just enough they wouldn’t be too heavily coated or too thick to cook. The oil had been preheated and care taken to not over crowd, which would lead to sogginess rather than something crispy. The only thing that didn’t require such care was the kimchi she’d brought from home, although she’d been just as meticulous when making it.

By the time she was done, there was doenjang-jjigae, kketnip jeon with a simple sauce to dip them in, her homemade kimchi, kongnamul, oi-muchim, and rice topped with some gyeran jorim. It wasn’t the most intricate meal she’d ever cooked, but there were a variety of flavors and many things that even picky children would enjoy. Plus with it being summer, lighter was probably better for now. Even with the broken window letting air flow into the apartment, it was still warm. Heavy food didn’t always play well with a heavy heart.

The scents of a fresh cooked meal spoke for themselves, although Seven was still focused intentionally on the screen before him. She set the table, even putting a Dr.Pepper out for him before calling out to him. No response.

…That irritated her, but she rationalized it as being focused.

Feeling somewhat emboldened by having done something to help, the girl walked with a little more confidence towards his spot in the floor… This was going to be like one of those fights to get a boy away from a game to eat. Granted, if he really needed to have it brought to him, that was fine considering the circumstances. This wasn’t a PVP match with no consequences.

Miyeon got within a meter of him, practically watching as his body naturally seemed to recoil and shift to avoid being any closer.

“Luciel.”

Finding her voice, she leaned over some and tapped on his headset. “Hey.”

His hands shot up, yanking the headphones down as his gold eyes flashed up at her. There was something like fear followed by hurt, which quickly shifted as he looked aside. It occurred to her that the reason he didn’t want to face her was because his face was too expressive. The realization must’ve been apparent, as he quickly lifted his hand to start fidgeting with his glasses to try to hide it.

"Luciel."
“What…?” he grumbled, pretending to rub the bridge of his nose to ease a pending headache.

“I made dinner, so now might be a good time to take a break.”

“I don’t have time for that right now.”

He was already fidgeting with the wires of his headset as the desire to put them back on built.

“Five minutes? C’mon, take your glasses off, and come have a bite to eat. You’ll be able to work better after.”

“I need to work on this - now.”

“Okay…” she relented, before considering that it wasn’t the only option. “If you’re really that busy, I can bring it here.”

“I don’t have time to eat,” he protested with more pointed annoyance, slipping his thumbs under the headband. “Please just pretend I’m not here…”

“Please…? I don’t like eating alone…”

His back went rigid before the hacker lowered his hand and stared at her. In that moment, he looked much older. “Look – I don’t have time, okay…? It’s good that you’re not panicking but could you try to be a little more aware of the situation? I’m here because you and the RFA are in real danger, and once that’s solved, I’m out. I’m sorry if you had any “fantasies” about me, but the sooner you realize that I’m not your friend, the easier this will be.”

Miyeon felt the ice in his tone making her brittle. “…Are you really going to keep acting like this?”

“Act…? No… The person you’ve been talking to for the past week has been the act. People aren’t who they pretend to be online. Especially people like me.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Pff… You want to know why I’ve really been so flirtatious with you?” his voice was deep and grim. “It was to get information. When I realized you weren’t a direct threat, it became something to keep the RFA together. If you got involved with anyone in the group, tensions would explode and the group would probably fall apart out of petty jealousy. Zen and Jumin are fighting worse than ever for dominance for your attention. So yeah, I flirted with you to pull the attention to me to keep the rest of the RFA safe. I am a professional liar – Miyeon. It is my job to assess threats and manipulate situations to what suits me.” The hacker scoffed. ”Not that it was hard – you’re a naive girl who downloaded a strange app and listened to a stranger. I didn’t even have to really try hard… You’re not exactly the sort of person who should be chasing after dangerous people. I don’t have a good reputation, and I am fully aware of what I’m capable of… I also know what the Agency is capable of. So when I tell you to keep your distance from me, it’s a REALLY good idea.”

“… So I guess I should bring your food here then,” Miyeon sighed with resolve.

There was an almost surprised little grunt from Seven before he shook his head and looked away. “…Do whatever you want…”

He was already pulling his headphones back on.

“Wait…”
“What?” he snapped.

“…Have you seen my phone? I haven’t seen it sin—“

She scarcely got the first word out before he slid it across the floor to her. Afterwards he secured his headphones firmly over his ears, his body hunched defensively.

“I put a proper copy of the messenger on it and put a few layers of security on it. Now leave me alone…”

Miyeon retreated to the table to start preparing him a plate before his voice called out.

“Don’t tell them about my brother or what happened!”

Bitterly she thought about telling everyone about the whole affair, but that wasn’t going to fix anything… The girl quietly arranged his food. A bowl of fragrant, hot soup, a plate with banchan, and a bowl of rice. She sat it on Rika’s desk, along with a Dr.Pepper, within arm’s reach of him, even though he was rigid and seemingly uninterested. It was easy to get angry and hurt about it, but she understood… He didn’t mean it any more than one of the animals at the rescue who snarled, clawed, and bit at people trying to care for them. They didn’t know that they were being helped just yet… Luciel was fighting the world and himself, flailing desperately in the storm that was his life. She couldn’t control him, only how she let it affect her… As long as she kept that in mind, his façade had no power over her. His actions were what mattered. The harsh things he said now were fabrications…

She sat and ate with long ponderous bites, looking over the messages he’d sent from her profile… Someone who didn’t care wouldn’t have gone through such lengths to make sure his friends weren’t worried… Someone cold wasn’t going to be so gentle when bandaging wounds. Someone who didn’t care about her wouldn’t be offering themselves as a sacrifice…

I’m so sorry you got dragged into this…

I’m so sorry…

Someone who didn’t care wouldn’t have a guilty conscience… Then again… It wasn’t the first time someone had said such a thing to her.

After finishing the little bit of food she had picked at, Miyeon stored what she could and put it away. A glance over to the corner revealed that Seven hadn’t touched a morsel of it. Sighing, she opted to leave it for now. Maybe he’d get desperate enough, reheat it, and eat it while she did something else. There was certainly plenty to do. There were messages from guests and from hotels she’d been working with piling up in her inbox… The other members were still worried.

It was best to keep going as though things were normal… If the gravity of the situation pulled them down, they’d only keep sinking and end up stuck. That wasn’t going to benefit Luciel, the party guests, or the charities. Someone had to stay bright and keep on track. She began the process of damage control with that in mind.

She called the other members one by one while she washed dishes. It was late so Miyeon didn’t keep them long, but it was enough for them to hear her voice. All of them were scared for her, and hurt over the bomb the former RFA party planner had put into the apartment… Jumin’s usually monotone voice held intensity that she’d never heard before… Jaehee was doing her best to sound calm, but there were cracks. Zen… He was angry and incredulous. Yoosung was taking it especially hard, practically crying. Yet she managed to soothe him some.
Her voice was calm and confident.

Everything would be fine…

Maybe Rika had worn a bright smile for everyone too, so they wouldn’t worry… How many secrets had she kept for their sake? How many of those had she shared with Luciel…? The former RFA party planner probably had so much stress and weight on her and apparently worked so hard to help other people. That likely came from a place of deep hurt within, and a want to keep others from feeling the same. Miyeon understood that… But was the risk really so great that she had to convince Luciel to put in a bomb? Even more than that, what dangers could have been great enough for him to agree to such a thing?

After talking to everyone and reassuring them, they didn’t seem to be worried about it… But it felt strange and didn’t sit right with her. That could’ve been the lingering side effects of the medicine though.

Glancing over, Seven remained in his corner… His long fingers were tapping his mouse pensively before a solution for whatever he was pondering seem to come to him.

Miyeon made the bed before going to the closet to see if there was anything she could use to make the couch more comfortable for him… There were some extra pillows and a thin blanket in the small closet near the bathroom, which she put through the laundry. The hoodie and long sleeve shirt were then run through the wash with her colored things. While waiting for them to dry, she worked on putting a dent in her inbox. It was a little past one in the morning before the drying was done. She did her best to make the couch up like a bed, although it didn’t appear as though Luciel planned to use it anytime soon. She told him all the same… He appeared to be running analysis on something and was so engrossed on it that he was softly talking to himself.

It was kind of cute…

Maybe she could have a little payback for him being a jerk.

Taking out her phone, Miyeon started an experiment. She pulled up his number and hit “Call”. For the first time in hours, a smile cut across her face when she heard the notes of the ring tone he had for her. It didn’t matter how quickly his hand had shot out to grab the phone, she recognized the melody of an upbeat, pop love song…

It made her chuckle. With everything else going on, changing his ringtone to cover his tracks hadn’t been a priority. Tactical flirting… “Professional Liar”… Yeah – right.

"W-Why are you calling? I’m right here.”

As he asked, he glanced over his shoulder. Now that she thought about it, he was puffed up like a cat or bird that’d gotten a bit of water on them…

“I wanted to hear your voice.”

He took the phone away from his ear, his fiery brow furrowed. “Really…?!”

She tapped the phone with a smile. Shaking his head, he put it back up to his ear.

“You were ignoring me before.”

“…I’ve been busy.”
“I know… I wanted to thank you for cleaning up the glass… Since I know you’re getting tired, I made the couch for you to sleep on. I went ahead and washed your hoodie and that shirt. They’re on the dryer just in case you get cold later – you know since the window….”

“…You washed my clothes?”

It was hard to tell if he was angered or flustered by that.

“Just the things you left in the kitchen!” she clarified. Better to change topics… “I know you won’t eat… But do you want me to grab you a Dr.Pepper now?”

The hacker shook his head.

“Sorry… I couldn’t hear you.”

“No,” he answered firmly, his gold eyes focusing on her over his shoulder with agitation. “Are you about to go to sleep?”

“You’re really interested on when I’m going to be in bed,” she teased.

If looks could kill…

“Okay okay! Probably in a bit… Which this next question is sort of related… What should we do about the window your brother broke?”

“I’ll watch over you while you sleep… And I’ll call a repair man when they open…”

“I can pay for it if…”

“I’ve got it…” he annunciacted every syllable pointedly to drive that point home.

“Are you sure you don’t want to rest some? If you want to take a nap, I’m okay with keeping watch till you wake up.”

Seven took the phone from his ear and hung up, letting it drop to show he was done with the “game”.

“I’M FINE… Good night,” he answered.

Miyeon sat her phone down between her legs as she sat cross legged on the edge of the bed.

“…Is there anything you’d want for breakfast tomorrow?”

“…No.”

“Maybe you like things that are more Western? I could make pancakes or-“

“I don’t care! Alright!”

The girl felt her body reflexively tighten with fear… She felt little again… Huddled in her closet, powerless to stop the yelling. He couldn’t know that, but the hacker apparently realized he’d gone a little too far… Seven’s voice was softer, almost hesitant as he spoke.

“Sorry… You’re probably nervous with everything and having me here… And with the window broken… I’ll have my headphones off while I keep watch, okay?”
“Okay… Isn’t there anything I can do to help?”

“If you really want to help me, please just don’t talk to me… and try to sleep… That’s helping me… Seriously.”

She nodded in acknowledgement, which seemed to appease him. For a few minutes, Miyeon sat, feeling reluctant to move for fear of bothering him until the pain in her legs lead her to stretch them out. He didn’t react, despite having his headphones off. She laid on top of the blankets, playing a game to try to tire herself out. Before long it was 2 in the morning. The typing seemed to have stopped, but a glance down at his corner confirmed that he was still hard at it. He was just trying to go about doing so quietly, almost as if he’d used up all of his sound for the day by raising his voice at her.

“Good night.”

To her surprise, he answered…

“Good night…”
Chapter Summary

This is a long chapter but it covers all of day 8. *Edits might be done later. XD*

Chapter 21:

It was well past three before the girl fell asleep. Even if she was being discreet enough for
the light of her phone not to show, the ghost admin profile he had monitoring the messenger showed
activity. The profile was set to trigger him when V or Miyeon logged in. V so he could get
answers… The girl, so he could make sure she didn’t leak information to the rest of the group and to
see if the hacker still had access to her profile. The only person on was Jumin, confirming that his
fight had arrived back safely, which was one less security concern. She chatted with the executive a
little, and even when the he prompted a change in security measures, she deferred to Seven’s
judgement without hesitation or doubt… It made him wonder if she knew that he could see
everything in real time, especially when Jumin was asked how Elizabeth the III was doing. While
that did lighten the mood, there were cracks in the façade. Whether it was because it was RFA
members in danger or Miyeon specifically was hard to tell…

…Maybe she would be better off with the CEO to be… He had that huge tower with the
shops and a full security detail that could watch her. She showed promise at getting him to be
reasonable and more human. The girl would never have to worry about another thing the rest of her
life aside from being a dutiful wife and good mother… She could live without want or fear.

That was more than he could ever give her; he didn’t deserve being this close… It was
driving him insane! The last time he’d been in the apartment, Rika’s perfume lingered in the air like a
warm Summer afternoon. The former party planner had been the embodiment of sophistication and
lofty pursuits… His memory was full of her in church and at parties – dripping with the aroma of
riesling, floral bouquets, frankincense, and lofty aspirations. It was sacred and otherworldly, like a
bright but cold light.

Miyeon’s scent was very different. Every lungful he drew in was either of the meal she’d
cooked for him or her natural scent with subtle notes of vanilla spice and autumn rain. It was the
aroma of the “home” his younger self could only imagine. Someplace warm and safe, with gentle
hands to hold, mend wounds, and comfort… An unobtainable dream of a place he longed for more
than heaven, if only because he knew it’d never be his. Yet it felt so close that it ached.

Every breath was a reminder of that bitter truth. Yet somehow, he managed to remain
focused; shame had a lot to do with it… Honestly, it was damn good motivator… It was past five in
the morning before he ran through an alpha test of the new security system. While waiting for it to
fully initialize and for the rolling reset to finish, his attention fell to the serving tray with its plate of
long cold food. Even hours old, it looked like a feast full of flavors he’d never experienced. The
temptation to eat it was equal to his desire to throw it away…

Ten years ago, he might’ve cried seeing such a meal… Hell, a week ago, he might’ve.
A real homemade meal was something he’d never experienced.

Growing up, what he and Saeran could scavenge from the kitchen were the scraps their mother gave them from her take out or convenience foods. Salty, sweet, or spicy were the flavors, each to the extreme in order to suit his mother’s drunken palate… He had no concept of umami or the outside then. Then again, he had no concept of anything beyond that squalid little apartment until that one day...

The woman had “punished” him by sending him outside on an errand for the first time. It was his “lesson” for being such a “sneaky, conniving” boy… He could still remember the burn of his rebellious little heart on top of an empty stomach, staring down that woman after she’d scolded him for untying his brother’s ankle. Poor Saeran had given up on pleading with her to having returned to his spot in the kitchen, quietly crying in the floor to prevent from provoking her more. That only made him feel more defiant, staring back at her with the knowledge that one day he’d be bigger and stronger than her… He didn’t remember if he’d even confessed having thought it, but the result was the same.

She practically yanked his arm out of the socket, threw him out of the door along with the money telling him to bring back medicine and water. The shock of it left him paralyzed on the tattered welcome mat while his brother’s wails could be heard through the door until she snapped at him to shut up. Saeyoung tried the handle desperately to protect his brother, but it was locked and for the first time in his life, he was on the other side!

His mother was always reminding Saeran and he of what would happen if they tried to run away from her. “Daddy” was the boogeyman who lived just on the other side of the door. Rationally, he had to have been on the other side of it at some point in his life… He just couldn’t remember when, and little Saeyoung had no idea where a “market” even was. The terror of where he was and confusion of what he was supposed to do paralyzed him until the resentment in his little heart felt that death was preferable to spending another minute with his mother. But he couldn’t leave his brother alone… Although Saeran was quiet now, or at least too muffled to hear. The other him was probably curled up in the kitchen biting his lips so he wouldn’t make a sound as she tied him back up. Without him there, she could do whatever she liked to him. She wouldn’t let him back in until he had medicine and water though. For Saeran… He’d do it to be back with his brother; not for her. That defiance got him quite far, and he began to feel a little proud at how well he could read the signs around him. If the words got too hard, he could just look for things that looked similar to the bags he was used to seeing.

Although the farther he got from home and closer he got to the convenience store, the more his skin prickled with fear that he’d never see his brother again. Then the fears of what his father would do to him mingled with thoughts that perhaps their father just wanted to save them from their mother… She wasn’t exactly the most honest person, that’s probably where he’d gotten it from. Not like Saeran, who was honest and gentle…

As he walked, his muscles ached. Instinctively they wanted to move fast and stretch in the warm sunshine, yet it hurt. It was an active process not to overdo it, as little Saeyoung had no idea how far or even what direction he needed to go. That first trip, he had to sit several times as he got winded easily. Eventually he found a place with a sliding door, which fascinated him enough for him to go through it twice. The strange looks eventually got him to trot into the store, embarrassed.

Saeyoung’d never seen so much food and color in his life... The sensory overload of the smell of plastic, cleaning supplies, other people, and food was enough to make him feel faint. Perfumed magazines and the white noise of refrigerated machines… It was all so alien; none of it felt real. He was so much shorter than the aisles and was bothered by how they left so much hidden from
his view; someone could pop out at any point. The boy spent a great deal of time there looking around, but eventually he relaxed enough to touch bags and tried to read what was on them. There were things he had no concept of but knew they were food, only because he could read some of the words.

He clearly looked out of place enough for the shop owner to ask if he needed help, which made him freeze with fear. He’d never spoken to anyone other than his mother or brother. The realization that people outside spoke the same language as him and as the people on TV was such an obvious, yet alien concept to him. He had to repeat himself a few times, as he’d been raised to speak quietly. Raising his voice to just a normal speaking tone was an effort. Looking back, he had to wonder if the shop owner thought it was foreign, with his messy red hair and how patient he was to him. Despite saying “no”, the person helped him anyway. They were even nice enough had helped him learn how to count money properly. He’d been a suspicious, if only to prevent getting scolded when he got home, double and even triple counting. But he must’ve been smiling a mile wide from a sense of accomplishment as the person moved to give him pat on the head. His body naturally recoiled, as the only physical contact he knew from adults was being struck or jerked around… But the older man seemed undaunted, and rumpled his red hair, commenting on how he’d wanted to touch it since he came into the store. It was rare… Special…

There were nice people outside the house.

Soon he’d gotten quite good at making use of his trips out to pick up money that’d fallen along the way. The best thing was having enough left over to buy a treat he could share with Saeran. It was this scavenging that lead him to staying out near their birthday, looking for a few more coins so he could bring his brother back a snack cake as a present. He’d discovered the church when he’d ducked in during a surprise Summer storm… It was like something out of a dream. His mouth was open as he looked at all the stained glass and the strange way the ceiling arched. There were other people there, some lightning candles, others in the pews with their heads bowed.

There was no need to ask for handouts; his boney frame was testament to a life of hunger. Rika had saw to it that he was fed, along with the other needy people who’d gathered for a meal. In exchange for food, he simply had to listen about God, the blessed Virgin, and the good works of Christ. At first, Saeyoung didn’t even hear as his attention was wholly on the food. It was bland compared to the prepackaged things he was used to, but it was filling. He was too afraid to be ungrateful…

Once he started to come regularly, and the hunger was being beaten back, he was more attentive. In many ways, the story wasn’t that different than the fairy tale book that he and Saeran had taught themselves to read with. Mass was read in a language he didn’t know but later the details would be explained to him by the sisters or Rika. There was conviction in the voices of the adults around him when they spoke of Christ’s suffering on the cross which soon made him question it. Soon, he was finding any way he could to visit the chapel for more. He wanted to meet the son of God or Mary and ask for help. By simply being there though, he found salvation in the smiles of those around him little by little… Unlike his mother who always saw him as a lying, stealing beast – the people at church often praised him. They often commented on how clever, polite, and sincere he was.

Greedily he soaked up the praise and recognition of his gifts and began to understand how God had given him everything he needed to escape. When Rika had given him that first book on computers, he was eager to show how much he appreciated it and how grateful he was to God for showing him that there was a way for Saeran to be freed… He might’ve been born to an impossible family, but in addition to that bright hair, God had blessed him with an equally brilliant mind, one that could be applied to build a path out of Hell for his brother and himself.
V sourced work for him, which allowed him to start making modest amounts that he’d started saving up. It’d been easy to justify the things he was doing as being like Robin Hood at the time considering how crooked the people he hacked were. Sometimes it was okay to lie if the cause was good. Even Christ chased money changers from the temple. In his own mind, he was the defender of justice, whose little acts of interference bought the food he’d sneak in for his brother.

Such joy wasn’t without its cost though. His bright hopes for a future of freedom met reality when he noticed that he was being followed. Until then, he had used quieter streets to avoid people seeing or talking to him much, so it was easy to recognize unfamiliar faces. Unfamiliar faces that would show back up when he started using more populated routes.

V had gotten him a hoodie to help him discreetly cover his bright red hair. There was no hope of him simply blending into a crowd if it was visible. People were always drawn to it and seemed to enjoy rumpling it, and until then he savored the uniqueness. Now, Luciel was aware of how dangerous standing out was.

It didn’t matter that he was a child. As his father’s illegitimate son or as a hacker – getting noticed was a quick way to death. His faith was firm though, and it wasn’t death that he feared. The thought of his brother being left alone without his support was something much worse than death. Everything was for Saeran… He did his best to go through more complex routes and with no particular schedule. Yet they grew ever bolder, and even though they were too smart to approach him at the Church or to attempt anything as brazen as attacking his mother’s house directly, there were only so much he could do. Inevitably, one day the odds would be against him.

The injustice of it put him into despair. It didn’t matter if he had no intention of telling anyone; by continuing to live, Saeran and he were threats to his father’s career. He’d seen the faces of the legitimate children his father had at news conferences. His half siblings looked well fed, cared for, and attended good schools. They didn’t have bright red hair and could live normal lives. As much as he ought to have hated them, Rika helped him understand that they likely didn’t know what sort of person their father truly was. He prayed for intervention instead.

God already knew what he needed, yet the answer he gave through V wasn’t what the boy wanted…

The Agency…

V had connections through his father. Luciel refused at first, and even felt a little hurt that such a thing could even be suggested. Even if the opportunity came with the promise of a real education, travel abroad, and the opportunity to make what his young mind perceived as a fortune, but the cost was too high. He’d have to leave his twin behind. Over the next few days, he thought about it a lot and pondered other ways to simply grab his brother and run. He had a skill set, but no market without V providing the connections. If he tried to go alone to find honest work, the problem would be his age, lack of documentation, and lack of experience. Even if he pretended to be someone older and more experienced online, it wasn’t like he could actively advertise his services. Working at a shop or waiting tables wasn’t an option either – too visible. Moving away to get an education so he could find legitimate work in the field he was so gifted in wasn’t an option. He learned to read English, although speaking it was taking time, and he was getting proficient with translating mandarin, but it was taking too long! He didn’t have the proper credentials in anything, nor the skill or connections to fake them just yet. Good universities required documentation and LOTS of money. Getting those things took time… Time wasn’t something he had. The Agency, however, could cover all of that.

But they couldn’t help his brother.
But then again… neither could he… Not really.

Despite the food he would smuggle in and the trips outside, Saeran was as pale and slender as a snow-covered willow branch. His stamina was almost nonexistent after a lifetime of being tied up or worse. He couldn’t run, and even on the short trips to the convenience store, he got winded… He always had to be mindful of their father’s men catching them both out or how long they were out, so his brother could rest and enjoy the view of the sky. Unlike him, Saeran was still so pure and innocent in so many ways… Outside, he actually smiled and looked peaceful, as he admired the fluffy clouds between timid licks of his half of the popsicle. He always ate them slowly to fully savor the flavor and being outside. Yet all Saeyoung could think of was plans of escape while being how aware of how easily overpowered they could be.

The night before he chose, his twin peered back at him from across the pillow, with a worried little frown. Without words, they’d always “felt” what the other did. Despite his attempts to keep his brother ignorant for his own good, he was certain Saeran knew… Although thinking back, it must’ve been just him feeling his brother’s anxiety… His eyes were wide in hollow cheeks as his thin hand rested next to his brothers, quietly looking for reassurance. Unlike when they were little and would cuddle up, there was usually a little space between them now despite their growing bodies leaving less room. Saeyoung was taller than his brother now, with limbs that were ever growing stronger. Even their faces were a little different now…

Something had to change.

Who was going to be with his brother when he woke up from a bad dream if not him?

…V and Rika promised to save his twin from the nightmare that was being awake living under that woman though.

They promised…

How long would it take for them to go to him though? Where would he stay? Maybe the Agency would take him too? But… Wouldn’t that mean Saeran would have to do bad things too?

His young mind ran over these questions to the point that he eventually moved to the floor so as not to wake his brother with his tossing and turning. For hours Saeyoung lay, sprawled out agonizing over it till the starry sky became dark and then grey with early dawn. The intensity of the way he was followed the next day convinced him that this was the only way… It was only after talking with V and getting assurance that Saeran would be cared for that he agreed.

Things moved rather quickly after. It was a tense wait for transport to arrive… He felt like a traitor and felt true shame for the first time. Rika had eyed him with such concern but did her best to reassure him that they’d take care of his brother. He quietly made the deal with God then… He follow this path, no matter how miserable, as long as his brother was happy. His only regret then had been not seeing Saeran before that black car came for him to say goodbye. The less his brother knew though, the safer he’d be… That’s how it’d always been.

Everything had started with that first step outside the prison of his mother’s home to get food and medicine…

Being an agent opened his culinary horizons. But being overseas simply changed the variety of take out available to him. Vanderwood took care of most of it while he was in college, as he dedicated himself to study and work… There wasn’t time for him to go out. His entire life became regimented down to the last minute without chancing any errors. As oppressive as it was, it was still much better than where he’d grown up.
The Agency gave him a degree of freedom, and or the most part, the conditions were outlined, unlike a drunken woman’s mood swings. Once he graduated, he had more work but less class, and more free time... Most of it he spent watching television in other languages to keep the information fresh. Cooking shows were common background noise as he would tinker with programs or his model kits. He tried recreating what he saw with mixed results. Even following a recipe wasn’t a guarantee as they often left little touches out... Much like hacking, cooking good food required patience and skill.

The cold plate of food in front of him was evidence of a life that was so vastly different than his own. It spoke to a normal home with plenty to eat. The skills needed to make it were testament to a life with a mother who didn’t lock her child up in a kitchen, but instead would sit beside her and taught her how to prepare foods. This food would go on to feed her grandchildren and her when she was old... A loving home. Unlike him, she was a member of a family, meant to continue on living a happy normal life. There were people who would miss her if something happened... Miyeon’s delicate little hands made everything look so simple because they were experienced in being in that world...

She and Saeran both deserved better. He wouldn’t fail either of them again by being so weak as to long for them... He pushed the plate further aside.

Taking a seat at Rika’s old desk to help alleviate some of the stress in his back, Luciel ran through the protocols and ran tests. Everything seemed to be running fine. The sun was starting to come up, and his eyes felt like the lids were sandpaper... It didn’t help that he really needed to relieve himself and could smell his congealed sweat with a vengeance now. He turned on the cat bot and set it on sentry duty before grabbing fresh clothes and retreating into the restroom.

He wasn’t normally shy about such things, but something about knowing Miyeon was within 30 feet of him in about any position he was within the apartment made anything related to the bathroom nerve wrecking. It didn’t help that he nearly dozed off while on the toilet. Turning on the fan and shower to provide white noise helped some, but didn’t do much to alleviate his self-consciousness. By the time Luciel stepped into the shower, he realized he had forgotten his own toiletries. That left him using hers. There were so many different bottles and a few rubber duckies... Normally, that might’ve made him grin, but it was easy to twist it into why he needed to keep someone so childlike away. Such playful little toys were a stark contrast to her shampoos and soap which spoke to someone who valued natural products and researched her options rather than just buying whatever was on sale. He ended up using a basic “revitalizing” body wash with caffeine, as it was the scent that reminded him of Miyeon the least... It was a futile effort. His baser instincts as a man were very much awake. That was exactly what he didn’t need right now...

Luciel turned the shower to cold to stop himself from thinking impure thoughts and to wake himself up... He had to bite his lip to keep from making noise, but the little jolt was enough though to encourage him to leave the shower. Only after pulling on his pants did he dare exit the bathroom to retrieve his toothbrush, the towel draped over his shoulders for modesty’s sake. He did a quick look to make sure she was still asleep before toeing over to his bags. The scent of the girl was seemingly more intense now; it warmed his blood with its sweetness. Hurrying back to the bathroom, Saeyoung wasted no time killing his sense of smell with a good dose of mouthwash and toothpaste.

A glance in the mirror while he rinsed the foam from his mouth revealed a grim looking sight indeed. There was no hiding the lack of sleep now. He rinsed and retreated to check on the security system, pulling a loose shirt on before returning the towel to his head. Typing with one hand, he lazily dried his hair with the other... Systems were online and functional. Catbot reported no unusual activity. It was after 7:00 AM, and Miyeon was still well asleep...
Rather than eat the cold food, Luciel threw the leftovers away and took a look in the fridge. She really did have Dr. Pepper for him… It felt wrong to take one, but eventually he reasoned it was probably better to go for a soda than make coffee. The sound and smell of brewing it would only wake her sooner, and that meant he’d have to deal with her. Gingerly he took one of the cans and held it to his cheek, then neck to allow the cold to help rouse him. Luciel took care to open it slowly so as not to make any loud “pops” that might disturb the girl’s sleep.

The lingering flavor of mint dulled the first sip, but soon the familiar cherry almond flavor made itself known. It was the one comfort he would allow himself… From there Seven began the search for a repairman to fix the window while taking slow drinks from the carbonated drink. A few places it was too early to call, but after asking around he finally found one that had the equipment and could make it out that day. It’d be a few hours though… After that was done, he could maybe take a brief rest while he ran a last series of checks and did the next change of the algorithm. Seven hoped it would be enough to keep Saeran at bay while he reviewed the intel on Mint Eye.

Despite his best attempts to resist, he couldn’t help but glance at her on the way back to his corner. The blankets rose and fell slowly, relieving some of his concerns. Whatever drug his brother had given her seemed to be mostly metabolized and out of her system now. Unlike before where she’d lay on her back stiff as a board for hours. She now lay curled up on her side, her little hands which were outstretched. It was so cute. It didn’t help that his eyes naturally traveled up to study her face. Her pink lips were parted just a little, allowing him to fully appreciate the fullness of them and the richness of the color. The temptation to do so many things stirred within him, although all he really wanted was to lay beside her. There was plenty of room if he cuddled up or rested with his back to her…

Settling back into his corner, he continued to work steadily until the dull gray light began to take on a gold tone as the sun rose. It was just a little before seven in the morning when he heard the sounds of Miyeon stirring to wake. This prompted him to pull his headphones on. That didn’t mean he was unaware of her though. He could feel the air move in the apartment with her motions. Her padding to the closet, taking a shower, coming back in, and then to the kitchen…

He found himself glancing aside, telling himself it was to check the results of a particularly deep data mine, but Miyeon’s reflection was just on the edge of the screen. She was wearing a camel colored turtleneck and a high waisted, pleated a line skirt, chocolate in color with a print of some kind in pink and white along the edges which came up to just above her knee. The Summer heat hadn’t really started to build thanks to the airflow created by the broken window, but it wasn’t that cold. Was it? His eyes lingered a little too long on the shape of her legs under their dark tights before the shame returned his focus to the task at hand.

The gentle curves of her petite frame were soon pushed aside with embarrassment as his stomach growled… Delicious aromas occasionally made it past the broken window. Something sweet… Something savory… All of it made his belly lurch. There wasn’t enough Dr. Pepper left in the can to fully quiet the rumble.

It wasn’t long after that he felt the coolness around him dissipate as Miyeon came up behind him. At first his body began to tighten to make himself as small and distant as possible, until finally he looked over his shoulder to glare at her. The hacker was met with her smile and bright eyes as she sat a tray practically dripping with warm and sweet aromas.

“Good morning, Luciel,” her voice greeted him so cheerfully…

That took the venom out of whatever he planned to spit at her. It didn’t help that she was so adorable this early… Her hair was beautiful, her smooth skin, and the brightness in her eyes… He
“…What?”

“I know you’re busy. So, everything is here if you want to just grab bites as you work.”

“Yeah… Sure. Thanks…” She wasn’t leaving. “What?”

“I’ve been curious… Is your hair really that color?”

He sighed with annoyance. “What are you talking about?”

“It is, right?”

Maybe if he answered, she’d leave him alone. “…Yes.”

There was a thoughtful hum from her. “Lucky color!”

He didn’t even dignify it with a response, rather Seven forced as intense of a look of concentration as he could on the screen.

“I don’t believe in luck though,” she noted, organizing the things on the tray so they’d be easier within his reach. “Something tells me you don’t either, which is why you always work so hard. You make miracles happen, like you did for Zen… That’s why I’m going to do whatever I can to support you – no matter how much you resist… So… You can drop the bad guy act and just focus on what you need to, okay?”

“You don’t need to do anything but leave me alone and let me - .”

“Rawr rawr – grr grr – I know,” she chuckled. “Oh, Luciel, about the gla-.”

“I already called the repairman. He should be here around 9.”

“God Seven is reliable as always,” Miyeon praised in a playful tone. “I’ve got some arrangements to make for guests, but I’ll try to be quiet so you can focus. Thank you again for everything.”

Finally she stepped away, although his skin still prickled from feeling her so close. Whatever semblance of reason he’d tried to scrape together and pile up was washing away, leaving him raw and exposed… She didn’t mean any harm; he knew that. But every time she spoke or did anything near him it was like rubbing lemon and sugar into a wound. Breakfast was just the latest offense.

It didn’t matter when it was; he had no intention of eating it… A glance over at the breakfast she’d made him only deepened his sense of self-loathing. On the plate were three cat face shaped pancakes, each with cute little faces, fresh strawberries, whipped cream and a cup of homemade strawberry syrup on the side, along with a colorful sliced rolled omelet, and pan-fried pork belly. This wasn’t just a meal, it was a carefully crafted feast… He simultaneously wanted to kiss and scold her for it…

This was the sort of treatment guys dreamed of getting from a girlfriend, being wasted on him. She wasn’t even eating the same thing; Miyeon’s breakfast was leftovers from dinner. His jaw ached from clenching… Why didn’t she get it? Why was she wasting this effort on him? Maybe she really had forgotten what his brother had done to her… He really needed to make it clear to her how
dangerous the situation was, when the time was available.

It was a little after nine. he had managed to fully trace the invitation back to an actual physical address, rather than the spoofed IPs that his brother had tried to mask it with. He even managed to figure out the pattern at which his brother had changed everything. The victory was a small one, but was progress towards the right direction. He set his timer for the next projected opening in the security, before taking off his headphones and checking over the messenger.

Everyone was curious about what was happening at the apartment… Jumin had been calling him constantly from the time he woke for his routine looking for updates. He didn’t have time to bother… Zen was probably the most concerned, albeit for reasons extending beyond the party planner’s personal safety. While he was worried about the bomb and reacted about as passionately as expected, his concerns were now more geared towards the girl’s purity. The Seven the actor knew was frivolous and funny, but not exactly one who showed any real interest in sex outside of its comedic potential. Yet a very different acting Seven was alone in the apartment with her. The actor could only perceive of one way the situation would play out, which spoke a lot to his own desires.

It was so selfish of Zen to be concerned about something so damn petty… Telling her to dress warm to avoid tempting him. As if how she dressed had anything to do with something like that! It annoyed him but not out of jealousy. Luciel didn’t have any claim to the girl or had any intention of making one. But in his mind, she’d been taken advantage of enough. Unlike the handsome actor, he knew his place. He would protect her, especially from himself… Unlike Hyun… The hacker remembered very well how confused and upset she sounded on the phone when the actor had tried to kiss her. Only hours before he’d saw how pitiful she’d looked in his brother’s arms, meekly trying to push him away. The last thing on her mind, or his, was pursuing a casual sexual encounter with anyone…

The doorbell rang, nearly thirty minutes later than expected, the hacker got a real good look at her for the first time. Miyeon really was short, standing easily 20 cm less than him. The top of her head came up just a little below his nose. She practically hid behind him like a shy child, while making small talk with Mr.Kim about how cold it was the sliding glass door being broken. He was tempted to say something to her about being so close until Luciel noticed the dark marks along her collar… A realization hit him then… The sweater, skirt, tights, and how she wore her hair down were all an attempt to hide the injuries his brother had dealt to her. Lowering his head, he held any objections to her proximity. If the repair man saw those bruises, he really would think he was abusing her…

He left her side only to help Mr.Kim bring the glass door up from the bottom floor and to help hold it while it was secured. It wasn’t the bulletproof, high impact glass they had gotten before, but it would have to do for now.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before. How’d you manage to break that?” the repair man asked.

“Got angry with an online game and threw something like an idiot,” Seven answered with an embarrassed little shrug while taking out his wallet and a few large bills which he handed over. “Just keep the extra.”

“Wow… You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you need a receipt?”
“No, we’re good. Thanks.”

“No problem. Just don’t throw things anymore, alright?” the older man noted. He was grumbling to himself about “kids these days” as Seven closed the door behind him.

As he finished locking the door and turned around, the hacker noticed Miyeon at the new glass sliding door. Her fingers lightly rested against the glass, while her other hand rested at her neck.

“…Bulletproof glass…” she pondered aloud. “Rika must’ve really been worried to have had that installed… I wonder how he did it. He’s your twin though, right? … Suppose it’s not surprising he figured out a way.”

“… I really wish you wouldn’t bring him up… My head feels like it’d explode if I think about him right now.”

“Sorry,” Miyeon answered softly, while continuing to trace along her neck.

That reminded him quickly that he wasn’t the only person suffering. This was the same girl who was teary after an attempt at a kiss… During the attack though, she was unsteady but fierce… Now she was so serene… It didn’t make sense. “You’re so strange… How can you stay so calm?”

Their eyes met… “You remember what happened right? Or are you so chatty because you don’t? Aren’t you scared that you’re in an apartment with a bomb?”

Her head tilted as it used to when they’d talk to on the CCTV, before the pink of her lips narrowed softly into a smile. “There’s no point in being afraid… I mean, if it goes off, we’ll both be crispy critters before we even know what’s happened, right…?” There was a nervous titter to her chuckle that grew into something with resolve. “Thing is, Luciel, you’re here; I know you won’t let anything happen.”

There was some grim practicality to her words, along with her faith in him… It was undeserved. It was his fault she was here to begin with.

“It’s good that you have a sense of humor, but you still should be mindful of how dangerous of a situation you’re in because of me… The bomb… The person who attacked you… It’s my fault you’re in this situation. Aren’t you angry with me?”

The girl shook her head.

It didn’t make sense. He was too tired to fully restrain the emotions that’d been welling up.

“…I’m so angry with myself for failing and letting this happen… You were hurt because of me… Why aren’t you mad at me?”

Miyeon gazed back at him with such warmth… He hated himself even more knowing he didn’t deserve it. “You’ve always got so much on you. It’s natural for you to take responsibility for everything isn’t it? But this isn’t your fault. If it weren’t for you, Luciel, things could’ve been much worse. But you saved me. And you’ve been working so hard to keep everyone safe, even though I know you’re at your limit… You would never intentionally put anyone you cared about in danger.”

“What I intend isn’t important… What matters are the results. Those bruises and cuts. The bomb… All of it is because of me. And the longer I’m here, the greater the chance that something worse will happen to you.” The frustration was nearly boiling over. “I wish none of this had happened! Installing that stupid bomb to appease Rika or talking V into letting you stay. I shouldn’t be so surprised that you’re not taking this seriously though. Anyone naive enough to follow instructions from a stranger after downloading a weird app…” he stopped himself before he
said anything too hateful. “I need to get back to fixing this mess… So just stay still and safe, and
don’t bother me.”

There wasn’t a trace of hurt on the young woman’s countenance though. She listened with a
thoughtful expression… That somehow only made him angrier, but he wasn’t sure why. He pulled
on his headphones, and plopped back down in front of the computer.

“You wish you’d never met me…” Miyeon noted quietly, touching her neck again. “…That’s why you’re avoiding me?”

His eyes stung at her saying such a thing. She deserved so much better than what he had
done, what he was, and what he could ever hope to be. If she thought that, it was honestly for the
best. Just like it was best if he pretended to have not heard it.

“…Request to satellite… code G2X0…coordinates 16.29562… 500 to 1, possible satellites… Germany… France…”

*****

For several moments, the girl was frozen to her spot near the window watching the
hunched over red head for any sign that an apology might be forthcoming. Rationally she knew that
it wasn’t personal, but another part of her was still reeling. There was no one for her to turn to, yet as
so often happened in her life, others were looking to her. Jumin wanted to know why Seven wasn’t
answering. Everyone else was confused and hurt over why her predecessor and V had even allowed
such a dangerous thing to be installed in the apartment to begin with. Miyeon could understand the
logic behind it, although she didn’t agree with it. On his own, Seven could’ve likely come up with
something more effective and much less likely to harm innocents. Then again, she was just a
common girl. It wasn’t like she understood much of anything… Not really.

All Miyeon could do was reassure everyone, even talking to Yoosung on the phone as he
seemed to be taking the inference that Rika could even ask for such a thing particularly hard. She felt
his hurt and confusion only increasing the cracks Luciel’s continued behavior was having on her
resolve. It was so tempting to go into the linen closet and sulk like when she was child. Yet she
busied herself with starting the preparations for lunch… Another meal he likely wouldn’t eat, but she
had to keep trying…

It was all she could do…

Multitasking kept her busy and prevented her from dwelling too much on her own troubles. If she kept moving, she was fine. Waiting for the dough to rise allowed her periods to check up with
guests and confirm the catering. She wore smile and kept up the mood with her most cheerful voice,
although once the call ended she found herself even more vexed. The plan was to use the remaining
pork belly to make kimchi and pork buns, but there was one thing missing. To get the lovely golden
color on top, Miyeon needed an egg wash… Problem was, the carton she’d purchased was only
meant for her. There was one left.

While she could change options, and go with steamed buns instead, the allure of being
anywhere but trapped in an apartment with someone who didn’t want her there was hard to fight.
Maybe it would’ve been better if she had let his brother steal her away. He was the one that lead her
to the RFA in the first place. For all she knew, Saeran knew something she didn’t.

Miyeon mulled over asking the hacker for permission to leave the apartment, but she
already knew he wouldn’t pay attention to her unless she called on her phone. He’d probably scold her for that too. Although he was so absorbed in what he was doing, it wasn’t like he’d really notice she was gone… She could totally leave, tell the police, and be done with the whole mess. Her fingers idly traced the tender spot around her neck.

Quietly the girl picked up her shoes and after a last glance slipped out the door, closing it so softly that the only sound was the pounding of her heart for fear of getting caught. No one was waiting outside for her, but it would probably be just minutes before Seven realized she was gone. Once the number pad lit up to show it was sealed, she quickly trotted towards the elevator. Miyeon mashed the button to close the doors, holding her breath until finally they sealed. Hurriedly she pulled on her shoes and the second she was on the ground floor; the girl beat a hasty exit from the apartment building. Her eyes darted around for any sign of the white-haired man or anyone that might look from an “Agency” of any sort.

With shaky hands, she began to dial Zen’s number while briskly putting distance between herself and the apartment. The memory of flight and moving quickly, securely holding onto him on his motorcycle was all she could think of. He could pick her up and take her somewhere – anywhere but where she was. Seven could be in the apartment by himself so she wouldn’t bother him anymore… Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of white hair, which made her nearly drop the device.

It wasn’t Saeran… Just some guy and his friends talking about a concert.

A sigh escaped her as she ducked into the convenience store, debating on whether or not to hit send… There was no way of knowing if he could even make it to her before Seven figured out where she was. He wouldn’t likely do anything to cause a scene, but at the same time, he was desperate… The scenarios played out in her head.

Zen would probably punch the hacker if he knew everything that’d happened and how he’d been acting since he arrived. Not to mention the damage it could do to the rest of the group if she dropped the act. Those people were the only real friends Seven seemed to have… This person in front of her wasn’t the real him, she knew that much. Whether she had ever known the “real him” was doubtful… Whoever he was, it was clear that his brother was his true focus. Regardless of how Luciel felt about her, it was clear he cared deeply for his brother and was sincerely shocked to see him in that state…

Something had clearly happened between the two of them, something so painful that Saeran hated his own twin… Or maybe whatever he’d gotten involved in had convinced him that he ought to hate him for some reason. Glancing over Luciel’s shoulder let her get glimpses of what he was working on. Mint Eye was a cult of some kind. The question was how did his brother get involved with such a group?

The story he’d told her about the kitten dream ran through her mind along with noting about how different his and Yoosung’s life was. The truth was there in puzzle pieces although putting them together in order was hard when she didn’t even know where the corner pieces were. Had he run from the cult to join the Agency? If so he wouldn’t need to investigate them. No, Saeran would have had to join on his own after the two of them parted. Had Seven pushed his brother away when he joined the Agency like he was doing to her now? If so, it made total sense to her why how he’d come to feel so much malice…

When Jun-Seo had taken his own life… She remembered all too well the overwhelming emotions that it brought to her. The sense of betrayal and anger for leaving her behind, the guilt for always relying upon him, helplessness for not being able to save him, and the despair of being on her
own in that miserable home. She’d given anything to have her brother back…

Saeran likely felt the same.

Maybe that’s why her phone was able to download the app.

…No… No one knew about Jun-Seo…

It was like he’d never existed...

Her father had hired a PR firm to hide the information so it wouldn’t impact her chances of getting into a good university, along doctoring the months she spent “sick” until he transferred her to another school. In many ways, she just sort of floated through life in a way that appeased her father until he died. She didn’t dislike college, but she wasn’t exactly excited about her future either. When her father died, the current pushing her towards it just stopped. Unlike Jaehee… She didn’t become successful or strong after that… That was why she didn’t belong in the RFA.

It wasn’t like anyone would miss her if the bomb went off either. She’d just cause more trouble trying to run away and hurt the business connections Jumin had via the RFA parties. No one else needed to suffer for her. She had nothing to look forward to, really… Not like Seven. He and his brother needed each other more now than ever, if only for the sake of reconciliation so they could both move on. Maybe Saeran could join the RFA, and the beautiful, exceptional people of the group could keep doing good things.

She could just go back to her empty house and wait to die, just like before. Even if she liked anyone else in the group, it’d just make things complicated… It was best if she just dropped off the face of the earth and let Luciel have his life back. Everyone’d be better that way.

Quietly she put her phone away.

A glance around confirmed that there were still no Honey Buddha Chips, which meant that there was just the one bag she’d managed to snag a few days ago. After grabbing eggs, she grabbed snacks for herself: stocking up on high calorie snacks, sweet iced coffee, and ice cream. If she was going to die, she at least wanted to enjoy her last hours with something yummy.

Throwing all care to the wind, the girl began the trek back to the apartment with a chocolate Samanco bungeobbang in one hand and her bags in the other. Whatever happened, she resolved to have no regrets one way or the other… If the girl could at least get the brothers to reconcile and finish her obligation to the RFA regarding the party, that’d be enough. After that, it didn’t really matter…

By the time she’d reached the front of the apartment complex, her phone was vibrating. The girl sat her bag down while waiting for the elevator, pulling the ice cream filled goldfish cake from her mouth. There wasn’t time for a greeting…

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the elevator, it’s taking a little while to come up.”

“It was so quiet I thought you were taking a nap… I had to check the security camera to see that you’d left. That was… 17… 17 minutes ago. I didn’t even realize you were gone for that long. What if something had happened to you?”

Back to caring… He was such a horrible liar. If Luciel spent half the energy being wasted on pretending to hate her on finding his brother, the situation would’ve been resolved already…
“You looked really focused… And you don’t want me to bother you…”

“If you were that frustrated, you could’ve just taken off my headphones and made me listen,” he asserted firmly, before a sense of self-awareness seemed to kick in. They both knew he would’ve snapped at her and told her not to bother with it. “Are you mad that I was ignoring you?”

She didn’t have the courage to be honest… If Miyeon spoke her mind now, she’d probably draw a crowd. It was a rhetorical question anyway… He was already chiding her about not being more mindful of how dangerous the situation was or how likely it was that someone could’ve been waiting to grab her.

Thing was… Miyeon lived her entire life with that sort of anxiety. Being female carried with it the constant fear of being noticed or wanted by someone… At any point someone might see an opening or like what they saw and take her and do god only knew what to her… What was a rare threat to Luciel was just a trip to the market to her… Any creep on the street could do whatever the Agency or his brother would do to her. Having him explain to her what she already knew and feared any time she left her house was more than a little annoying. It came from a place of concern, but damn he could be a condescending jerk…

“…I should’ve put a GPS device in your clothes…” There was some rummaging.

“Ah… I have some here. When you get back give me your coat so I can attach it.”

She was too over it to even disagree. The elevator door opened, rather than get in, she stood. To her surprise, he wasn’t in it. Slowly the door closed, and the girl stood all too happy to wait a little longer before going in.

“Why on earth did you even leave?”

“I thought that maybe you weren’t eating the Honey Buddha Chips I got before because they were too old or something. So I thought I could try to find you a fresh bag… But they didn’t have any. Plus we needed some more eggs.”

“You don’t have to take care of me,” his voice was almost repentant. “I told you to leave me alone to work. Why didn’t you listen?”

Miyeon bit her lip to keep from answering while stepping into the elevator…

Wasn’t it obvious?

There wasn’t anything else she could do to help her situation or anyone else really. The temptation to get back off turned to defeat as the door closed and the climb to the 14th story began.

“Hurry back inside. If you’re hungry… There’re sandwiches in the fridge.”

The girl nearly dropped the phone and her increasingly melty ice cream filled fish shaped cake.

“Sandwiches?”

“I made it, so I can’t vouch for the taste but… It’ll fill you up. Don’t get the wrong idea, I didn’t make them for you. I just made extra when I was making something for myself. There’s tuna, ham, and egg… I didn’t have a lot of time to really mess with them, so they look sloppy but it’s the best I could do in 7 minutes. There’s also grape, orange, and grapefruit juice, so you can just pick whatever you want. I… I uhh… Really… REALLY just wanted those kinds.”
Liar…

It hurt a little to know he didn’t want her food, there was some relief in the fact that he at least seemed to have eaten something. The flustered little stammer in his voice was the familiar one of her friend when they’d been flirting just days before… This was probably his attempt at a peace offering for being such a jerk earlier, rather than directly apologizing to her.

“Oh… I think I hear the elevator. You’re on it, right?”

“Yeah. I got my hands a little full though.”

“I’ll meet you there,” he affirmed. “I can’t focus until I see you… Please hurry.”

She turned the phone off and tucked it into her pocket as the 14th floor approached. It wasn’t like Miyeon had that much control over how fast it moved, although she could stop it… Part of her was sorely tempted to do just that, although she wasn’t feeling quite that sadistic. If the Agency really was looking for him, he really shouldn’t leave the apartment himself. She blended in much easier than him.

As the door slid open, the red headed hacker was waiting for her an anxious little frown on his face. Her cat used to have the same look on his face when she’d leave for school. She scarcely got a “hi” out before he was reaching down to take the bags from her. It was hard to miss the worried little look he gave seeing the indentation they’d made into her flesh. They seemed practically weightless to him as he hoisted them up and watched to make sure she exited safely.

“Thank you.”

The hacker didn’t reply but kept close by her side until they reached the door. It was hard to tell if she felt protected or oppressed. He was slightly taller and stronger than the man who’d attacked her the night before. While she wasn’t quite afraid of him, Miyeon was also very aware of the situation. If it came to a struggle between the two of them, the odds were against her… He seemed aware of this too, as his gaze was on anything but her to perhaps lessen the tension, with a coy little frown.

While his current behavior had turned her off, he was cute. Unlike Zen who was embarrassingly attractive, Luciel had a few handsome features on an otherwise common face that was probably more expressive than he wanted. Although she’d seen pictures of it, this was probably the first time she’d gotten a real good look… The pictures he’d sent were always from a distance or with exaggerated features. The rest of the time he’d done his best to hide in the corner or only glance at her from the side or with his head lowered. Right now, she could see the darkness around his eyes from lack of sleep making the gold in them even brighter. It was strange, but he looked simultaneously older and younger at the same time.

“I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“…Next time if you’re feeling frustrated, just… ask first and I’ll take you.”

She was still surprised by how deep his voice was when he spoke normally.

“It was better to go alone… You stand out more,” the girl observed aloud, walking past him.

The hacker followed shortly behind her, dropping the bag off in the kitchen, before disappearing for a moment. She continued to put the snacks away until he returned a moment later.
Her body froze as he pulled her collar away from her neck, working something into the seam of her sweater.

“Luci-!”

“It’s a GPS,” he answered calmly.

She yanked the fabric away and took a few steps back. He looked genuinely surprised before annoyance furrowed his weary brow. The stalemate ended almost as soon as it had started, Luciel was already reaching back out and taking a step forward. Fear froze her of memories of the night before ran through her head. He’d been avoiding her the whole time, but now he seemed angry and… It was like when his brother…

“I don’t have time to play around like this, hold still."

She was practically backed into the corner of the kitchen, with nowhere to run to. Her back was digging into the counter already, and the warmth of his hands was so close to her neck. He was too close! Something horrible was going to happen to her again! A whimper escaped her before finally a sharp cry escaped her and her hands pressed hard against him to try to push him away.

He stopped fiddling with trying to get the GPS into the seam but didn’t move.

Miyeon pushed again this time with her whole body, feeling the muscles of his breast soften as a confused noise caught in his throat.

“Roach! …I… saw a roach!” she yelped, desperate to do anything to get him away from her. It was the only thing her mind could think of as for some reason the fact that he was so worried about things being bugged ran through her head.

The plan backfired as he quickly pulled her away from the counter top, putting himself closer to the potential vermin.

“Where!?"

Her cheek was practically buried in his shoulder now, although this was a very different feeling than before… Reflexively her fingers now dug into him. There was none of Saeran’s leather… Only Seven’s natural scent mixed with petrichor.

“Where!?" he asked again urgently.

Shakily she pointed towards the general direction of the counter, just to get him to loosen his hold. Holding her close with a hand on her shoulder, the hacker used his body to guide her out of the kitchen.

“I’ll take care of it,” Luciel vowed, coaxing her onto the sofa. “Just… Wait here, okay?” There were bumps and rattles as he dug in the cleaning closet, for the bug spray before disappearing into the kitchen. “How the hell did it come in? Must’ve been from when the door was broken… Don’t worry! I’ve got this! So just… wait a bit more, okay?”

Several moments passed as she could hear him opening and closing every single cabinet. While he searched for the non-existent bug, Miyeon desperately tried to pull herself together. Her body was still quivering. It didn’t make sense. She knew that Luciel wasn’t his brother, but everything else in her felt differently. Her muscle memory perceived him as the man who attacked her. She KNEW better, but at the same time he’d been so harsh to her… It was bad enough she didn’t have any control over the situation, but now her own body wouldn’t listen to her. Frustrated
tears only worsened the more she tried to hold them back and steady the shaking of her knees. The best she could do was to tense everything, which only made her torso quake.

“Whew… Alright, everything’s good! Huh?”

*Crap! Get it together, Get It Together, GET IT TOGETHER! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS? STOP SHAKING!!! Please stop! He’ll see! Stop being so weak! – she pleaded with herself as a sniffle escaped.*

The girl lowered her head to try to hide it, but he’d already noticed. Her body was as small as it could get and felt as though if she tightened anymore something might shatter. The coolness on her cheeks worsened as he got closer.

“…Y…You’re crying? Why are you crying?!”

The aloof hacker had apparently run away, leaving an awkward school boy with no idea of how to handle a girl, let alone an upset one. Her embarrassment only made it worse as a hiccupping sob escaped her. It was soon followed with the feelings of helplessness from before. Desperation came into his voice as he stammered things to try to help.

“I… Uh.. Ah… Um… Here!”

He sat a box of tissues near her then disappeared back into the kitchen before setting the sandwiches he’d made “not for her” on the table along with a glass of juice. It reminded her of how Yeon-tan used to bring her his favorite toys when she’d feel sad. Thinking of him as a fluffy little Pomeranian with glasses made her half chuckle, which he mistook for another sob.

“Gah! I sprayed everything so the roach is gone, I promise! I’ll check the whole rest of the house too, okay? So you can stop crying!”

This… This was her friend… Seven was here with her… Already he was about to run rings around the apartment if she asked, if only to get her to quiet down. He wouldn’t be able to focus if she kept this up… Stupid, she was so stupid!

“I…I’m * hic * o *hic* kay,” she sniffed. “I’m * hic * sorry *hic* for both- *hic* bothering you… I’m sorry… I’m sorry.”

“…You’re not bothering me… Is there anything I can get you? God… Please don’t cry,” he soothed with increasing desperation. “Here, drink this juice…”

She tilted her head back and swallowed forcefully against the jolts the hiccups gave to her system. It hurt but after a few more, they stopped, which seemed to relax him some.

“Better?”

She nodded before feeling him gently tap the box of tissues against her hand. If he had been Zen, he probably would’ve just wiped them away or kissed her cheeks and said something romantic. It was better this way. Having him too close would only upset her again. At the same time, part of her desperately wanted to be held and to just sob like a child… She wanted her brother… She wanted to go home.

There was a creak that startled her enough to look up. Luciel had pushed the plate aside and was sitting on the coffee table in front of her with such a piteous expression. It looked like he was about to start crying and looked every as helpless as she felt. Not him too…
Quietly she reached a hand out.

His golden eyes widened before he looked aside quickly, a little flustered. “Are you asking me to hold your hand?”

Wiping her eyes with her sleeve, she nodded.

Clearing his throat, he mechanically reached out and lifted her fingers into his own. The coarseness of the pads of his fingers was soon followed with the softness of his palm. There was no pressure… Perhaps he was afraid of hurting her more than she already had been…. At the same time, there was almost a look of wonder upon him.

“Your hands are so small…” Shaking his head and clearing his throat, the hacker tried to put back up some semblance of his act from before. “I… I’m not doing anything weird; I… Ahm… just trying to comfort you.”

Miyeon gave his hand a little squeeze, which he returned, going as far as to hold her hand between both of his own.

“…Thought you liked bugs… Guess roaches really scare you, huh?”

There was nothing in his tone to suggest sarcasm. His countenance and the intensity of his gaze upon her was entirely sincere. Was he really that clueless? Or was he giving her an out to try to save face? It didn’t matter, not really… With a sniffle, she let out a chuckle and rubbed her eyes with her free hand.

“Y…Yeah...”

Gently he gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze while his thumb caressed the back of her hand. Just as soon as she realized it, he caught himself and eased. She felt a little more composed, if only to keep from upsetting him any further. Although soon it was clear that he was deep in thought. Not letting go of her hand, Luciel stood, letting his fingers intertwine with hers. He picked up the plate and gave a nod towards the computer desk.

“You umm…” The question must’ve been written on her face, as he soon stammered to answer them… “You can sit near me for a little until you feel better, okay? Just don’t look at me or the screen…”

The girl followed his lead quietly, hand in hand. She stayed just a little behind him as he sat the sandwiches on the edge of Rika’s desk and cleared up a little space next to him on the floor. Luciel sat down first, keeping their hands joined. He glanced up, quietly inquiring whether it was suitable, which she answered by finally sitting. Her back was to his, and their hands were loosely connected. It felt surreal…

Her body was unnaturally stiff at first. A sigh escaped him as he moved the mouse over to the side of his free hand, and he began to work again. The strangeness of it gradually quelled her emotions. Soon her focus shifted to the way his pulse seemed to race and how very hot his hand felt now. The pads of his thumb, pointer finger, and part of his palm were coarse, likely from handling tools. His other fingers and the rest of his hand, however, were smooth, although a little dry. Like in the pictures, each digit was long and graceful like a surgeon’s hand but the sinew spoke to their use. The nails weren’t well manicured, but clean and cut close. They were very different than Yoosung’s soft hands or Zen’s. In another era, Seven might’ve been a skilled Artisan of some sort…

Her imagination got caught up imagining a whole other life. The two of them in old
traditional garb riding on the back of a cart… Having adventures like in some old drama… Until an alarm went off on his phone.

“Sorry…I... need my hand back now…”

The girl complied, watching him readjust the timer on his phone and pull up another menu. Before he noticed, she looked away and took out her phone. Working in the shelter, she’d often been the person to share a kennel with a scared animal to help show that they weren’t a threat. Now, Miyeon wasn’t sure who was more afraid of who… Then again in those situations, she was just as frightening to the animals she’d rehabilitated as they could be to her. They both needed to learn to trust the other.

As he worked, the party planner followed up with Jaehee regarding the final preparations. After a few more replies to a guest with a late RSVP, she checked the chatroom. It was just the two of them. The girl couldn’t help but glance back at the hacker. From the way his lead was lowered and his arm moved, it was clear that he was checking his phone… He was probably checking the messages for any sign of the RFA’s leader.

“V still hasn’t been on. I guess he still hasn’t called you either?” the girl asked.

A dismissive huff was his only response until he slid the phone aside and returned his focus to the screen.

“Of course, when I have something to say to everyone, they’re not on… It’s so…” Luciel sighed. “Everybody is so hurt and confused… But you’ve been trying to cheer everyone up so they don’t get more worried. I’m so – so sorry… I should’ve apologized to you sooner for getting defensive and raising my voice. I’m not mad at you; I just… Miyeon, I’m so very sorry.”

“It’s really fine… You have so much on your shoulders right now. Honestly, it’s amazing you can even function. I can’t even handle seeing a bug.”

He shook his head, despite her attempt to lighten the mood.

“Bug… Yeah… Seriously… Why are you so nice…?” There was almost exasperation in his tone. “I don’t get how anyone can be so accepting of being in a situation like this… You’re really not like anyone I’ve ever met.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m the first person to be in this situation with you,” she observed. “Although, I’m curious… why Rika was so adamant on having a bomb…? Is the guest information really worth potentially harming so many innocent people?”

“It wasn’t ever supposed to be used; it was more of a deterrent. “

“People don’t pick up weapons they don’t plan to use.”

He didn’t answer at first, rather his attention was on the computer screen before a few taps changed the black box full of numbers and symbols to a similar looking window that had been colored a deep maroon.

“You wouldn’t know since you joined recently, but Rika wasn’t the type of person to ever want to cause harm to another.”

“I get that… I mean, the entire RFA was made because she wanted to help others.”
“Right… I swear, she only wanted it for protection; Rika had NO intention of hurting anyone. At the time, she was so worried… I only did it after V gave his permission.” A tapping sounded from his mouse as he eased back some, popping his back. She could feel how tense the muscles of his lower back were, despite the attempt to loosen them.

The girl hugged her legs. “Still… It’s hard to believe that anyone in their right state of mind would see a bomb as a suitable security measure for protecting charity party guest information. There are so many other ways of securing information like that. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but knowing that Rika chose to take her own life… Paints the portrait of someone who probably shouldn’t be in a position to have access to such a thing.”

“What do you mean by that…?” his tone was sharp and the heat coming from his body seemed to spike.

“There is no doubt in my mind that Rika sincerely believed she was in danger. But when people are dealing with depression or anxiety, their world view isn’t exactly based on reality. They can get fixated and irrational. I’m sure you probably did your best to talk her out of it… But something tells me Rika wasn’t the sort of person who’d have accepted anything other than what she asked for… Even then, V had to have known before that, and asking for a bomb should’ve been a big red flag! But I’m the last person who should judge someone else for missing signs…”

“You’re not wrong…” There was a rapid barrage of keystrokes. “For the record, despite what Yoosung says… You’re nothing like Rika.”

“Thanks…?”

“You know… When V and I first talked about whether you should be allowed to stay at the apartment or not, I was so excited by the prospect of having another party and bringing the RFA back together that I didn’t take the breach of security seriously. Like an idiot. But it this wasn’t something that happened out of the blue. Looking back, he must’ve been watching us for a while. I was so sure that I made the perfect defense system that I got lazy. Or maybe it was because everyone was using the messenger less and less after Rika’s death. I sort of lost motivation. I don’t think if Rika were still with us that this would’ve happened. Not that it matters… It doesn’t matter how or why; my guard should’ve never been lowered.”

“You’ll only torture yourself if you keep going over “what if” scenarios… You know better now, right? And what’s important is that you’re doing your best to fix it.”

“Thank you for seeing it that way, but it doesn’t change the fact that none of this would’ve happened if I hadn’t been such an idiot. I was supposed to be able to predict things like this and head them off before they become a threat. That’s why V had me in charge of security.”

“You’re only one person, Luciel.”

“V trusted me; I was sure that I was all the RFA needed,” his tone was strained. “…I’m so angry at myself for not being good enough… You’re right about one thing though, I am doing my best to fix it. I just can’t trust that my best is going to be enough anymore. But this is all I can do… I can’t undo what happened to you… So please just accept me doing what I can now to fix this as an apology.”

“Please stop blaming yourself…”

“When this is over, I’m going to disarm the bomb after discussing it with V…
And if for some reason you decide to stay in the RFA, he and I will discuss relocating you. I won’t take shortcuts, ever again… And I’ll never forget that my systems aren’t perfect. Especially since the hacker I’m up against is just as good… If not better than I am.”

“Will you go after him – to Magenta – Mint Eye place, aren’t you?”

The hacker had stopped typing and was idly twirling the knot at the end of the drawstring of his hoodie. “…Don’t look over my shoulder…”

“I’m not…” she soothed, letting her cheek rest against the back of his shoulder as she shifted to sit more towards one side. “Are you?”

“The security system is stable for now. Once I finish recon, I plan on heading there… Without talking to V, I’m not sure that anyone needs to know what is going on. Honestly, I wish you didn’t know as much as you do.”

“Will I need to come with you?”

“That depends. I’ve really considered taking you to Jumin. He has a private army that could keep watch on you, but that doesn’t mean that it’s risk free. I still don’t know how much the hacker will target you. And hired help can always be paid or intimidated to look the other way.”

Luciel was still referring to the person as “the hacker”. It was probably easier than to accept that the person in question was someone so very important to him.

“I’m not worried about me, Seven… I’m worried about you.”

“That’s not something you need to worry about… Unlike the bomb in the apartment.”

“You just told me the security system was stable,” Miyeon reminded him. “So are you still looking up information before heading there? Or are you just waiting to get the OK from V?”

“… Everyone in the RFA probably thinks that I get permission from him to do everything… And that I just take orders… But… To be honest…” his voice darkened, “He’s forfeit his right to have a say when it comes to your immediate protection… Right now the only thing I need to ask him, is something personal…”

“About Saeran…?” The red head fell silent again. Folding her legs back in front of her, Miyeon sat back up a little. “I might be thinking too far ahead, but… Let’s say you leave me with Jumin when you go to confront your brother… There’s still the Agency to worry about, right? Are you going to just take him and run?”

“Stop worrying about things that don’t concern you.” his voice was a low growl.

“…Your maid already knows what I look like.”

“They won’t bother you if I disappear.”

“It’s not like you can really stop something from happening to me if you ‘disappear off the face of the Earth’. You’ll eventually run out of places to go, and despite saying you don’t care about me… If you checked on me, they could probably track that.” He was tense but silent. “I know you feel responsible, Luciel, and want make things right, but… Keeping me ignorant isn’t going to protect me, and hiding things and running isn’t going to solve the problem. That’s sort
of how it got this bad to begin with right? We have Jumin – we could expose those people or pay them off… If you’d just tell me what we’re up aga- ”

“STOP!” Miyeon froze, startled by the sudden raise in his voice and the way his arms flew up to hold his head. ‘Just… Stop talking about useless things! I’m tired of you sitting here whining next to me - wasting my time… asking stupid questions – talking about my hair and my glasses…! Taking about stuff you don’t even understand… Just… Go away! Go!”

He wheeled around and slung his arm so fast that she reflexively flinched in anticipation of getting slapped, but no… He was just pointing to show that he wanted her as far from him as she could go without leaving the apartment.

“Go – Over - There – NOW!” he growled.

“…I’m sorry…” the girl murmured, pushing herself back, but it clearly wasn’t fast enough.

He glared at her until her back was against the end of the bed. Only then did he turn back around, shoulders hunched over.

“Christ…”

Rather than snap at her, he pulled his headphones back on and began to softly utter numbers and colors to himself while his knuckles bleached from the sheer amount of force with which he held the mouse. The apartment fell silent aside from the occasional click or tap from him. Despite the bright afternoon sun streaming in, there was no warmth with the oppressive atmosphere…

Miyeon had often thought of herself as a blackhole who sucked the joy out of things and only served to weigh others down with her, but Luciel …. She’d already slipped past his event horizon. The two of them were slowly ripping the other apart… The situation was unstable and eventually one of them would really go off flying off somewhere unless there was some sort of epicenter. Finding any sort of balance seemed impossible though.

She didn’t understand his way of thinking. It was irrational and trying to help it only made things worse. Maybe it really was her who was wrong? The girl was back to being just an unwanted burden. An interloper who’d stupidly complicated things thinking that her feeble attempts at support could help hold him together.

Miyeon made her way back to Rika’s closet before simply closing the door and locking herself in. Turning off the light, she pushed the bagged dresses and luxurious shoes aside to make a place for herself in the corner on some old blankets. There, she took a spot, hugging her knees and just waiting for it all to be over…

For all practical purposes, Miyeon was dead… Unthinking, unseeing, unfeeling, and still… It was no different than a little over a week ago. Again, she was just waiting for the end to come, hating herself for being so weak and not fighting back, hating herself for being the sort of coward who just waited for death to come rather than get it over with… The guilt and shame for even thinking of doing something that would’ve caused her brother and father so much pain if they were still alive. Desperately longing to be with them again…

She wanted to go home…

But that wasn’t the house her father had left her…
Home stopped existing the second her father was pronounced brain dead, although it’d been dying a long painful death long before that… Those long afternoons after school when she and Jun-Seo would spend time together, sometimes with their father when he had time off, were the closest thing to “home”… It wasn’t that she hated her mother or her hated her. She was just an accessory that had long since become unfashionable, not like Jun-Seo…

Right now, she could get up, leave the apartment, get help, but then what? She’d probably just go back to how things were before. Even if the RFA continued, it was inevitable that Miyeon would fail at something and disappoint them… It was just a matter of time; it was possible that Rika felt the same… The only difference is that Luciel listened to her… Then again, he probably looked up to her as much as he seemed to have V. The former RFA party coordinator wouldn’t be in closet feeling sorry for herself. Rika would’ve had the courage to do something, even if it was something that hurt so many others.

Just like Jun…

Not like Miyeon…

…He even said she was nothing like Rika…

Did that mean that she really was a coward? Was that to say that no one cared? Everyone had mentioned time and time again how the group had pretty much died without her. Yoosung had been so terribly hurt by the loss that even years later he was stuck. Jaehee didn’t seem to show too much, but she was likely too dignified to. Zen likely ached to see the man who saved him mourning a lost love. And Jumin. V was his best friend, when Rika died, she basically took him with her. Seven lost a father figure and the rest of his family. There was a vacuum that had been eating away at the group for so long.

Trying to fill that gap with someone like Miyeon was doomed to fail, despite her foolish optimism at the onset. Rika mattered – she didn’t… Even if she did, the girl would never do anything that would cause someone else to suffer no matter how much pain she was in herself. Whether it was helping animals or smiling those empty smiles for her father… It didn’t matter what she felt, as long as those around here were happy.

Right now, she had no one…

Miyeon was expendable…

That realization lead to her remembering how attachments could choke as easily as support. Along her neck, wrists, and feet were wounds to show that it didn’t matter how much she hid. There was really no “safe” place for her as long as she did nothing but cower and wait to be saved. By that logic, it was an inevitability…

Luciel had confessed to disappearing when things got too heated or people got too close. It made sense that his instinct was to grab his brother and run. Maybe he’d done the same thing to his brother as he was doing to her now, telling himself it was for his own good. It was a decent way to stay alive, but foolish when one had resources…

Saeran wasn’t going to be satisfied with simply talking to his brother and walking away. The resentment of being abandoned by someone so close was one she knew too well. She’d felt it herself along with so many other hurtful things. In many ways, she sympathized with Luciel’s brother more than him. For all she knew he had very good reasons for his actions. Although he had been radicalized to the point where reasoning with him wasn’t likely to happen… He wasn’t the first aimless young man to be hardened into a militant under some sort of banner promising a new world.
It wouldn’t be as simple as just buying someone with an ideology off.

There had to be a bigger plan.

That starving kitten had conviction, a home, and an owner…

Organizations of any kind needed a charismatic leader. That leader wanted the RFA…
Tension eased from her body as something smooth, cold, and unyielding filled the cracks. The members were the first priority and the guests were secondary to Mint Eye’s leader… Those were things too valuable to just give up on easily: Jumin’s resources with Jaehee to direct it, Zen’s ability to give a public face, and Yoosung’s ability to organize.

Luciel had even noted that his brother had probably been working on breaching his defenses for awhile. There’d been a previous attack that he suspected had been his brother too. Had this person put them against each other or done something to drive them apart specifically for that purpose?

That spoke to a meticulous nature with no lack of motivation. As long as the RFA existed, the members were valuable, and the guests had some influence: there would be no end to it. Whoever lead that cult would just send someone else.

It was possible that Rika knew that and chose the ultimate escape. Or perhaps had she been coerced, which made sense if she really was mentally unstable. There was also V being gone all the time… None of this was a coincidence… Although she didn’t want to jump to conclusions, the threads were dangling. The irritable red head in the apartment may have grasped a few of them, but his own circumstances were clouding his judgement. He was more focused on punishing himself than those who were really in the wrong… Was that because his twin knew how to put him off base? Was she chosen because they shared a type? So much for the “Defender of Justice”…

Seven couldn’t fight a war on so many fronts singlehandedly… Even if he were something like a wizard with spells that could wipe out armies, it would just take one well shot arrow. The attack on the apartment and seeing him at his limit right now made her certain of that. His pride was going to lead to serious consequences to everyone unless he could be made to see reason. Neither she or he had the luxury of wallowing in self-pity.

There was no malice in the decision that followed…

As she stood and exited the closet, her body felt so much lighter.

She finally understood what her brother had last uttered to her… “Something only I can do”.

Miyeon was going to pluck out the “Mint Eye”…

Above all other things, she hated those who preyed upon the weak. She could mend the wounds of the rescued animals, but that didn’t see those who abused or neglected them answer for their wrongs. Whoever ran this cult was doing the same to people, robbing families of loved ones, and now targeting a group of kind people to weaponize them. They were relying upon a false God to give them easy answers and false purpose…

She could understand why such a thing was so attractive. Till now, her momentum was borrowed. She’d never really tried or cared to achieve anything on her own, not really. Her life had been one of service of sorts, making others happy and subsisting with a smile to make them comfortable and reduce suffering. Penance for failing her brother and a way to escape the loneliness
of the empty family home. When it came her father that meant making good grades, learning to cook, and making friends so he wouldn’t worry. Without him or Jun-Seo, she had no purpose… It’s not like her classmates and even best friend had made any real attempt to keep her around. They came to her when they needed someone to listen, taking pieces of her, and disappearing when the next lover or distraction came. That was, until they needed her to glue them back together.

For so long she’d been so happy to even be on the outer edges of the lives of others that she’d accepted that much. As much as Seven talked about having to leave when people got curious about him; he had the RFA and a brother. Miyeon had her father’s corpse and only memories of her brother, whose body they never found… How Seven felt about her or how she felt about him didn’t matter. The RFA loved him as much as he loved them. That was something worth protecting.

One useless girl so one hacker could continue protecting his “family” … It was a bargain.

Her father’s gear from his time as a detective was still at her house. They were the guns he’d taught her to use after all, and after a quick bit of maintenance they’d be serviceable. That meant, the girl just needed to see what intel the hacker had gathered and head out before him. It probably wouldn’t be that hard, even with him on guard. From the moment, she first joined the chat, he’d underestimated her. Granted, Miyeon had probably done that herself. Luciel may have come to save her, but it was her that had beaten his brother off him despite being half drugged. And now he was too busy battling with himself to really be a threat to her. All he was all bark. A snarling dog in the corner, baring his teeth and shaking.

The faintest outline of a plan was coming to mind, although another part of her was very aware of how insane it was. Then again what about this situation was rational? For now, Miyeon just had to pretend like nothing had changed, but things were so very different… She needed information… It would be easy enough to gather by pretending to tidy up, and if he so much as made a move to go to “Mint Eye” without her, it would be as simple as knocking him out and making use of the zip ties in the storage drawer. Worst case scenario, the girl could probably pull his unconscious body into the bathroom and secure him, give Jumin the location, and be gone before anyone could stop her… If she got caught or jailed for murder, that was fine… Something told her the RFA would disavow knowledge of her, and Jumin would pay to cover the whole affair up…

That didn’t mean that she wasn’t going to give up on negotiations though. There was strength in numbers, and Luciel was still the most capable to handle the situation. She just needed to change the approach… He was going to keep up his martyr act and was only going to get more irritable, if there hadn’t already been irreparable damage done to him… He still hadn’t slept from what she could tell, and the only potential food had been the sandwiches he supposedly made for himself around midday.

The boy (considering his childlike behavior) needed to eat and sleep, even if that meant she would have to go to extreme measures… This person he was pretending to be was an act that was draining his energy. She just had to overload his systems and get him to address the problems head on. From there, they could maybe start getting something done about the real problem.

A dull orange of approaching dusk lit the apartment, Seven was still in the corner although he seemed to be tinkering with the robot cat. Unlike before when he wouldn’t even glance at her, she only noticed a guilty lowering of the head. The plate of sandwiches he’d “totally not made for her” were still on the edge of Rika’s desk. They were untouched and probably beyond stale.

Good…

Taking out the chicken that had been purchased on sale earlier in the week and the unopened bag of Honey Buddha Chips, the girl set about making something familiar but new…
Overall, it would be noisy and tempting… A distraction.

The chips were the first. They were crushed with the back of a pan, making quite a bit of clatter, before she ran them through the processor to get a nice consistency. Mixing those with some panko breading, Miyeon then set about preparing the flour, the egg, and the rest.

What followed was much less pleasant.

His annoyed glares ebbed into something akin to horror as there was a loud snap as she broke the thigh of the bird before repeating the motion where the drumstick connected. Using a large knife, she then severed the leg, before chopping the drumstick away from the thigh. This was repeated on the other side. Cutting off the wings was equally noisy, although it was much louder as the girl made sure to use enough force to chop through the tips of the wings. The ribs cracked as she tore the spine away finishing the work her knife had started. Once the spine was ripped away, Miyeon chopped the two sides of the breast in half. The breastbone gave a satisfying crunch that seemed to drain the last of the color from his face.

That nervousness didn’t seem to leave even as she progressed to less gruesome tasks, although the rest of dinner preparation wasn’t nearly as loud. By the end, she had a feast of Honey Buddha Fried Chicken (with a honey drizzle), rice, and a few banchan that were laid out at the table. As she sat the last plate down, she dialed his number. The pop song that he had as her ringtone had now been changed, but barely got out a bar or two before he ripped off his headphones and picked up. Their eyes locked as his agitation returned.

“…I wasn’t going to answer. What is it?”

“Dinner’s ready.”

His brow furrowed into a deep V shape as he shook his head.

“I thought you could have dinner… take a nap… Or is Zen right and you’d rather have me?”

His face was about as red as his hair now. The line went dead as he put the phone back down and his headphones back on. She dialed again; as expected he answered it, but this time he actually face palmed at his own reaction.

Miyeon nibbled on a piece of the chicken, making sure the crispiness made it through the phone… Although the two of them were pretty much engaged in a staring contest. Him with a frown and her with a light-hearted smile.

“Why do you like wasting my time so much?” He grumbled until the gold of his eyes widened at the sight of her portioning things out onto an empty plate, “And what are you doing?”

“Making another plate for you since you’re busy.”

“I’m not hungry!”

“I can hear your stomach from here.” He looked uncomfortable. It was stretch, but his reaction spoke to its validity.

“You’re so weird and playful all the time! Why are you doing this? Calling me when I’m right in the room with you. Didn’t I make it clear I want nothing to do with you?”
“You did, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.”

“That drug must have really confused you… The person you like is the 707 in the chatroom – not me,” he scoffed.

“For someone who is supposedly a genius, Luciel, you certainly say some really stupid things.”

He hung up and turned his attention back to the screen. She chuckled seeing him puffed up. Slowly she edged closer and reached over to set the plate next to his mouse hand. His back was stiff as a board as she realized her breast was pressed against his shoulder and some of her hair was starting to flow over him. Was being close to her really that much of a problem for her?

There were a few cans that had built up over the day, showing he’d at least been drinking soda. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she reached over to get them.

“Don’t…”

“It’s okay, just tidying up,” Miyeon soothed. There was nothing on the screen that made much sense to her. But that didn’t mean there weren’t other things around…

A sigh of relief heaved his shoulders as she edged back, the empty cans making a hollow clatter as she sat them on the tray before moving the plate of stale sandwiches onto it. Her eyes scanned over Rika’s desk and the work area behind it. There was something new there, where he’d pushed her crafting supplies to the side… A suspiciously plain brown book. Why did he have that? Maybe there were notes on what he’d found so far?

For a moment, she idled, making sure he was engrossed in work again. He was softly speaking to himself again and forcing his attention on anything but her. That left an opening.

Pretending to put things away, the girl discreetly lifted the book. The plain outer covering was false. Within was a children’s book whose smooth pages opened quite readily to an old diskette that had been sandwiched between the pages. The artwork was light and the words within simple for younger readers. Neither thing were things she’d seen since early in her school life. If anyone had the hardware to even read such an old thing, it would’ve been the hacker… Maybe it had information from back then too? Before Miyeon could even consider how to go about finding out, the book slammed shut and was yanked from her hand.

“What are you doing!” the hacker barked, flush against her back in the narrow space between the tables.

The girl braced herself for it as he slammed the book down on the table.

“Are you just lighthearted or dumb? I told you to not to get curious about the stuff I brought with me! Why won’t you listen?! I am trying to keep you alive! What about that do you not understand?!”

She wasn’t even afraid anymore, but she did step back. This time though, Miyeon made sure to keep her gaze on him… He wouldn’t hurt her.

“Luciel… You’re tired, plea-.”

“You’re right. I’m tired of people like you pretending like everything is going to be fine. People like you don’t get it. You can’t possibly understand the things I’ve done or why…”
“I don’t need to know any of that to know you’re my friend, and that you need help.”

“Let me make this clear – we’re not friends. I don’t care about you – other than you’re safe and alive.”

“Stop lying… If not to me, then at least yourself.”

For a moment, he was silent until his long fingers pushed his glasses back up on his nose.

“The truth is… The ending has been set from us from the start. I let my guard down… And you’re hurt because of it. The sooner you understand that we can never be anything, the easier this will be for both of us.”

The girl’s fists balled up as a bitter little chuckle escaped her. “Easier… What’s easy about watching someone important to me hurt themselves, telling me that it’s for my sake… Enough people have been hurt because of me.”

Luciel’s guilty eyes drifted along the floor to the window. “Miyeon… I’m not the kind person you think I am. You’ve only known who I’ve pretended to be in the messenger… I don’t know what else I can do to make you realize that. When it comes down to it… I’m really very selfish person, which is why God is punishing me like this…”

“God? Don’t blame god for your decisions. You’re the one choosing to act this way.”

The hacker pulled up Rika’s computer chair and sat down. Wearily he rubbed his eyes under the lenses.

“You don’t understand…”

“You keep saying that, but I know the 707 in the chatroom is as much a part of you as the stubborn jerk sitting in front of me right now. You’re a human being, Luciel. No one is expecting you to be perfect but you.”

“When other people make mistakes it doesn’t kill people…”

“How many times do you think Yoosung has blamed himself for not doing enough for Rika?” Miyeon asked softly. “Or Zen?”

“That’s… different.”

“It’s not.”

The girl barely finished before the eyes on the robot cat lit up and it stood. Luciel was already whipping out his phone and pulling up the messenger.

“V is on – meow~! V is on~!” it’s cheerful voice called out musically as it toddled across the carpet to the hacker’s feet.

The hacker was so absorbed in the phone, that he didn’t even bother to turn it off. The girl scooped the artificial feline up and held it in her arms, while taking out her own phone. It was… deceptively heavy despite it’s small size.

“Meowy detects stress! Petting cats lowers blood pressure and Meowy loves pats!
Please give pats~!” the cat sang.

Miyeon gently patted the machine’s head while pulling up the app. It ebbed to a soft recording of a purring noise, although she was more interested in what words were being sent with the red head’s rapid fire texts. Her eyes darted across the messenger to try to catch up.

707- E

707- V

707 - Why didn’t you answer any of my calls?

V- Sorry, I was out of reach…

V- I couldn’t read all the messages because the service here isn’t that good, but I spoke to Jumin.

707 – Where the hell are you?

V- I’ve been taking pictures in the mountains.

707- When your eyes like that?

Was something wrong with V’s eyes? A glance up gave no answers as the hacker was focused on his screen. The girl felt tremendous pressure to avoid interjecting into the conversation too much but it was clear by the way he was starting to tap his foot that the pressure was building. She needed to keep things on track.

V- Let’s talk about that later.

Miyeon – Jumin told you about what happened…?

V- Yes. That’s actually why I’m on.

V- I’m so sorry… I don’t even know how to apologize to you for what you’ve been through. Never did I imagine that anyone would breach it… But I’m glad Luciel was able to make it to the apartment.

707- Why did you call Jumin first?

707- What about me?

Was he jealous? No… It couldn’t be anything as petty as that.

V- I did try to call you. But you remember the phone you gave me? The light was coming on when I tried to call you.

707- For real?

V- I’m here now because I couldn’t reach you that way.

707- There are so many things I need to ask you.

V- Jumin told me that you recovered the special security system.

707- I did. I’ll send you those details later.

707- I think we need to move Miyeon to another location.
V- I see…

V- Alright.

V- The party is in three days. So, it may be best to move her after that.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” the hacker exclaimed in a hushed tone.

V- Please stay with her and protect her until then.

Miyeon could see Luciel shaking his head vehemently before simply running his hand through his hair with an exasperated sigh. Biting his lip he seemed to reread the message.

“Seven…?”

707- Since there may be other parties after us. That may be safest for now since the security system has been recovered.

V- That was my thought. If you’ve repaired the security system, and it’s been calm there so far – then that should continue to work until the party. We can discuss changing things more readily since I’ll be back after the party.

V- Although… I do have a personal favor to ask.

The hacker’s frown and posture made it very clear he wasn’t open to granting any.

707- What?

V- You recall that all the information stored in the apartment is classified.

707- Yes. That’s why I installed the bomb when asked.

V- Yes…

V- This is a bit embarrassing, but… There are some personal letters that Rika had stored in her nightstand. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t look at them.

“…Wait… Why would we even do that?” Miyeon asked, typing a message out herself.

Gold eyes met her own before glaring down at the screen.

Miyeon- That’s never been a concern.

Miyeon- We would never be that disrespectful…

Miyeon- Not after you’ve been kind enough to let me stay here.

V- You’re right. I’m sorry.

707- Why do you think I’d look at Rika’s personal things without your permission?

V- I don’t! I was just stating it out of caution.

V- It’s just that there are a lot of private and personal things there that hurt me.

V- You can understand how I feel, right?
707- What in the world are you talking about?

V- Luciel

V- I know that you’ve had so much pressure on you
V- With me being mia, things must’ve been so very hard
V- I apologize if it seems like I don’t trust you
V- It’s just that there are so many painful memories and personal things in those letters.

707- That’s the part I don’t get.

707- Why do you think I’d rummage through Rika’s personal things LET ALONE share them with the rest of the RFA?

707- Why are you suddenly suspicious of me?

V- I wasn’t
V- I’m just asking so that you’re aware.

707- I don’t want to doubt you, but you’re doubting me… And acting strange.

V- I’m not doubting you.

707- V, you do realize that those letters aren’t what’s important right now.

707- There’s something MUCH more pressing than letters.

707- An innocent girl, who is relying on us for protection.

707- Are those letters more important to you than her life?

V- You’re right.

V- You’re completely right.

V- I’m just flustered because no one else has been in that apartment since Rika passed…

V- I made a mistake.

707- That’s a hell of a mistake to make!

V- I know.

707- Miyeon agreed to join because she wanted to help people.

707- Now she’s hurt!

V- What…?

707- Shouldn’t her life be your top priority?!

V- I’m sorry.
V - I understand.

707- No…

707- No, I don’t think you do…

707- Should I send you pictures?

707- Not that you could see them with your eyes that way.

V - Luciel…

707- I’ve been waiting so long to talk to you, worrying about you and everyone else…

707- And you get on and you’re concerned about fucking DOCUMENTS!?

V - It’s a misunderstanding. I made a mistake…

V - That’s not it.

V - Luciel, please listen to me.

V - You know that the RFA’s safety is my top priority. With everything that we’ve been through, I know that you understand that.

707- I believed that until a couple of days ago…

V - I guess I should head back as soon as possible so we can discuss this.

V - I feel that you’re angry with me.

V - Whatever the misunderstanding… I promise you that I’ll take care of everything.

V - We can discuss everything at the party.

707- No… I’m not fine with that.

707- I have to ask you something now.

V - We’ll discuss everything face to face at the party.

707- Is Saeran included in that “everything”?

V - What?

707- Answer the question.

V - Why are you suddenly bringing up that name?

707- Don’t pretend like you don’t know…

V - Luciel

V - I don’t know what you’re thinking.

V - But I assure you it’s wrong.
707- Do you know where Saeran is right now or what he’s doing?

V- We agreed not to speak about that.

V- Please don’t be like this here.

V- You know everyone can read this.

V- When I get back, we’ll talk about this.

707- Tell me here and now.

707- V, please…

707- Tell me something so I can trust you again.

Miyeon – V, he has his reasons for asking…

V- Does Miyeon know about him?

707- Is that what’s important right now?!

V- Luciel…

707- I saw Saeran with my own eyes!

V- That’s… Not possible.

707- I saw him…

707- Explain to me

707- Explain why he was like that

V- You’re mistaken…

Miyeon- No, V. He’s not…

707- why did he look like that

707- the filthy work that I do

707- tell me V

707- why is that boy

The girl was startled as the increasingly rapid breathing of the hacker turned into a choked sob.

“Luciel…”

He was in his own world, clutching the phone with the glare of it illuminating the lenses of his glasses and a thread of tears that were starting to brim over.

707- why is that boy doing that dirty work!?

707- When you were supposed to protect him!?
707- YOU PROMISED ME
707- Please tell me what happened.
707- Explain to me.
707- Say something?
707- Say anything so I can trust you again
707- So I can have my brother back
707- I’m begging you
707- Please V

V- Luciel
V- I don’t have good service right now
V- I

V has left the chatroom.

“No…No…No…NO!” the hacker uttered with increasing pain before a ragged breath escaped him. The hacker let his phone drop unable to stop his shaking hands from his hands curling into fists.

The robot cat’s head let out a soft whirring as it turned towards Luciel.

“Meowy senses depression, meow! Cheer protocol activated~!”

It began to play a little of the song he’d set as her ring tone…

“…Shut up…” he ordered darkly.

“Meowy can’t turn off until depression is--!?”

“Meowy… Shh… Turn off for a little, okay?”

Craning to look back up at her, the machine purred.

“That’s a voice I absolutely have to obey, meow!”

As its eyes darkened, she sat it aside along with her phone, deciding how best to comfort her friend. Instinctively the girl wanted to hold him, but considering how things were going, it was unlikely he’d let her get that close. Instead she picked his phone up from the floor and set it aside alongside her own before retreating to the kitchen to make a fresh pot of coffee so he could have a little time to himself. From the other room she could hear the occasional snuffle or grunt from him as he tried to compose himself. When she returned to him, with a fresh cup of coffee, he’d propped himself up on Rika’s desk.

After setting warm cup of coffee away from him enough to where he wouldn’t accidentally knock it over, along with a bowl of sugar, and a little cream, Miyeon took a spot on the edge of the table. She was close enough to touch him if needed but left plenty of room for him to move if he needed space. It was a few moments before the red head even bothered to look. Although even once
Luciel noticed, he didn’t seem to care. The conversation with V had completely stripped him of any remaining willpower.

He took off his glasses and sat them aside, before wiping his eyes and nose on his sleeve. His jawline grew taut and set with resignation.

“I don’t think you should be in the RFA anymore… Once this is done, I’m removing you from the app… And everyone else… I’m going to delete the app and destroy the server… You’ll all be safe from V and me then.”

“…Luciel… You’re not a threat… And the RFA doesn’t need to be disbanded because of this. There has to be some sort of explanation.”

His throat tightened but nothing came out.

“…Talk to me here…”

The gold in his eyes narrowed as he glared at her wearily.

“What’s talking going to do? Even if I told you a little, you wouldn’t understand,” he scoffed. “You don’t know… You don’t know how many of V’s secrets the RFA is entrenched in…” A sigh escaped him as he leaned forward, letting his elbows rest on his knees while his lips rested to his hands. “…It wasn’t supposed to be like this… God I was such an idiot… All this time I never even questioned him, I just believed like a fucking idiot… I’m so tired of this… I wish I could shut down instead of that cat.”

Miyeon couldn’t help but reach out to stroke his hair, only to feel him push her hand away.

“Don’t…” he warned.

“Sorry…” The girl then looked over at the drawer. “…You control the security to the apartment right? So… Maybe we really should check to see what’s in there…”

A brittle, sardonic little laugh escaped him.

“What if there really is something about Saeran in there? If you open the drawer I could…”

“You’re not doing anything…”

“Luciel, please…”

“I’ll open the drawer eventually! Just… Not tonight. I can’t take anymore…”

“The party is in a few days, we-“

“Don’t you think I know that?!” he snapped.

“…I know you do…”

“Then why bring it up? Honestly the party is the LAST thing on my mind right now.”

Miyeon took a deep breath to steady herself. “There are more important things, like your brother. I get that.”
“Do you? Because for someone who “gets it” you ask a LOT of stupid questions.”

“You’re right… I do.” He looked a little gob smacked that she’d concede that point. “It’s just all a little coincidental, don’t you think? V being gone so much, Rika committing suicide… I don’t know about what happened with your brother but…”

The hacker shook his head before standing up.

“Luciel?”

He pulled his hoodie on and tucked his phone into the pocket.

“Luciel…?”

“Done.”

Miyeon watched as he began to walk towards the door, not quite sure how to take the statement before seeing him pull one of his boots on.

“…Where are you going?”

“Out.”

The girl stood, taking steps to close the distance.

“Are you really going to just run away?”

He gave a good twist and stomp of the ankle to get his foot into the second shoe.

“…I’ll come back after you’re asleep. I can’t handle this right now. Robot cat!”

“Meowy Active!”

“Robot cat, RFA messenger conceal protocol B006. And security protocol 7XY88M31Z.4A.”

“Roger Roger!”

“Luciel…”

A gust of stale air rushed in from the hall as he opened the door and slammed it shut, not even bothering to look back.
So sorry for the delay guys! Had a bit of an accident back in late January that resulted in me breaking a finger on my typing hand, which added a good bit of recovery time before I could get this chapter out. Midterms and clinicals didn't help either. But it's a LONG chapter to make up for it. We're about to get to the good stuff. I should have all of May off, which means more frequent updates. I'll be starting full time clinicals in July so things may slow down a bit then. Thank you for bearing with me. The time is about upon us to cover the week after day 11 and then the infamous After Story/Secret Endings. I am still debating on how to handle... Certain ( AHEM ) Scenes, so I welcome input. I'm thinking about either including them as a separate chapter for those who don't want to read adult situations - but I know I will likely need to do something to separate it out for those who may not be okay with adult situations. I'm open to recommendations there. I do also do quite a bit of fanart that I haven't posted anywhere, so if anyone knows a decent place to share that - I'd be happy to post some of that ( including some more adult content oriented work that I've done ).

You're all amazing. :3

Chapter 22:

This was only the second time he’d stepped out of the apartment since he’d arrived. It wasn’t a long distance, but it had been days since Seven’d slept or stretched properly… He’d been hunched into a corner since the day before with no sleep after having run quite a distance carrying his gear. Every agent had to undertake physical training, but it didn’t stop his body from aching from the abuse he’d put it through over the past few days. Parts of him were still tender from the scuffle with his brother. But that all paled to the years of guilt, regret, self-loathing, and frustration that were crashing around him.

He could take physical pain…

His heart though…

All these years as an agent, he’d seen so many sad and ugly things. Affairs, money laundering, screwing over workers for the sake of their bosses, misinformation campaigns, blackmail, and so much worse… They always affected him, but they were never his pain. It was easy to push it aside and do what was asked. Those were the dirty things he had to do to… The things he’d agreed to do so Saeran wouldn’t have to.

He had been doing these horrible things for NOTHING.

He KNEW better than to blindly trust anyone; he of ALL people should’ve known better than to trust the lovely blonde girl at that church and her boyfriend. But Jihyun had never lied to him.
He always seemed so sincere and those light eyes of his would always convey warmth and concern. They treated him with compassion and with dignity… Was it all a lie? He kept making excuses but striking them out the instant that they came. There had to be a reason, but the bottom line was that trusting him had been a mistake… One he couldn’t make again.

Stupid…

He was so stupid!

Had the whole thing been a plan to separate them from the start? Maybe that’s why he and Rika had trouble… Why she did that to his eyes and why she took her life… Had V betrayed her too?

Maybe his father and V were more alike than he ever allowed himself to acknowledge.

The bastard couldn’t even be bothered to offer an explanation. Maybe it was because he knew there was no point…

His steps grew faster to put distance between him and anything reminding him of the photographer. What else could he do? There were so many books he’d read that emphasized that having hope and wanting a way out was enough. What the hell did those people know about how the world really worked? It was one thing to say things would get better, but what about the children in the world who had grown up like him…

Granted the same could be said of the prayers that he’d made to God. Looking to Christ, Mary, and V to save him from his hell and from himself… God was supposed to have a plan. What was the point to all of this? Punishing him would’ve been enough, but not his brother too.

Miyeon’s small but strong voice echoed in his head like a distant chapel bell… “God? Don’t blame god for your decisions. You’re the one choosing to act this way.”

But what other choice was there?

His entire life was a “Kobayashi-Maru” scenario – there was no way it could end happily. He tried having hope and finding a way out only to find it was all the same shit just in a different setting. In trying to spare his brother from being drawn in, he’d only made it worse. Now the RFA and some innocent girl were involved, there was no containing it. Even if he tried to explain things, his brother wouldn’t believe him because he had no integrity to bank. It was far too late to go back to how things were before he’d betrayed the person who was most important to him. By the very slim chance that they did reconcile, it’d just pull Saeran into the crosshairs of the agency. Not only as collateral against him, but his brother was exceptionally talented as a hacker. They’d kill him and simply replace him with his brother, assuming they didn’t liquidate both. If he gave himself up, they might just send him to a re-education camp and torture him for a few months. But doing that meant that the RFA and his brother could never be free and everything he’d worked to protect would be betrayed. Out of countless nightmare scenarios, that seemed to be the worst.

Before it was just their parents… Now it was the unholy trinity of horrors that his stupidity and naivety had unleashed upon them. He didn’t see any way out. There was no “help” coming though – it was only him and God… More than ever he needed a miracle. And as much as he joked about being a deity, he knew there was very little he could do if this was his Creator’s will… The bitterness of how inevitable it all seemed filled the hollow depths of him with misery.

As he walked the neighborhood, quietly he hoped a sign of some sort. It was perhaps conceited to think that someone who was obviously so incapable of recognizing the truth anymore
could ask for such a thing. Christ was supposed to reach to the weak and the wicked who sought salvation… Was he beyond help now?

There were so many normal people… Families, groups of students hanging out, couples, and even single people more content than him going about their normal lives. They were completely oblivious to the bomb in the apartment, the Agency, and the burdens on him. All of them still walked a path to heaven and could enjoy the small luxuries that normal people took for granted.

Seven envied them… Yet someone, somewhere had to be happy. Certainly, he didn’t wish them any ill. Rather he ached for a boring life too.

Eventually the red head settled into an internet café not too far from the apartment, burying himself into checking on his systems through some pretty gaping holes in their security. Other guys his age were talking enthusiastically about games, girls, their crappy jobs, college, and ordinary things in the cubicles around him. During his time in America, he’d idly pretended to care about such things… Yosung was so lucky to have normal concerns like the boys behind him but didn’t appreciate it… He’d rather be facing down the boiler room that was the Korean education battleground than this.

A check over the systems showed that hacker hadn’t done much since earlier, which told him that his brother had quite a trip back or no one else at that cult was as skilled as him. A practical side of him was annoyed that he’d wasted an opportunity to get sleep. Another part of him was worried if Saeran was getting enough rest. He looked thin and pale… Surely whatever he’d drugged Miyeon with was something being given to him too. Then again the concoction had been enough to knock her out, Saeran was able to function.

…Maybe Miyeon was sleeping now.

He logged into the messenger to check, hoping that he could return and maybe try to get some rest.

Miyeon: Seven!

Miyeon: Are you feeling any better?

Just like that night, even though she’d been attacked – she worried about him. How could anyone be that bright and caring? Even God had seemingly abandoned him, yet she still reached out desperately with those little hands of hers. There was no way she could lift him out of his sorrows, but that didn’t stop her from trying… If any part of her touched him, there would be no salvation for her either. He had no choice but to keep pulling away. It was for her own good, didn’t she understand that? She’d already been hurt; it didn’t make sense.

The girl had to have selective hearing.

Looking back at the messages, every word from her had been so encouraging to everyone else. No one else knew about the bruises on her or the cuts on her feet. She was all smiles and kind words… Not a single slip of his secrets, fear, or angst. Her every word showed faith in him and concern that he didn’t deserve. The guilt of it made the cup of instant noodles he’d purchased nauseating.

He wanted her to stop…

He wanted to stop…
707: Why are you still up?

As he typed it out, Seven wondered if she’d hear him yelling at her in her thoughts. His frown deepened at the thought…

Miyeon: I’ve been thinking about what you said to me earlier…

His hands felt weak. Maybe she “got it” now. Strange, he didn’t feel relieved by that at all. Rather, his guilt and bitterness at reality only deepened.

707: I must have really hurt your feelings.

707: I had no choice… that’s the truth.

707: Going forward, if I have anything to say, I’ll do it here.

The further he kept her, the easier it’d be to slip away from her gravity. He wouldn’t have to see that wounded look on her face or the pitiful look in her beautiful eyes as she tried to reason with him. Even now he could imagine the sad expression peering down into the glow of her phone, the long strands of her hair hanging loose.

Focus…

707: I have something to say regarding your safety for now.

707: When it comes to V… I meant the last thing that I said, and that will not change.

707: I no longer trust V.

707: And you shouldn’t either.

Miyeon: I understand, although that doesn’t mean that everyone else will…

Miyeon: Luciel, now might be a good idea to explain to everyone why you feel that way.

Miyeon: If you wait, you may not get a chance to be heard properly…

His thumb idly tapped the screen with hesitation.

707: Yeah…

707: You’re probably right…

707: It’s personal, so I won’t go into details, but to summarize the facts…

707: Saeran is my twin brother.

707: Due to family issues when we were young, my brother and I had to part ways.

707: Our biological parents weren’t really… capable of being parents to us.

707: So V gave me an opportunity to be independent by joining up with an intelligence agency when I was in middle school.

707: I wasn’t permitted to stay with my family or have any contact, but V and Rika promised me they’d take good care of Saeran.
Before Seven could even begin to put into words what his brother had become because of the photographer…

Miyeon: You must’ve had complete faith in V to trust him with someone so precious to you.

707: I did… At the time, I really thought he was an angel from Heaven.

707: I felt that I owed my very life to him.

707: I trusted him completely.

His eyes stung remembering the kind words, encouragement, and protection the man had offered him as a child…

707: It’s been a debt that I felt I couldn’t ever repay, which is why I dedicated myself to him and the RFA.

707: I’ve done everything he’s asked and had faith in him.

The stale gratitude soured in his gut to hurt…

707: Till now, I’ve never had a reason to doubt.

707: Then I discover that the person who has been hacking the RFA, sending those invitations, and who attacked you was my very own brother…

707: V let him end up like that.

Miyeon: Is it possible he did it in secret?

Miyeon: Were V and Rika keeping you informed?

707: Because of what I do, I couldn’t risk anyone finding out about my brother.

707: I can’t really keep watch on him directly because of that…

707: Rika told me he was going to school and was doing well, but never details.

707: As long as he was happy… That was enough for me.

707: Like an IDIOT I believed that no news was good news.

707: I considered that man my father, Miyeon.

Miyeon: Considering how deeply her death impacted everyone else, is it possible that Saeran took it hard and joined that Mint Eye place because he was lonely? V has been out of the country a lot…

707: It doesn’t matter.

707: V PROMISED me he’d take care of my brother.

707: If something had happened, he could’ve told me. And just now you saw how he lied and avoided answering my questions.

707: There is no reason or excuse he can give me that can make this right. Whatever the cause, there is no denying that he neglected his duty to my brother.

Miyeon: I don’t think anyone can deny that.
Miyeon: Everyone will want to know his side…

707: He’ll just lie…

Miyeon: That’s possible… I don’t know V as well as you do, Luciel, but I trust that you had a very good reason for putting that much faith in him. I trust your judgement…

Miyeon: What ever happened, Saeran needs help now.

Miyeon: I want to believe that we can all agree on that much.

It angered him a little to have things pushed aside, at the same time, it was true… How she could feel that way too after he’d attacked her so viciously…? She was so strange… Maybe stupid… He couldn’t know. Thinking about it made him feel weird.

707: The other members will have to decide what they believe and agree to on their own. It’s not my concern.

707: To be honest, I don’t trust this party that V has authorized either.

707: I don’t even care about it at this point.

Miyeon: Your family is more important. Everyone understands that. But there are still people who are counting on the funds the party will raise to help them, so I suspect it will go on.

Miyeon: Part of me sort of hopes we can all work it out and that this is all a misunderstanding…

Miyeon: But the only thing I know for certain is that you and your brother need each other now more than ever.

707: I spent so many years deceiving myself into believing that he was alright, and that he was better off without me…

Miyeon: You chose whatever the best option was at the time.

Miyeon: There’s nothing we can do to undo the past, only learn, and do our best to do better.

707: Yeah…

707: I can’t rest until I do something to make this right.

707: God…

707: For now, all I can do is gather information and go to that Mint Eye place myself to retrieve him.

Miyeon: What can we do to help?

707: Nothing.

707: Just stay safe and everyone else they should remain with their guards until I say otherwise.

707: Saeran hasn’t been active since earlier, but he hasn’t given up yet…

707: I am so sorry for all of the trouble my brother and I have caused the RFA, but I plan to make it right.

707: Peacefully… God willing.
707: From now on, I will act on my own. I’m done taking orders and being used…

Miyeon: Seven, are you sure there is nothing I can do?

707: Please don’t get involved any more than you already have… Just be cautious and keep yourself safe.

707: I’ve said everything I needed to say for now.

707: I must get going…

Miyeon: Luciel…

707: Miyeon, please try to get some sleep.

Miyeon: Just please promise me that you’ll take a break and rest too.

707: Don’t worry.

707: This is normal for me.

707: I’ll get going.

Everything inside him felt weird, brittle, and sore.

He looked over the security feed. The lights were still on at the apartment. The hacker checked every ten minutes with no change. Eventually his concern for her wellbeing overrode his desire to be apart from her and he began the walk back. It was a little after midnight when he entered the apartment complex again, having taken a long route just to make sure he wasn’t being followed. Rather than immediately go up to the apartment, the agent sat in the lobby, running checks through his phone.

His head sagged, his belly growled with agitation at the ramen, and he was nodding off. Eventually the delirium of it got to be too much. The lines of code were discussing the implications of Zhuangzi’s observation on the happiness of fish and how Linux kernels were the best fish food. It all turned to chaos when a goldfish cake joined the conversation asking where it fit into the command line…

“Excuse me. Are you waiting on someone or do you need help finding a place to stay?”

Seven nearly jumped out of the oversized couch that he’d slowly been melting into. A security guard looked down at him. He did his best to give off an air of authority but failed miserably. They were too similar in age for it to be effective.

The agent gave his phone a little wag. “Girlfriend problems,” he noted, doing his best to offer a sheepish little smile.

“Oh, sorry, dude. We can’t have you sleeping in the lobby though.”

“Sorry. Once she calms down, I’ll go back. It’s just been tough with work – they have me working so much overtime and she’s not happy because she never sees me. They expect us to make all this money but get mad because you’re not spending as much time with them, you know?”

Quietly the guard nodded. “I hear ya… Tell you what, we have a couch in the breakroom,
you can crash there for a while until things cool down.”

“Really? Thanks, man!”

“Hey, it’s cool.”

Following the man back, the two chatted about the guard’s former relationship while Seven helped adjust his phone to give him unlimited calling without using a service… Well, at least as long as he used that sim’s card. The guard was more than willing to help keep an eye out for anyone suspicious. He described his brother and the Agency people he recognized, saying they were ex-boyfriends. His new ally seemed all too willing to “help a bro”.

Between catbot and the guard agreeing to keep an eye out on the 14th floor with walkthroughs every fifteen minutes… Maybe… Just maybe, he could get some rest…

There were vending machines, a TV with the news on, a card table, a microwave, and an old couch with old newspapers stacked nearby. The lingering tang of long since eaten cup noodles permeated the atmosphere. It made his stomach lurch at remembering the briny cup he’d had only an hour before. Out of all the trivial regrets he had, not eating the “Honey Buddha” fried chicken she’d made before he stormed out was at the top of the list.

Using his hoodie as a shield while laying down, Seven tried to find a comfortable position. The honey butter aroma was hot in his memory along with the crispiness as she bit into it… Then again, she was pretty scary cutting it up, but equally as cute in the kitchen.

The feed he could check from catbot’s cameras showed that the lights were still on in the apartment and Miyeon was reading in bed. The cat was sitting next to her as though it were a child’s beloved toy. Her expression was weary, melancholy even… But focused. Maybe she’d fall asleep soon.

Denying that he wanted to be next to her was pointless… Even if he’d not actually touched her in such an intimate way, Miyeon’s existence had been seeping color into his dull, miserable little world. It ached being away from her in a way not too different than what he often felt for Saeran. Since he’d left, a part of him was missing, no matter how he lay or moved, something would always feel off. Being with Miyeon had helped offset the unsteadiness, but without her, he was back to wobbling… Without his brother he had been missing half and without her he was hollow.

He was unsteady with her too, but if he had her and Saeran… No… That could never be… Especially not after what his brother had done to her.

Miyeon deserved much better…

Setting his alarm for two hours, the hacker closed his eyes. Sleep didn’t come easy as his mind mulled over the rouse he’d just pulled… It had been wrong to include her in his lie.

He’d wanted her to find a good man with an honest job… That was why he’d tried to pair her off with Yoosung. She was never supposed to be interested in him, but thinking back on those early days, they had always clicked. Her friend had called her the “maiden hermit”, which seemed to infer that she was a “good” girl by all accounts. Even if she wasn’t openly flirtatious or loose, Miyeon was too nice for her own good. It was easy to mistake kindness for interest… But they could talk about all sorts of nerdy things that most girls just weren’t into though.

She thought puppy bot was cool…
Thinking about the sort of person she’d end up with after he left made it even more impossible to lay comfortably. With drinking being as prevalent with men his age and older, he couldn’t feel confident in any sort of happy ending for her no matter how much he tried. The meals she’d cook and things she’d do would gradually become common place and expected; taken for granted… That was assuming that the economic and educational crunches didn’t result in her being parted from whoever she married with her being sent to the US with her children to take advantage of the less competitive college market.

She and Zen seemed to get along… But he’d heard how stressed large crowds made her. The thought of making bots to filter out negative comments that less gracious fangirls might make towards her was in the back of his mind. If she was with Jumin, it’d be the same thing – assuming “Daddy” Han didn’t try to woo her too. Although it was clear the girl didn’t see Jumin in that way. Her interest in his wealth was nonexistent and her leaning towards the interests of the working class put her in direct opposition to the businessman’s politics. Jumin did enjoy a good debate though, and she was just clever enough to maybe pique his interest.

Thinking of those possible futures again only made it more obvious that he didn’t want to live in any of them… Seeing her with anyone else in the RFA was just as bad as not seeing her at all… Things would be strange, at least for him. Jealousy wasn’t something he had felt since he was very young, and the thought of the bittersweet feelings of seeing her happy but on someone else’s arm was enough to make him want to turn himself in.

All he could do was make her cry while she would lie and pretend it was “a bug” to avoid him feeling hurt…

It didn’t make sense to him why she cared despite his prickly behavior. Maybe she thought she deserved it…? But she didn’t… No one deserved someone as good as her…

His troubled mind pieced together scenario after scenario as he tossed and turned on the dingy couch. Every time he felt comfortable, the lack of familiarity brought him back from the brink of peaceful slumber. A spring would dig into his back or the rough fabric would irritate him.

The baser part of him was so much more honest than the conscious part of him. He wanted to be naked with her in bed. To be intimate. It was very different than merely wanting to “sleep” with her. Desperately he needed feel her warm, smooth skin against him, petting him, and the vibration of the air against his breast as they spoke in the safety of the other’s arms. Across the pillow, he’d confess everything while her honey colored eyes saw the real Saeyoung. He could draw strength from the gentle curves of her petite frame, knowing that she was analog and physical… A direct connection through flesh. Something real… Proof of his existence as a flesh and blood man, not a cobbled together collection of aliases and lines of code.

He wanted to be free of his past - born anew.

With her, it felt possible… He could think she was foolish or naive, but deep inside, Saeyoung knew better. Her intuition was spot on and she was deceptively wise for her age… For every question she voiced, there were likely countless other scenarios running through her head too. Miyeon wasn’t stupid by any means. She couldn’t sleep because they were too alike, except the girl was honest. He was so good at lying that even his own twin, with whom he shared a unique, spiritual bond couldn’t figure things out…

But that didn’t work with Miyeon… Even with him treating her like this, it felt like she saw right through him. Even when she’d flinch or give him that pitiful look, it was clear she could read him like a book. It wouldn’t matter how much he snapped at her. To her, he was the same frightened, untrusting child Rika met all those years ago. Stupidly she kept reaching out and stubbornly he
refused to take her hand, no matter how desperate he was. In some ways, Miyeon was very much like V… Other than how close their birthdays were and the fact they shared a blood type. There was a quiet, warmth to them both that made him drop his guard in a dangerous way. A sincerity…

He didn’t want to taint her with thoughts of Jihyun though…

Miyeon wasn’t a liar though…

Maybe that’s why he kept hearing her voice in his restless repose rather than V’s. Slowly she’d become the voice of reason in his head… Painful truths came from those beautiful pink lips.

*People don’t pick up weapons they don’t intend to use…*

She was right… There were problems long before things got to this point that he chose to ignore… The situation between Rika and V had gone sour long ago. Rika’s paranoia had to come from somewhere. He was the idiot who had blindly trusted V without question.

The hacker gave up on trying to nap after an hour in, finding that the ache to be close to her and to protect her from the world was much greater than the self-loathing and desire to protect her from himself. Thanking the guard on the way up, he was reassured that he’d be notified if anyone “sketchy” showed up. It didn’t make him feel entirely better, but if he did disappear, that person could try to watch out for her a little at least.

As the elevator ticked up, his mind tried to find any excuse to delay it a little longer. He looked around the hallway as the door opened on the floor, but he rode it all the way up to answer another question that had been in the back of his mind since that night. The stairwell to the rooftop had been locked with a metal padlock that’d been cut open with the bolt cutter cast aside.

For someone so meticulous, there were signs that the entire attack had been somewhat rushed and impulsive. There was still rope and boot prints just a little smaller than his own as he retraced them. Saeran had left evidence all over the place. It was hard to tell whether he was confident nothing would happen or just desperate. Was his brother afraid of what would happen to him if he failed? What if he’d fallen and hurt himself? He found himself voicing those concerns aloud as he often did when his mind was so full. Quietly he tidied up the scene, took a picture with his phone, and made a note to make some security changes in the future. There was very little he could do right now…

It was a miserable trip back down to the 14<sup>th</sup> floor until he stepped out into the hall.

For over a week he’d gotten used to seeing the apartment from the camera in the corner. His heart lurched a little remembering how the girl would come out to wave at him, her little dance, and the cute things she did to try to cheer him on. The first time he’d watched her moving, she’d tripped on her own hoodie trying to pull the potted tree back into place… Lightly his fingers caressed the doorframe the girl would lean against. It was cool and smooth to the touch, yet it made him feel a little closer to her. Even though they’d been kilometers apart then, he could feel her heart reaching out to him.

If he could go back to that… That was more than he deserved. To feel her warmth and her smile through the data sent through visual feed was more than enough to make him happy. It was digital, but somehow felt more real. Everything was so tangled up inside him now.

Desperately Seven wanted her to greet him… To hug him like she’d said – “my heart is racing at the thought of such a warm welcome”…
He meant it then and did now.

It was bittersweet to see that the light in the apartment was off.

Something told him that even after the way he’d acted, she’d welcome him back, relieved, and with a smile that saw the real him somewhere in the pile of discarded identities and personas that drew pity, scorn, and estrangement.

Seven remotely disabled the catbot before opening the door as quietly as possible. Moonlight filtered into the apartment, softly illuminating the bed where Miyeon lay. There were markers, scissors, and paper set on the nightstand as though she’d been working on something but had cleared a spot beside her... A spot big enough for him, he realized with a swallow… It didn’t look intentional, but it sent his blood coursing all the same. For him, made the couch up like a real bed using things from the small linen closet. Catbot sat beside her, while the book he’d snapped out of her hands earlier rested in her arms.

That’s what she’d been reading…

Locking the door behind him, he was frozen…

The apologies were trapped in his throat along with a want to scold her for digging into his things, all bound with sentimentality. He felt weak. Something told him Zen had probably recommended the couch. The actor wasn’t wrong to worry, even if Saeyoung had self-control, he still was very much a man… He’d never force himself on another person, but if she asked earnestly and enthusiastically enough tonight, he would probably give in. If only for the clarity it might give him…

Thank God she was asleep…

He could see the rhythm of her breath, the unique bouquet of her scent, and the beauty of her sleeping face. There was something so subtly sad in her expression that echoed everything in his heart. As always, her one hand reached out… It was a habit of hers when she slept. Who was she reaching out to? He wanted to be that person.

Reflexively, Saeyoung reached for it before stopping short to simply resting his hand on the edge of the bed. No… Any more than this and he wouldn’t be able to stop himself.

She was so lovely.

It wasn’t a glamorous beauty… Miyeon wasn’t some pampered rose in a greenhouse to be put into a bouquet, she was the defiant wildflower that grew on the cold mountain tops or in the cracks in cement. The splash of unexpected joy and color where it ought not to have been. Small, easily overlooked, yet deceptively strong and defiant. It was a natural loveliness, something that no amount of makeup, clothing, or perfume could really capture. It was as commonplace as it was rare. Unappreciated yet so comforting and necessary for a happy soul. It was the subtle common beauty one found in the quiet moments of a busy day. She was the first shoots of green in Spring, glittering sun showers, the scent of leaves in autumn air, and the joy at seeing the first snowflakes in Winter. The comfort of warm food on a chilly day and the subtle sweetness of cold melon.

The strands of her long dark hair were loose along the bed, glimmering softly beside his fingers. How desperately he wanted to comb his fingers through, but he had no right to. She was trying to stay cheerful and had such faith in him despite everything. He was a horrible person though… He Being this close made him want to be so much closer and so far away at the same time. Their perihelion was his aphelion... It was as though he’d burn and freeze as the heat of his longing...
was matched by the cold of reality. He was going to be torn apart!

They could travel the world together, leaving all of it behind... He'd been learning Arabic, although Australia could be nice too. It would be easy to get lost in the far reaches of the desert outback. A few weeks, months, or maybe a year of happiness and experiencing her love and joy would be worth it to him. Precious good mornings, good nights, and being near her like this... To wake up to a kiss and a hug, fights over nothing, and sweet reconciliations. The agency would eventually find them and put an end to it though. He didn't want to die, but a dark part of him was very aware that in such a situation a decision would have to be made. When it came down to it, he'd rather they died together on their own terms than let her be trafficked outside the country for a lifetime of sex slavery... The fact that he could even think about such dark things made him all the aware of why he couldn't be with her.

A deep breath escaped her, letting him hear just enough of her to remind him of how desperately he missed the sound of her voice. The version in his own head hardly did it justice with how it tingled his ears. Even with his headphones on, he'd heard her talking to guests throughout the day. Her tone was so cheery and betrayed nothing of the situation they were in. He wished she'd say those sweet words to encourage him; those little things made Saeyoung want to try harder. Even when there were frustrated tears in her eyes, she burned so brightly with the hope that things would get better. That beautifully defiant, courageous fire in such a little heart...

Miyeon’s honey colored eyes were sealed behind long, full lashes for now though...

If she could just wake up and tell him again; he’d listen properly... This angel, who seemed to see so much clearer than himself, guided him with her painful questions and futile hopes. He’d believe her gospel of foolishness; baptizing himself in her tears and the sweat of her wanting body as they made love. If he was truly going to die anyway, it wouldn’t matter. God really wouldn’t forgive him then, but an eternity in Hell was already guaranteed for someone like him... A few moments tasting Heaven on her lips and feeling the gentle embrace of her body was by far the sweetest sin he could commit, albeit the greatest.

But Seven couldn’t even be sure if he had a “tonight” let alone a “tomorrow” to give her. A sniper could be on the building across the street just waiting for the right moment. Even his walk out earlier had been an invitation of death. If he was lucky, Seven could look forward to a gunshot to the back of the head in the most remote reaches of the mountains... That was unless he was sent to a re-education camp... Or just beaten to death to make an example. In any case, if there was enough of his brain matter intact to even form a thought, Seven knew it’d be of her and Saeran.

If only he could be so lucky as to have her beautiful, peacefully sleeping face be the last thing he’d ever see... But not within days, weeks, or months. He wanted a lifetime with her and his brother, living simply, happily. Until now, he hadn’t really cared to live. It wasn’t that he wanted to die, but right now he probably wouldn’t do much to stop it if it weren’t for the both of them...

A sigh escaped her, and he found himself breathing in, drawing her essence deep into his core. Saeyoung held the air perfumed with her in before slowly letting his breath free... Maybe her essence was contagious? At the very least... Those oxygen and carbon dioxide molecules could maybe be part of him so he could always have a part of her with him. Even if he felt a little like a creeper, something told him Miyeon would understand. She seemed to “get” him, even when he didn’t get himself...

“You’re so weird, you know that?” he murmured softly.

There was no reply from the sleeping girl... Earlier she’d snapped back at him. It was so cute when she was cross with him, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit it at the time. Seven missed
her exasperated pout behind those long bangs of hers. Even her annoyance was light and bubbly…

“You can get angry with me for saying this… But seeing you makes me think of the 707 I am in the messenger. You’re really like him. Cheerful… Optimistic… Nothing like Saeyoung… I’m such a pessimistic person, not the happy-go-lucky person from the chat room. This icy, cynical person is the real me. I wish you’d realize that… That way you can get disappointed and move on. But no matter what I do to convince you of that, you just won’t understand. You shouldn’t waste your feelings on someone like me. But you’re strange and will probably keep trying, and I’ll probably end up hurting you again tomorrow morning…”

The words caught in his throat at remembering her voice…

_You’re the one choosing to act this way._

“I’m the strange one, aren’t I?” he sighed. “… Sometimes I dream about you accepting the real me… It’s ridiculous, but thank you for at least letting someone like me dream…”

Was she just pretending to be asleep…?

“Miyeon, is it wrong for me to maybe hope you dream of me too, just a little? Maybe the me in your dreams can be happy at least… If you can hear me: don’t trust V… anyone… especially me… Please don’t give your heart to anyone else in the RFA, and… Be less nice to me so that it won’t hurt when I disappear… Just forget about me, keep yourself safe, and live a long happy life, okay?”

His chest was so tight and his eyes burned with all the things he wanted to say, but she could never hear…

“Letting me protect you is much more than I deserve… That’s enough for Saeyoung.”

*****

The girl wasn’t quite sure when she’d fallen asleep but a sense of dread filled her at the unpleasantly familiar stillness of being alone settling in her ears. Since Luciel had arrived to the apartment, her waking moments were accompanied by the sounds of the red head working in his little corner. The pitter patter of his fingers beating out a rhythm on his mouse while he thought, the ever slower (but still rapid) pace of his typing, and the long, resigned sighs that punctuated every few minutes had been an affirmation that she was safe, or at least, she wasn’t alone. Maybe Saeran had felt the same way once.

Had he really abandoned her that easily?

He wouldn’t have been the first…

Once Miyeon summoned the courage to lift her head, she was greeted with the unexpected sight of a splash of red from a shirt and Luciel’s lanky form sprawled on the couch. Fear filled her until a few moments of watching him confirmed he was still breathing. Poor thing was so exhausted that his mouth was partially open as he drew in air. It wasn’t the most attractive thing, but it was sort of endearing. From the look of it, he had only meant to lay to stretch while continuing to work via his phone. Instead, he’d fallen asleep with one arm over his face, pushing his glasses up over his head, while the other hung loose at the side of the couch, the phone was on the floor. Thank goodness he was finally getting some rest… Maybe he’d be a little less irritable now, although that didn’t change everything he’d said to her.

While he’d been gone, she had plenty of time to consider her options…
Some of them were very rash.

Some of them she even discussed many of them with Catbot when it accurately picked up that she was “depressed”. For something that looked so like a toy with a squeaky voice, it’s capacities were anything but child’s play... Her memory had hung onto one key phrase from before Seven stormed out:

*That’s a voice I absolutely have to obey, meow!*

She understood enough about computers to know that a statement like that wasn’t just it an idle statement. Those were the parameters... While he’d been gone, Miyeon had tested exactly how far it’s obedience to her would go and just how formidable of a tool it could be if wielded properly. Provided she phrased the request appropriately, Catbot would “absolutely obey” a request to block his ability to access it if she asked as much. It could likely copy and refine Seven’s own algorithms to hack into the C&R bank account if she asked, and so much more. She was half tempted to set it to take over the fight against Saeran’s cyber-attack, although going head to head with someone who clearly possessed a genius intellect like his brother and maybe had a decade of IT experience seemed beyond its ability just yet.

The girl had tested other things though… Catbot could easily open the drawers for her to see what was in them and hide that she’d done such a thing. Thankfully, the contents of the one drawer she’d had unlocked were Rika’s cosmetics. No alarms had gone off and the red head hadn’t stormed back in to fuss at her. Her courage ended there though, as every creak and sound made her sure he had come back. The prospect of that was equal parts relief and anxiety though.

Surely Seven was testing if he could trust her… He wouldn’t leave something that powerful with her with such a poorly constructed command parameter. Then again… Luciel being a genius, used to dumbing things down for those around him, might not have realized she would figure something like that out… Or maybe he thought she’d be too “good” to do it.

To a degree he was right… But Miyeon was doing lots of things she’d never considered before though… She would utilize Catbot if the need arose, although her best bet was getting its creator back to a stable state. Seven needed someone to support him and to have faith, namely himself. The hacker wasn’t making that easy though, considering how he’d stormed out the night before. Every time there seemed to be any progress forward, Luciel pulled back with more force and grew more volatile each time he erupted. It was an extreme situation to be sure, and she wanted to be understanding, but another part of her was very aware of a potential for it to become a cycle of abuse – if it wasn’t already…

The second he’d slammed the door on the way out, it had shut the more tender feelings that might’ve grown back into the cynical box she kept them in. Really, she wasn’t in love with him; they didn’t really know each other. It was infatuation… Limerence was neurochemistry and was fleeting. It was just a chemical reaction that lasted long enough for a breeding pair to produce offspring, get the child to a point where it could walk, before eventually fading out and turning into tolerance. Eventually people quit doing even that much… There were exceptions, but she’d watched those feelings of “love” fade. Her brother had died for it… So many people suffered under the illusion that they needed “love” and couldn’t be alone. Those who “loved” their abusers… What she’d felt for him before was just limerence… Or a need to escape her own problems… As the more clinical, detached side of her stepped in to quash the more tender feelings, it took her appetite with it. It hurt being this close to him and remembering how only hours ago, his voice brought her comfort and warmth.

She understood why so many cultures called this feeling a “crush”…
In order to let him rest, the girl did everything in her power to keep the apartment quiet. Her shower was short. Rather than preparing another meal that’d go uneaten or warm up leftovers, she kept things light with just a bit of juice before taking a spot on the outside patio to work. She brought catbot with her. The bot seemed content enough to act as guard and to help with some of the party preparations. There were a few matters regarding the catering and entertainment that were pending. She focused on getting those handled before Jaehee could. Usually the executive assistant would begin around 7:30 or so… Miyeon had about an hour, which she used effectively.

If she stayed busy, there wouldn’t be any time to dwell on her misery…

Jumin and Zen were both up early too, as she felt her phone vibrate with notifications on active messages in the group chat. It went about as she expected. The actor being as empathic and considerate as he was had his concerns for his friend. The business man showed no outward sign of disturbance and opted to keep things on course regarding the party. This lead to the expected bickering between reason and sentiment. Maybe it was the restless night, but she couldn’t find it in herself to play mediator. Despite his inability to properly relay his reasoning for it, the girl agreed with Jumin regarding going forward. Whatever Mint Eye had planned or V for that matter, C&R’s security force could probably handle it. The company’s reputation was involved, as was her own… Although V had the final say, despite being a ghost for the most part. That was a debate in and of itself, although the actor and businessman were still on the fence regarding the whole situation, waiting to hear the RFA’s mysterious chairman explain himself.

Once the CEO to be left the chat to check with Assistant Kang, Miyeon’s phone rang.

“Can you believe that guy? Seriously, he has no heart,” grumbled Zen.

“Even robots have motors.”

His chuckle brightened her mood a little. At least someone wouldn’t yell at her.

“So how are things there…?”

Miyeon’s fingers reflexively tightened on the phone. Something told her if she asked, he’d come pick her up… The conversation could even be listened in on, so there wasn’t much she could say. Zen wasn’t concerned about the more real concerns though… His tone made it clear he was more concerned about her honor. He trusted Seven to keep her from others harming her but not from temptation; if only he knew how safe she was in that regard.

“Quiet, for now.”

“I guess with everything going on, being alone with a cute girl is the last thing on his mind… That makes me feel better on that front at least, but the rest of it is just… It’s too much, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“I wonder what happened between Seven and his brother. I mean, I had issues coming up with my family too… It must’ve been pretty intense for those two to end up as hackers.”

“Yeah… Zen. What do you think about V?”

“V? Well… Up till now, I guess I sort of looked up to him in a way. He saved my life. I was involved in a motorcycle accident a few years ago, he saved me.”

“Oh god…”
“I’m fine!” he assured her.

“What happened…?”

“I took a corner too fast. V found me and took me to the hospital. He even contacted my parents, although he and Rika did much more for me than they did. Honestly, the RFA is more like a family to me than my own blood… I guess it’s even more like that for him and Seven. Considering he handles security, he probably knows more about V than any of us except maybe Jumin. You know, I didn’t even think Seven could get angry. He’s always been so weird and goofing around. How he’s acting now bothers and worries me. I get why he’s upset though, it wouldn’t have hurt V to tell him if something happened. Then again, his brother is the same age as him, so maybe he did something on his own.”

“It’s hard to say. I’m wondering if something happened maybe after Rika died…”

“That’s possible, maybe he took it hard too?”

“Maybe… But I think he’s a victim in this too,” Miyeon sighed. “…All these needless secrets and conspiracies… If people would just say what they feel and be honest with each other, a lot of this could’ve probably been avoided.”

“You’re probably right… But I’d be out of a job if it were that simple. Most plays rely on miscommunication, misunderstandings, and the drama of conspiracy! Although I would prefer my drama to stay on the stage, you know?”

The girl chuckled breathlessly. “Same here! Although I think even Lovely Zen could make a play without drama enjoyable too.”

“Ah… There she is.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re a pretty good actress, but as a professional, I can tell you’re sort of going through the motions… Are things really okay there?”

“No…” she answered honestly, with a brittle laugh. “But I’m alive enough to complain so that’s something!”

“Jagiya… Seven’s not mistreating you is he?” his tone was decidedly more sharp.

“Nothing like that…”

“Even if he’s having a rough time he shouldn’t take it out on you. I honestly don’t get why you two are still in that apartment with the bomb to begin with… There are much safer places to go.”

“I can’t really get into details, but I trust Seven’s judgement about where we are. He has good reasons for it.”

“He’s rubbing off on you in a bad way… So… Do you like him?” Zen asked, his voice wavering some. “Like… As a man.”

Her gut lurched.
“…I don’t like the way he’s acting right now,” she replied softly.

“That doesn’t answer my question. How do you feel?”

“…Like an idiot…” she chuckled, feeling a bit sorry for herself.

“…Miyeon…”

His voice was so soft and gentle compared to the hacker who’d been scolding her.

“I promise I’ll do what I can for your friend – so the RFA can be a happy family again… So we can help people and make the world a better place. I promise…”

“God… If that dude doesn’t realize how lucky he is… I’m serious by the way… Whatever happens with Luciel, you know you can always come to me, right?”

“I do, oppa… Thank you… When this is all over, it’ll be nice to get to know you properly.”

“That’s right! The party is just the beginning! Maybe we could do something for Christmas too! “

“And Jaehee and I can see one of your plays after the party.”

“Oh! Just thinking about it gets me all worked up! Seeing such a pretty lady in the audience, phew! Just hang in there and don’t let Seven get you down, alright? Make sure he knows that we’re here for him.”

“Of course, if I can get that through that thick head of his… And Hyun, thank you so much for cheering me up.”

“Ou… You called me by my name… I feel all hot now! Ah! Should I send a selfie too? You know what? I’ll send a pic every few hours to keep your spirits up! So hang in there, pretty girl.”

“You too, lovely Zen. Good luck at practice.”

“Thanks! I’ll talk to you later, Miyeon.”

Gently she stroked catbot on the head as though it were a living thing, admiring how it was sunning itself to recharge one of the backup solar batteries on board. To call it a marvel wasn’t doing it nearly enough justice. Luciel could easily advance the world of robotics and space exploration on his own with having the ability to make something like it. Yet he had trapped himself in the world of hacking, bound with invisible chains. Surely he realized that the only one holding him to that was himself. Catbot seemed practically alive…

“I feel bad I didn’t ask last night. Did he give you a name at all?” she asked.

“Designation Robocat – M.E.O.W.Y.”

Miyeon quietly pondered the letters and phonetics.

“Robocat and Meowy… Not very original, but I guess he did make you in a hurry, huh?”

The bot continued to study her expectantly for another order or more questions.
“How about Kisa?”

“K.I.S.A.? The Korean Internet and Security Agency, meow?”

“Not that one!” Miyeon corrected hurriedly. “But maybe using that could be a good cover for now too… No, there’s a fairy tale about a cat named Kisa, who saves a princess.”

“Will Meowy-on tell Meowy this story?”

“I can… Maybe you can play it for him later if something happens to me.”

“Meowy will protect you!”

Miyeon ran her fingers under the smooth chin. Maybe it was sturdier than it looked. The thought of it latching onto someone’s ankle made her smile. “I know you will… Let me see if I can find it on my phone… It’s-…”

“By Lang, Andrew – meow… Should be on your phone now!”

“You’re fast.”

The machine had already toddled over and plopped on her lap like an expectant child.

“You’ve probably already processed it.”

“Recording, Meowy-on!”

“Oh? Already! Ah… This might be a bit rough. My English is really rusty.”

“Should Meowy translate?”

“It’s fine! I need the practice…” God only knows where they’d have to go to find Mint Eye… “Once upon a time, there lived a queen who had a beautiful cat, the colour of smoke, with china-blue eyes, which she was very fond of. The cat was constantly with her, and ran after her wherever she went, and even sat up proudly by her side when she drove out in her fine glass coach.”

Miyeon changed her voice to be a bit more eloquent, although she’d been stumbling through phonetically sounding things out. It’d been years since she’d taken English… Seeing it was one thing, saying it aloud was another.

“Oh, Kitty,’ said the queen one day, ‘you are happier than I am! For you have a dear kitten just like yourself, and I have nobody to play with but you.’”

Softly she changed to a more feline tone only to find catbot reading it.

“Don’t cry -meow,’ answered the cat, laying her paw on her mistress’s arm. ‘Crying never does any good. I will see what can be done! Meow!’”

The two of them continued reading in that fashion, although the cat was much better than her. By the end, however, the robot cat seemed satisfied. It’s small white paw rested politely on the page. A real cat might’ve simply laid on the book and gazed back up at her expectantly for a pet. Memories of the first time she’d ever seen a picture of Luciel ran through her mind. He had been holding Elizabeth the III up and was playing with her ears. From the way Jumin talked about it, and that image, it seemed that he treated cats more like children and approached them with the curiosity of a child himself. Despite his fascination and clear love of them, he had no idea of how to approach
them or interact with them. He couldn’t have pets as an agent and very likely had never had a pet as a child. He had Saeran; Saeran had him… Until he left.

Her heart recalled keenly the pain she felt when Jun-Seo took his own life. There was still a part of her that ached because they’d never found the body. For months she denied that he’d even jumped from the bridge where they found his belongings. It was cold and the water was fast, but he was a great swimmer. The “maybe’s” and “what if” scenarios tormented her… Miyeon would torture herself with the thought that he was still out in the world. Eventually she came to the hollow truth: he was dead to her by his absence. Whatever the cause, he wasn’t with her… She was alone and he’d actively chose to leave her to mourn him, watch their parents’ marriage break apart, and for her to watch alone as their father succumbed to cancer. Miyeon wasn’t sure what was worse. Not knowing was hell though…

To that degree, she understood Saeran…

It didn’t excuse his treatment of her, but she could understand why he felt such anger with his brother… He’d been abandoned to suffer alone, like her, although to a worse degree. If things were so bad for them as children, then it made sense he’d want a family or someplace safe too. Remembering the depravity and desperation in how he’d kissed her… He wanted to “save” her, maybe from her former life, although the pink haired hacker’s concept of “saving” was warped. His concept of salvation was ownership and enslavement… That wasn’t something he could’ve been exposed to from Seven; unless something far worse than she’d imagined occurred to the both of them. It wasn’t unheard of for men to be victims of such things… If only the former RFA party organizer was still around so she could ask. If V was like a father to them, then surely Rika would know something too.

It was nearly nine before there were any signs of life from the couch. When she glanced in, Luciel had taken to looking at his phone with a dour expression before disappearing into the bathroom only to emerge ten minutes later, showered, changed into a fresh red shirt, before proceeding to plop down at his usual spot in the corner of the floor with a Dr.Pepper. Not even an acknowledgement of her presence…

Rather than risk getting yelled at, Miyeon remained quiet on the balcony and focused on party arrangements. There was only one day until the party… Jaehee was already onsite at the venue, although she’d brought supplies with her to maintain her office work. The older woman expressed concern in her own way, although it was professional due to the time of day. Unlike Zen wanting to know about her “virtue”, Yoosung’s inquiries for his own sake, and Jumin’s cold indifference – the business woman was warm and encouraging when time allowed. If they all made it out alive, the girl would happily purchase tickets to Zen’s next performance herself to make up for the stress she was causing the other woman.

Her phone vibrated with a message from the chatroom. Reflexively she clicked over, anticipating the executive assistant following up.

707 – Miyeon.

707- Hello.

The surprise made her freeze. Biting her lip helped her restrain the list of grievances she wanted to address. It was only after a deep breath and a rewrite or two that she came up with a reply. He was barely twenty feet away from her… Yet it may as well have been lightyears.

Miyeon- Hi… How’s working going?
707- It’s going well.

707- So Jumin’s going ahead with the party…

707- Even though the RFA doesn’t mean anything now, since V’s a liar.

    Miyeon’s entire body clenched to the point her phone let out a small pop. There were so many things wrong with that statement and his attitude. It wasn’t just “Jumin”… Jaehee was working herself hard to make it happen. Zen, despite his reservations, wasn’t “nothing”. Yoosung’s help wasn’t for “nothing” either… Not to mention her own hard work. There were still people who the charity could help. The egocentric view that none of that mattered because one person who had personally wronged him gnawed greedily on the last string of patience she had.

707- I guess Jumin’s holding out hope.

* Yoosung has entered the room.

Yoosung- Seven!

Yoosung- Are you okay!?

707- Yeah. Don’t worry about me.

707- Just be careful.

Yoosung- T_T

    Good… He wasn’t going to be a total jerk. The blonde hadn’t done anything and would likely sympathize the most with him about V.

Yoosung- hey, Miyeon

Miyeon- Yoosung, you understand how Seven feels, right?

Yoosung- Of course!

Yoosung- I understand everything Seven said – 100%!

Yoosung- There’s something more important than the party.

Yoosung- Seven

Yoosung- Is there anything I can do with like

Yoosung- catching the hacker or like finding information?

707- No

Yoosung- We may find out something about what happened to Rika!

Yoosung- Please let me help with anything!

707- I appreciate it, but it’s okay.

707- It’s probably better that you not associate with the RFA now too.

Yoosung- Seven.
Yoosung- I’m willing to do whatever it takes to find the truth!

Yoosung- Even risking myself.

707- Sorry to break your attempt at encouragement…

707- But this isn’t just dangerous.

707- The RFA is buried deep in V’s secrets.

Yoosung- I can handle it!

707- Don’t think it’s that easy.

Yoosung- I’m stronger than you think.

Yoosung- if we just work together

707- I said I don’t need your help.

Yoosung- I know I can’t do much… But still I want to help do something!

Yoosung- Maybe I can come to the apartment?

Yoosung- Miyeon will be safer with two gatekeepers!

707- You’re seriously acting pathetic right now.

Why couldn’t she bring herself to say anything? It was all going so fast!

707- I’m not just working for the RFA.

707- I’m trying to find my brother.

Yoosung- Right now – it’s the same.

Yoosung- Seven, you’re my friend!

Yoosung- We can get through this if we just work together!

707- I don’t want your help… And not any one from the RFA’s. I never will.

707- Besides…

707- I plan on leaving once I’m sure Miyeon’s safety is secured.

Yoosung- Whadadfl ad ft?

Yoosung- What!?

707- I was going to mention it before…

Yoosung- Seven! Wait!

Yoosung- What’s up with you?

Yoosung- Just because you’re mad at V doesn’t mean you should leave!
Yoosung- Jumin can be leader instead.

707- It’s not that simple.

707- And it doesn’t matter who is in charge; I’ve already made up my mind.

Yoosung- Seven… I know how you feel. I hated V for so long after Rika died. So I sincerely understand, but you don’t have to leave!

Yoosung- You’re still going to talk to us though, right?

Yoosung- We’re friends, aren’t we?

707- No. We were never “friends”. Once this is done, I’m going to disappear and forget everyone here.

707- That was going to happen anyway.

707- What else can a secret agent do?

Miyeon felt so sick… She wasn’t sure if it was tears of hurt or rage welling up in her eyes now. It was one thing for him to snap at her. Yoosung was blameless in the whole thing. Everyone else hadn’t done anything to him. He seriously was trying to destroy his own life. Her lips hurt from how tightly she was pursing them. He had so many people who cared about him - real friends. Luciel was so ungrateful…

Yoosung- You’re not serious, right?

Yoosung- Seven… You’re scaring me. ;;;

Yoosung- Did the hacker take over your account or something?

707- I meant everything I said.

707- So stop trying to involve yourself in things that don’t concern you.

Yoosung- What’s wrong with you?

707- I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you upfront that this was going to be out it would end. There was no point in pretending like any of this mattered.

707- Feeling sorry is sort of pointless too.

Yoosung- What are you talking about?

Yoosung- This si seraaegtryously…

Yoosung- Seven… I get that you’re angry with V, but you’re being rash.

707- No… It’s not just that.

707- I’ve always been like this.

Yoosung- SEVEN

Yoosung- I’m getting mad

707- You knew I was a secret agent.
707- I don’t have a real identity.

707- That means I don’t have friends either… Temporary connections.

Yoosung- You’re saying all those times we hung out was just nothing to you?

707- Yes.

Miyeon- Seven… That’s enough.

Yoosung- That’s ridiculous!

Yoosung- Showing off your new car

Yoosung- talking trash about your boss

Yoosung- going to the movies

Yoosung- going to the arcade

Yoosung- that time we went fishing

Yoosung- None of that mattered to you?

707- It was all meaningless. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you can move on with your life too.

Yoosung- I

Yoosung- I can’t believe this.

Yoosung- I don’t know anything about that agency…

Yoosung- But why are you thinking of just yourself?!

Yoosung- What do we do now?!

707- Sort your feelings out on your own time.

707- I will too.

Yoosung- I won’t accept that!

Yoosung- Whatever this crap is…

Yoosung- You’re my friend, Seven!

Yoosung- You don’t have to stop talking to us just because you’re mad at V or you’re an agent – WHATEVER!

707- The conversation is over. You and no one else will change my mind.

707- I was supposed to disappear from the start. I’m not sure how else I can explain it to you.

Miyeon- So my feelings don’t matter either, do they?

707- No. They don’t.
Yoosung- SEVEN!
Yoosung- WHAT THE HELL!?
707- You don’t know anything.
Yoosung- Why are you acting like this!?
707- Where I was born
Yoosung- Apologize!
707- Who my parents are
Yoosung- None of that matters!
707- What V’s been telling me…
707- What I do at the agency…
707- You don’t know anything about me.

Was he talking to her or Yoosung? Or himself to justify it. Her entire body was quivering, too numb and tense to even notice the robot cat paw on her leg.

Yoosung- I don’t have to!
Yoosung- Even without knowing that stuff- I thought I understood you!
Yoosung- But this person… I don’t know this person talking to me right now.
707- You’re right. You never knew me.
Yoosung- The Seven I know…
Yoosung- Was always bright and fun.
Yoosung- He did what he had to do.
Yoosung- He would never say things like this.
707- I’m not that person. I never was.
Yoosung- He said weird things sometimes…
Yoosung- But he was warm and kind.
Yoosung- He worried about us
707- What part of “it was all an act” are you not getting?
Yoosung- He helped Zen get famous
Yoosung- and with that one project I had to do
707- So what?
Yoosung- SO WHAT!?
Yoosung- You think you can just erase my memories?
Yoosung- I will never forget my friend.
Yoosung- I’m almost jealous you can say things like this and “forget” about us so easily.
Yoosung- Because I can’t.
Yoosung- WE can’t.

She felt the same… Maybe he’d get through…

707- Yoosung.
707- Miyeon.
Yoosung- This hurts you too.
Yoosung- So why are you doing this?
707- Stop it.
707- both of you
707- will never understand me
* 707 has left the room.
Miyeon- Yoosung… Are you okay?
* Yoosung has left the room.

For several minutes the girl sat in shock staring at the screen while the world beyond the balcony continued as though nothing had happened. The apartment was dead silent, not even the clattering of Luciel’s fingers on the keyboard. The words weren’t spoken, but they were there for the whole group to see. It wasn’t a total surprise, but it was a fatal blow to any hope she had to reason with the red head. Trying to save someone who had no interest in saving themselves was an exercise in futility.

Her phone began to vibrate again.

The vitriol sharpened her tongue, anticipating it to be Luciel… Instead, it was Yoosung.

“Yoosu-”

She scarcely got the strain out of her voice to greet him when the sound of his tears met her.
Where Miyeon had been holding back, the student and his gentle heart were more honest…

“Seven-“ he was sobbing so hard he could barely get it out ”SEVEN!”

The pain he felt was no doubt much worse than anything she could claim… He’d known the hacker for years. Shakily she stood and closed the glass door to the patio to limit the sound going into the apartment.

“Yoosung… He didn’t mean it,” she soothed. “I’m sure of it.”
“R…Really?”

“He’s just really confused and hurt now too…”

“Yes…” the blonde sniffled. “That has to be it. But! *sniff* I’m still hurt… I can’t believe he said those things…”

“I’m so sorry…”

On the other end there was some more simpering before he seemed to compose himself a little. “Everyone else in the group is so much older than me, except Seven. We spent so much time together… We used to hang out at least once week before classes started back up. We used to go to the arcade and team up – NO one could beat us! We were legends in that neighborhood!”

“Was that the same arcade you took me to?”

“Y-yeah!... I told him we should start traveling around until we were known around the entire country as the Kings of the Arcade – he laughed so hard… Looking back though, I remember how sad his smile looked. Probably because he knew one day he’d have to leave… I mean… I’ll always remember the fun we had together, but him saying that none of it matters to him… I always thought we were like best friends – that’s what I thought… I really love Seven, like a brother! It hurts that he doesn’t see that. Sure I get mad when he pranks me, but he never does anything that would really bother me bad… The Seven I know would never say those things to me… I know there’s not a lot he can tell us, but I always felt he was sincere. So why did he say all those things? Why?”

The composure he’d mustered was crumbling again.

“I think, in his own way, he’s trying to protect everyone… He seems to think the only way to keep everyone safe is for us to stay away from him,” Miyeon explained, moreso to keep him from crying… If he started again, she might not be able to keep up the strong front.

“That’s stupid! I don’t understand why him being away from us would keep us safe…”

“To be honest, I don’t think he really gets why he’s doing it this way either. He’s not thinking clearly right now.”

“…You’ve been dealing with him like this for days too, haven’t you?” the student realized. “…I’m sorry for crying on the phone… I should be listening to you – especially after what he said.”

“I’ll be okay… But I did think of something you could do to help.”

“Really?”

“The RFA isn’t made up of V… It’s you, Jumin, Jaehee, Zen, and Seven… Without you guys – there is no RFA – really - you haven’t needed V for awhile. And Rika would’ve wanted everyone to continue helping others – that’s what you told me from the start… There’s no reason why innocent people who need clean water should suffer because of what is going on between V and Seven either. Those people still need our help.”

“That’s right…”

“…The Seven you knew likely knows that too… Just like he knows that whoever that Mint Eye group is needs to be stopped… I won’t give up on him… or his brother either…”
You’re right that we can get through this together. Please trust me to try to talk some sense into him, but since I can’t go to help Jaehee, would you go there after class to help her get things ready? And if possible, could you see about the security being tightened? If we make it through this, maybe Seven’ll realize he’s being an idiot and want to see everyone there… If nothing else, it could be a going away party if he is serious about this.”

“Yes… But I don’t want to think of it like that.”

“Neither do I, but let’s try to make it the best party we can regardless. Could you do that for me Yoosung? Please.”

“For you, Miyeon…”

“Thank you, Yoosung.”

*****

The hacker heard the balcony door shut and paused his efforts to crack the satellite. He couldn’t hear who Miyeon was speaking to, although he had a good idea of who it was… For several minutes the girl paced, holding herself tightly. Now and then he’d pick up her strong, gentle tone over the hum of his equipment. She was facing outward as her hand holding the phone dropped along with her head. As the door slid back open, he pretended to be working. Something felt wrong… His back tightened hearing the door to the linen closet shut and the click of the lock.

Finally, he turned his head to confirm. She really had locked herself in the closet… A sense of guilt settled in his stomach despite his attempts to tell himself that she was just doing more laundry or tidying up more. The deafening silence was testament to something else though. When their mother would get really bad, Saeran and he would do the very same thing.

God… Was he really like that woman?

His eyes began to sting to the point that he couldn’t work. Was she that scared of him now? That wasn’t okay… He was supposed to be here to protect her. Yoosung’s words hit him too… People weren’t like hard drives; they couldn’t be erased and overwritten. While the student had fond memories of him; Miyeon’s were quickly becoming full of sad and horrible things… He didn’t want her to have memories like this of him… He wasn’t his mother or father… But he couldn’t do anything about it. It would hurt enough to hear her crying, but the quiet was even worse. What if she was hurt or did something drastic?

Unable to restrain himself anymore, Seven got up and closed the distance to the door. His knuckles tapped against the wood before trying the handle. She really had locked it.

“Miyeon…”

There was no reply.

He put his ear against the door. Small scuffles confirmed she was in there… The fear that his brother had somehow snuck back in and was doing something to her ate at him. It was irrational, but so was repelling down to the 14th floor and breaking bullet proof glass. No telling what’d happened when he’d left the apartment the night before.

“Are you in there?”

Still no reply.
“Are you angry with me?”
He could hear movement but no response.

“Are you hurt?”
Silence.

“Look. I don’t have time for to pla-“
Luciel had to step back to avoid getting hit by the door as it forcefully swung open.

“I’m here!” the girl shouted before a choked sound broke as she repeated more softly, “…I’m here…”

His mind scrambled to process the sight before him. Miyeon’s tears glistened on her cheeks although the rest of her was desperately fighting to hide it. The frailty of her tone cut him so deeply.

“Miyeon…”

“Please just… I’ll misunderstand if you drop the cold act now.”

Her saying it whipped the beast in him… Whether it was into submission or a fury he wasn’t sure yet. The whole situation was so confusing. How badly he wanted only to embrace her and apologize. The other part wanted to run. Instead, the harshness won out before he could catch it.

“It’s not an act.”

“LIAR!”

This was the first time she’d ever raised her voice. It was shrill and wild… The cold settled over him.

“I-I’m not ly-“

“If you didn’t care then you wouldn’t still be here!” she snapped, before the anguish came back. He couldn’t even bear to look at her. “Is the reason Saeran hates you so much because you treated him like this?”

“Don’t…”

“Was Saeran temporary too!”

He shook his head, clutched his hands, and stepped back to avoid doing anything worse… His mouth though…

“Exactly what do you know, college drop out?”

There was no taking that back after it was out… Part of him was looking forward to seeing the surprised look of hurt on her face, behind the tears was a frightening resolve.

“I know that the man capable of building a robot cat with that AI could easily figure out a way to save his brother and get away from the Agency and his past if he really wanted to… But the boy in front of me now is more interested preparing a funeral pyre with the bridges he’s burning.”
“You don’t understand… You can’t possibly und-“

“How am I SUPPOSED to understand when you won’t tell me anything?!”

“I’m trying to protect you!”

“By getting yourself killed and leaving everyone you care about defenseless? I never asked to be your guilty burden, Luciel! Besides, your “maid” already knows what I look like and knows that you have ties to the RFA, right?”

“…If I go they’ll leave everyone alone.”

“I’m not naive enough to believe that.”

“Please… You walked into this apartment after a stranger told you to,” he scoffed.

“That stranger was your brother,” she reminded him. “He used me to find you because he didn’t forget you… Just like Yoosung and I won’t…”

There was no denying that much, although part of his mind was desperately looking for any excuse or argument.

“Luciel, I know this isn’t what you want… Talk to me, please.”

“What I want doesn’t matter,” he answered, the hopelessness seeping in every word.

“It matters to me,” she urged in a wounded tone.

He didn’t dignify that with a response. The hacker turned and began to walk back to his workspace.

“…It hurts seeing you torture yourself like this.”

“Then stop staring at me!” he replied coldly while slipping his headphones back over his head.

“…You are the one who won’t let me out of your sight…”

“That’s because you can’t protect yourself!”

“But I’ll be fine if you run away…?”

“Look… All you have to do is sit and stay safe.”

“Until you leave…” she noted, her voice bordering on defiant.

“There’s no point in arguing this anymore. Just sit over there and leave me alone.”

“You’ll eventually run out of places to run, Luciel.”

“I told you to stop involving yourself in my life!” he shouted, wheeling around.

Every ounce of her petite form was rigid… She was afraid, but not backing down, despite the tears in her eyes. The temptation to do worse itched in him, that desperation and anger had no outlet… Until he felt something on his sleeve. He reacted before he could help it, yanking his arm...
Miyeon’s eyes went wide with fear before he watched her sink to her knees. The piteous sound that came from her was shut off with a ragged choke before silence fell over the apartment. Looking down, he saw the shattered remnants of his creation as the girl gently picked it up and held it in her arms.

He couldn’t undo it…

Maybe now she’d understand that he was a monster who could never make her happy. That was why he had to do any of this… The urge to apologize sank as he realized it was still probably better this way. But… Why did it hurt so much?

“When...?” she asked, her voice soft as tears began to stream.

“Just leave it… It’s useless trash… I’ll throw it away later.”

Even though he said that, she held it closer, pressing the pale cheek to her own. As much as he wanted to look away, the fear she’d cut herself on the pieces kept his gaze on the pitiful sight.

“I’ll be leaving soon anyway. So just forget about me.”

“You don’t mean that…”

“Tell yourself whatever you want, but to be honest, I’ve always felt this way. I’ve never been happy... I’m a bastard... A liar... The jokes, the laughs, the pranks, the person I pretended to be– all of it was just an act.”

Her honey colored eyes raised to meet his… Saeran used to look at him like that…

“... You’re always sacrificing yourself for everyone else... Smiling so people don’t worry…”

“Stop thinking about me - worry about yourself.”

“...I am ...” she simpered. “I’m selfish, Luciel... I don’t want to live in a future where you’re sad or where I can never see you again…”

His jaw tightened.

“...Don’t say things like that…”

It was agonizing the hacker watched as she forced herself up onto two feet, clutching the broken catbot’s remains.

“I don’t want to live in a world without you... No matter how much you hate me…”

“You’re so much like Yoosung... Neither of you know who I am... There was never anything “real” in my life, not even a real “me”... All you know is 707 from the chatroom. You don’t have to mourn someone who never existed to begin with, so stop wasting your time... Just leave me alone.”

He turned away to hide the fact that the weight of all of it was crumbling in on him. It was all so pointless... She set the pieces of cat bot aside... Like everything else he’d ever built, it was
disposable and pointless.

“You can’t possibly understand my life,” he choked. “The sort of life I’ve lived… The things I’ve done… My life… It can’t embrace anything…”

Something pressed between his shoulders, before he could move away. A torrent of emotions stunned him… He wanted to push her away and pull her closer all at the same time. The terror… The pleasure… Her tears soaking into his back… The tears streaming down his own cheeks. Saeyoung was so tired of fighting a battle on every front. Nearly stumbling, he felt her tighten her hold to steady him. How could someone so small be so strong…?

“Miyeon…”

“There are people who need you, who love you so – so very much… Who’ll be so hurt when you go… That’s why I can’t…! I can’t let you do this… I won’t lose someone important to me! Not again…”

His body felt so heavy, it was as though her sobbed words were his own. “Again”…? What did she mean by that? His mind was blank… When it came to it, neither one of them really understood each other… But he felt what a kind and gentle person she was. The world didn’t need him, but it desperately needed someone like her. He had to make her understand that. Saeyoung needed a universe with her in it, even if he couldn’t be with her. Like a firework, he was to burn bright and die fast… Not like her… She was like the moon, gently shining upon the world forever. His body ached and his soul was so weak; he was tired of blindly swinging at everything…

“…Please…” Her fingers dug into him. “… Miyeon, my life isn’t worth saving… It was wrong from the start. I’m so pathetic, I couldn’t even protect my only brother… And all I could ever do is bring you misery, hurt you, abandon you… I don’t want to involve you in that kind of life.”

Her frail little fists raised to where they rested over his heart to keep him from breaking lose, although he wasn’t even struggling now.

“Don’t do this… Stop being kind to me…” he pleaded. “…Why can’t you understand that I’m trying to protect you from someone worthless like me…?”

Miyeon didn’t reply with words: the warmth of her breast against his back and pressure of her petite frame holding him said it all. Either she was a desperate idiot who would’ve accepted anyone, or she really did understand him… Deep inside, he knew which was the truth, but acknowledging it would make it too real. The desperation to be free was so intense… But it felt different than before. If he was going to die anyway, there really wasn’t any point in keeping secrets.

“I cherish you… I want to make you happy… But I can’t…” he admitted in defeat. “If you’re with me, I could only hurt again… Or get killed… I’m so dangerous and fucked up… I couldn’t give you a normal life… How could anyone love someone like that?”

“Do I need a reason?” Miyeon’s voice was soft. “Luciel, before we started talking… I was always afraid of someone would notice me… I’d imagine the horrible things that could happen to me… So much so I wouldn’t leave the house for days… The worst part is that if something had happened to me, there would’ve been no one to call…”

He choked back a protest as he tried to hold back his own misery from flooding over.

A soft breath escaped her as she nestled deeper into him, rattling the brittle shards within
him. “If you knew anything about me, you’d know I’m not the bright, happy person you think I am... Really... I’m a useless coward who would rather sleep her life away than do anything... There was nothing for me to be happy about, not really... Until I met the RFA, and you... Seeing how amazing all of you were - I wanted to try harder. I could become that person because I had people counting on me; I had a purpose. Because you were protecting me, I felt safe for the first time in so long... Like I could do something worthwhile... Luciel, you always talk like the 707 in the chatroom is someone entirely separate, but he’s just as much a part of you as the person in front of me... The things you did as him were all things you chose to do because you felt that’s what your friends needed... Helping Zen... Playing pranks on Yoosung...”

“Why would I want to be a buffoon like that?”

Her fingers relaxed, fanning out over his breast.

“Because you’re someone who hurts so badly he didn’t want to see anyone else in pain like him... A kind person, who wanted to bring joy to people around him... Wearing a fake smile is exhausting, isn’t it...?”

The first time he’d ever seen her, the picture he’d deleted. The ache in his chest deepened as he finally understood why that image bothered him so much.

“The person precious to me, is in my arms... Even though he’s been a jerk... I know he’s a kind person who would give everything to protect the people he cares about, no matter how much it hurts him... This face he’s showing me now is just as much of a mask as that fake smile. Somewhere in there is the person that’s so important to me... He’s someone I want to see happier than anyone...”

“After everything I’ve done to you... How can you feel that way?”

Slowly the girl released him, and met his eyes as he slowly looked over his shoulder.

“It’s just how I feel.”

Seven turned to face her, studying the earnestness in her gaze.

“What if something else horrible happens to you because of me?”

Miyeon didn’t even hesitate.

“I won’t regret being with you.”

“Don’t say that so easily...”

“If there is anyone who can figure a way to make this work, Luciel, it’s you.” He was about to protest, but she cut him off by merely touching the cross at his breast. “You’re Catholic, right?”

Feeling her so close made his heart race, but his mind was mulling over why she’d ask such a thing. Eventually the unvoiced question in his eyes made it through to her.

“Growing up, my family never went to church or shrines or anything like that... To be honest, I don’t even know if I believe in God... Or an afterlife.”

He flinched...
“That doesn’t mean I don’t believe in anything greater,” she amended, “But I don’t think there’s a Heaven or Hell after we die. For me - this is the only life any of us get. That makes it so very precious… We can make that short time Heaven or Hell with our choices… Because of that - I think it’s up to us to look out for each other, to reduce suffering when we can, because we’re all we have for each other… That’s why I can’t just pretend that you’re not suffering and not want to help. You’re the first person I’ve ever really connected with like this… I don’t want to go back to a world without you.”

The hacker swallowed hard.

“You once asked me why God was punishing you… What if it wasn’t punishment at all, but a way of preparing you for this moment? What if all along you were meant to save your brother and all those people from that cult? Maybe you were always meant to be the Defender of Justice for real.”

He couldn’t bear to look at her…

“I can’t…”

“…No one is stopping you, but you, Luciel… Before you were willing to live in misery to protect Saeran… And both of you were unhappy… If there was ever a chance to stop that needless suffering – it’s now. Do you really want to fight for a lifetime where no one can be happy? Isn’t a future where you and Saeran don’t have to live in fear anymore worth everything? That’s why you became an agent to begin with, right?”

As his eyes lifted to meet hers, the boy in him felt alive again but still afraid of “daddy” on the otherside of the door. Rika and V had given him such sweet hope long ago, but it was false… He had been skeptical at first; it was Saeyoung’s nature not to trust… Yet he desperately wanted something true in the world.

“I don’t know… It’s not that simple.”

“If the end is going to be the same no matter what, doesn’t it make sense to at least try for what you really want? We can’t undo the past, but we can try to do better now that we know what he’s been through… Right?”

Luciel lowered his head.

“You’re impossible… Why won’t you give up…?”

“Because I really want to get married on the Space Station…” she answered with a weary smile, the drying tears glimmering on her cheeks.

The blood raced through him, making him think of crazy, wonderful things, but it still felt impossible.

“You’re so strange…” Her weary smile only broadened; it was infectious, yet all he could manage was a shallower frown. He was too exhausted to protest or acknowledge that she wasn’t wrong. “God… I don’t know anymore… I’m tired of fighting about it… Do whatever you want.”

“I intend to; maybe you should start doing the same,” she replied firmly.

Did she mean what he thought she did? Maybe it was how gloomy he had been, but suddenly he wanted to do “those” sorts of things to her…
“It’ll b-be too late to regret it later…”

“I won’t… It’s my life and my death to choose, and being with you is what I want.”

“You s-shouldn’t say that so easily…”

Miyeon seemed to brighten up as a little chuckle finally escaped her. The remnant of her tears made it sparkle so beautifully… He wanted to hold her lovely face and kiss each cheek; and so much more… His ears were burning now! His back still felt warm from where her breasts had pressed into him and – GOD - his CPU was going to melt!

“Why are you…!?” His brain felt foggy. “…Gah! I can’t believe you’re getting to me! God… What am I supposed to do now?”

“It’s not like I’m asking you to marry me right now or anything. Take some time to think about what it is you really want and maybe be honest with me… Let’s just focus on making it through this together. That way the real us can meet. We can talk about our future then.”

As she spoke, the soft heat of her hand settled over his. The words from her lips though…

*Our future…*

The daydreams he’d had of them were so sweet, but the immediate reality looked so grim. Whatever fluffy nonsense he had in mind seemed so far away and unlikely to pass… The threats around them though were very clear to him though. They were so frightening and numerous that he’d been putting off doing anything but acknowledging and avoiding them, let alone figuring out how to neutralize them. Options he hadn’t considered came to mind now, it was just a matter of determining how probable success was.

“I need some time to think about it…”

“Take all the time you need. We have the rest of our lives, right?”

There was no telling how long or short that’d be though… Wanting to live a long life was so foreign to him. There were memories he wanted to make with her though; he didn’t want to wait! Saeyoung loved her now and wanted to skip to the future where he could embrace her… He wanted to meet their children… Their grandchildren… To reminisce over the sad times and the happy ones that followed. That time wasn’t now though, and all he could manage in his cowardice was a bit of fidgeting and in a small voice…

“Thank you.”

The girl offered a bright smile as she used the sleeve of her sweater to dry her sorrows away. As she gave him space, Saeyoung lamented being unable to do it for her. Sitting back down, he was dumbstruck by the whole situation. He kept replaying in his head over and over for several moments, her words and variances of her voice…

*I won’t lose someone important to me… Not again…*

What did she mean by “not again”? Diligently he ran through his “ideal” scenario, if only because he couldn’t focus on anything else. It was an amalgamation of what he had already been working on along with his halfhearted plan to run away with her, but with modifications. Gutting the agency would be easy
enough; people like that thrived on anonymity. Revealing everything would be easy enough… But a lot of undercover agents could be put in danger or killed when their cover was blown, which made that play the least favorable. He couldn’t justify making such a move for selfish reasons, but if there was ever a time to pull all the chips on the table – it was now. Really the threat of doing such a thing was all he needed as leverage. It would take time to track down the other hackers in the group as well as time to decrypt their data. That would be hard enough on its own if it weren’t for his brother’s renewed bout of attacks. It was easy to tell that it was his brother’s work by the inconsistency of it. At times it was very methodical, at others, it was done with a manic, brute force. The mistakes he’d find too were markers of someone who was self-trained…

Seven’s stomach growled irritably after two hours of concentration… Days without a proper meal or a generous offering of chips were catching up to him. Even though he’d rejected the meals the girl had cooked for him over the past few days, he’d almost gotten used to the regularity of them being offered. He waited… It was well after noon before he glanced back again. She hadn’t moved from her spot on the bed. From what he’d overheard, there was an issue with a plane delay for one of the guests, which lead to Miyeon working on finding an alternate flight. To say she was persistent didn’t really cut it; he almost pitied the person on the other end… Eventually the frustration of it led her back outside the the balcony, likely for fresh air to continue her felicitous offensive. Internally he was cheering for her, although there was no doubt she’d get something to work. Maybe he’d do something on the back end to make things smoother; if he had time…

Getting up, he walked into the kitchen under the pretense of getting a soda only to confirm that there were no signs of her having warmed up anything. Not a single plate was dirty or a crumb was out of place. Was she not eating now too? It was also just as likely that she’d been too afraid of getting yelled at earlier to even attempt it…

Leaning against the counter, he sipped the soda and allowed his aching back to stretch. This only seemed to make his stomach growl louder. The thought of eating something like sandwich didn’t really sit well with the hacker. He wanted to do something to apologize for breaking catbot, but Seven didn’t have the time or experience to cook anything as nice as what she had made.

Really the hacker didn’t even really know what sort of food she liked aside from the snacks she’d told him about those few nights ago… Or the ones she’d carried in the day before… He knew so many other details about her from the background check, but it was increasingly apparent the important details were still a mystery. He didn’t know the real “her” any more than she knew the real “him”… While Seven could just ask, something told him she’d retreat to the kitchen to make something for both of them instead. No, it had to be a surprise…

Taking out his phone, he looked through what was available within the neighborhood before deciding on a small place just a block or two away that delivered. They had gimbap… Everyone liked that, right? He spent ten minutes looking over the menu, second guessing what variety to get her. Eventually he decided on the house course and the daily special platter; it had enough varieties that surely there’d be something she’d like. Whatever she didn’t want, he could pick at after.

Once the order was placed, he returned to his corner to check on the rolling reset of the bomb’s algorithm to make sure it wasn’t too similar to the one before. He was just wrapping up when there was a knock at the door. Getting up quickly, he did a quick check of the outside camera, and grabbed his taser just in case, before confirming it was the food delivery and not a ploy. Miyeon was so busy that she didn’t even seem to notice. He’d already paid and closed the door by the time she had come back in from the balcony and taken a spot on the edge of the bed. His eyes searched for acknowledgement, yet her focus was entirely on her phone with a frustrated little pout. Maybe she thought he’d just gotten it for himself?
The hacker took the containers from the bag and set them out at the modest kitchen table before glancing expectantly back at her. Still nothing. He cleared his throat... Not even a glance. A part of him was almost hurt by that, but another was very well aware that this was the result of him being so harsh to her over the past few days. After a little deliberation, he found himself doing the one thing he knew would get her attention...

She answered with her more “professional tone” but that broke the second he spoke.

“Since you didn’t have breakfast, I got lunch... You like gimbap, right?”

Miyeon looked a little confused as her gaze immediately lifted to his usual spot before she finally glanced around the apartment. Finally, she spotted him at the kitchen table.

“That’s a lot of food,” she acknowledged, with some hope in her tone, before her eyes scanned the table. “…Why is there only one set of chopsticks out?”

“Just give me whatever you don’t want later…”

“So... We’re not eating together?”

“Like I said... Just give me whatever you don’t want when you’re done.”

She hung up!

“I’ll eat, I just... Need to work,” he urged. “I don’t have time to-...”

Miyeon played with her phone as though he hadn’t said a word. It was so childish, but he knew she was subjecting him to the same treatment he’d be putting her through for the past few days. Albeit, a subtler version. That was fine... He could be “her” for a little. What would she do?

He dialed her again.

“Why won’t you eat by yourself?”

“I’m busy...” she replied, mimicking his voice. The girl even poked her nose as though she were pushing up glasses.

Was the girl always this sassy?

“Stop joking around, hang up, and come here.”

“Luciel, I’m not a dog...” she reminded him, her voice bordering on authoritative.

“I got the house course and special, so you can have whatever you want.”

“I want you to eat with me.”

His stomach growled and the realization it was going to take more time to argue about it; she wasn’t going to back down. Really, it wouldn’t take more than 5 or 10 minutes to sit there and eat. He didn’t even have to talk to her, just wolf it down. That’d pacify her, right?

“Fine! ... I’ll eat with you. So, hang up and come- sit here.”

The hacker pulled the chair out for her. It was agonizing as the girl mulled it over a moment, but eventually she crossed the distance and did so.
“Woof…”

So cute… But maybe he was being a bit too harsh.

With care he pushed the seat forward before grabbing another set of chopsticks from the bag and slumping onto the seat in front of her. She was making no move to lift a finger, rather the girl watched him expectantly. Shaking his head, Seven broke the wood at the base of his set of chopsticks before gingerly reaching for a roll with beef. This prompted her to follow suit, although she didn’t take a bite until he did.

As he finished chewing and swallowed, the hacker sighed… “So, this is how hard it is to eat with you…”

“I’ve been watching you starve yourself for days,” the girl retorted before taking a nibble out of a roll with pork cutlet and vegetables.

A quiet settled over them as the number of rolls diminished. It wasn’t nearly as good as the things she’d cooked, but anything was better than cup ramen. Gradually, he relaxed after realizing how tense his hand was from holding and eating in such a guarded manner. Now and then, his eyes would drift up, finding that her lips were a darker pink than before she’d started eating. They looked so soft and sweet… When Miyeon caught his gaze, he turned his attention back to the platter before them. He’d eaten with people before – it wasn’t a big deal, but he’d never felt so self-conscious in his life!

The honey color of her eyes was so bright in the afternoon light… She was so cute! He deserved to get tased a thousand times over for making her so upset earlier. How anyone could be that cute in just a sweater and “around the house” clothes!? “How’s work been coming?”

Was this what dates were like? Were they on a weird date of some kind? No… Considering the outburst hours ago, Miyeon likely wanted an answer of some sort. He’d been in the apartment for days; it was hardly a date at that point. It wasn’t like they’d slept together or anything. He’d been so busy pushing her away, that the fantasies he’d had of being close to her felt so childish now. This was real. Holy god he was eating with a girl, alone… A cute, incredible girl who said all the things he’d always wanted to hear… Maybe she was right… Maybe it could all work. How did these things work? They took like 8 episodes or around the hour movie mark to kiss… Should he ask her to marry him now?

“Luciel…?”

He’d completely frozen while reaching for a bit of gimbap… Elite secret agent his ass… How many books had he read on women and being a playboy? Yet here he was, awkward, and inept. Taking a deep breath, the hacker’s fingers slowly closed the chopsticks and lifted the roll. Work… She’d asked about work… Tell her about work- idiot! But it was complicated. Girls didn’t like math, right?

There was a look of disappointment forming on her brow… No, it was hurt. “Sorry… It’s just your face…”

Her eyes widened. CRAP!

“That-that I…”
Want to kiss… and say good morning to across the pillow to every morning… No! Do NOT say that!

“You’re… that’s I… uh…”

The weight at the end of his chopsticks lightened, as the girl supported the slipping roll that had nearly fell onto the table. His face felt hot. If he ate that, it was like an indirect kiss, right?

“Your hands must be really sore, huh?” she observed.

He could only sit paralyzed as the girl held a hand under the roll to catch any falling rice while her chopsticks held it closer to his face. She was totally going to feed him… Her scent perfumed the air more than the food as she drew closer. The sight of her long hair cascading over her shoulder and the sweet expression on her face made him desperately want to see the same thing as she climbed over his body on the bed just steps away.

*Thank you, Heavenly Father, for this bounty I am about to receive.*

Without much protest, he wrapped his lips around the roll although the rest of him felt like a coil building up tension. There was a little push to get all of it into his mouth, but once in, he quickly chewed and swallowed it down. Her lips had touched those chopsticks… The same chopsticks that’d touched that food… When was the surface of the table that close to his… No… No no no… Crap! Down boy! Seven crossed his legs and tensed his thighs to encourage the blood to go ANYWHERE but where it was. Something was going to burst, whether it would be his nose or something else didn’t change the fact that there was nothing he could do about it. What was wrong with him!?

“It’s so hot in here,” he finally stammered, taking off his hoodie. “Are you hot…?” She was hot… Very hot! “That is… why are you wearing sweate-… Nevermind, you should just keep dressed like that… So work…! You were asking about work.”

Miyeon watched him with a little smirk that made him want to knock the table aside and do things to her so he could see what other expressions he could get her to make… This was a mistake. The hacker lifted his soda and chugged it while recounting as much pi in his head as he could before needing to breathe. He nearly choked, getting the bubbles in his nose remembering the first time they’d ever spoken how she’d read the number off to him while playing along with his hoax…

This was the same girl from then. As he sat the can down, expecting her to be disgusted or annoyed at his behavior. Instead, she handed him a napkin and offered a smile. A calm settled as he recalibrated himself…

He just needed to be honest with her. God knows she’d proven herself more emotionally stable than him… She wasn’t a child or just “a girl”. Treating her as a full equal would mean burdening her with things, although her words regarding that hit him again. Really, the only way for her to be safe was to know what she was up against. Taking a deep breath, Saeyoung tried to figure out where to start.

“So… I-“

Her phone began to ring.

The girl looked a little startled as she’d clearly been observing him so closely while he got himself together. Her expression was clearly disappointed, but dutifully she checked her phone.

“I’m sorry… It’s Jaehee… You’ll eat without me watching you, right?”
He shoved a huge roll into his mouth which seemed to satisfy her. As she stepped out to the balcony, the hacker followed every motion of her body and admired the lines of her form beneath her leggings. Even as the glass door slid shut, he observed the way she shifted her weight and paced while talking between bites. The words weren’t totally clear to him, but the tone seemed much less consoling and more cheerful than before. Miyeon even laughed… He missed her being able to do that in front of him without reservation… That sound was something more precious to him than his own life.

It was several minutes before he saw her hand drop from her ear. Immediately the girl began to dial out again, although it was back to her “professional” tone; something had probably come up with another guest. Five minutes soon turned to ten. With care, he put the food away before retreating back to his spot in the corner on the floor to work. As he plopped back down, the London blue topaz of catbot’s eyes were hollow but cast in his direction. For a little, he did his best to ignore it’s shattered little body. A quick study of one of its onboard drives confirmed that Miyeon had it helping some with some of the guest arrangements. Her tears earlier weren’t because of that though. She’d been talking to it. There were missing parts of time, but it seemed more likely that the damage it’d received when he’d slammed it against the floor. The solid-state drives within it had likely been shaken lose or worse, or perhaps it was overheating inside.

Even though she talked to people all day; the person she really wanted to talk to wouldn’t say a word to her… Despite Miyeon saying that 707 was part of him, that also meant that the person who had been so harsh to her over the past few days was also something he’d chosen. Both of those parts of him were useless caricatures of what he thought he ought to be. Amalgamations born of media and twisted role models, but he had trouble remembering who “he” was anymore. The last time he’d been honest about that was with V, which didn’t mean much… But perhaps before that, with Saeran…

His fingers caressed the hard surface of catbot’s broken body.

Ice cream never fixed the sorrows that he and his twin faced, but those small acts of kindness go them through the worst of it. Back then, he’d taken everything onto himself and told himself that keeping Saeran ignorant would keep him safe. His brother was always so physically frail, quick to cry, and so quick to blame himself. But he had such faith in him and needed so little to be happy. All Saeyoung needed then was his brother. There was no dollar amount or number of luxury racing cars that would ever make him that happy.

Miyeon didn’t need much to be happy either it seemed.

Both of them had faith in him, although he’d broken that with Saeran so long ago…

Cradling catbot in one arm, Seven dragged his knapsack over and began to dig through until finding the blue prints and his tool kit. As he took the battered casing off and began to get a better look of the damage he’d done, a strange calm settled over him. This was something that he knew was “true” to him. Saeyoung had always been good with math and had always liked seeing how things worked. Even when he’d been studying in the US or working on his cars, this was something that every part of him enjoyed. That and doing things for others…

No amount of presents of apologies could make up for a decade of whatever hell his brother had been through. He’d had the illusion of a choice, albeit the options weren’t ones he wanted… Saeran hadn’t even gotten that.

No amount of gimbap was going to fix what he’d done to Miyeon either.

He couldn’t undo what he’d already chosen, but he try to do better… Deciding what was
“better” was the trouble though. As easy as it was to say that he should fight for what he wanted, the girl didn’t understand the full extent of such a thing. She understood that death was a real possibility though, but the revelation that she viewed that as the end of it all was still shocking to him. As the hacker worked on the cat, he wrestled with trying to understand her lack of faith in God or Heaven. Many people would’ve seen those things as reasons to not bother and to just do what they wanted… If everyone was going to die and there was nothing after and no one to answer to, then what was the point? He couldn’t live in a world thinking like that. At the same time, perhaps his faith had lead him to always look for someone to fix his problems for him and to blame others… God, V. No amount of prayers was going to undo the last decade just like how catbot wasn’t going to miraculously repair itself…

Saeran had taught himself to hack and done this much to find him. He should at least do just as much to save the both of them, to save all of them… If they were both alive, things could get better. As a child, he’d felt that sincerely – defiantly. That was him. Not 707. Not “Luciel”. That hopeful child had thought to reach out but had done so much of the work himself. He had gotten himself this far… He could surely finish what that brave, cautious little boy started.

“Seven…? What are you-“

He nearly dropped the screw…

“Sorry…” she murmured, lowering her voice.

“It’s okay,” the red head replied, “I’m fixing what I broke earlier.”

Miyeon’s sweet scent mixed with the lingering warmth of the sunshine as she leaned over. He could feel the pressure of her hair slipping along his shoulder as she knelt beside him. The tension he always felt when she was close wasn’t unpleasant… It had never been. It’d been resisting it that had hurt him so much.

“Come to think of it, if something happens and I disappear, at least he could talk to you.” Tenderly he ran his fingers along the chassis that held the “brain” of the cat. “The AI that I installed talks similarly to how I used to in the chatroom. I’ll try to finish this up quick then get back to work… So don’t mind me.”

“For what it’s worth, I prefer you to catbot.”

The hacker felt warm but somehow hollow.

“It’s not surprising that you’d say that… You can’t be discouraged, can you?”

“I think you’re worth fighting for, even if you don’t feel that way about yourself.”

As he glanced over, there was an affectionate smile waiting for him. It felt sincere, but then again he’d thought the same thing about V once upon a time. The hacker was still sorting out where it was she fit into the whole picture… There were reasons why Zen and Yoosung liked her so much.

“…Since we’re talking about it… You don’t say things like that to other people do you?” he asked, feeling his blood course through his ears in anticipation of her reply.

“Like what…?”

“Like earlier… There are a lot of dangerous men in the world,” the hacker elaborated, not even sure himself what he was getting at so indirectly. “Sometimes just being nice can seem like an invitation for more, and it can cause problems.”
He looked aside as her eyes lifted to meet his, feeling a little embarrassed for even bringing it up.

“Do you need a formal invitation -?”

She edged closer, knowingly teasing him. His ears were burning up!

“B-be careful about saying things like that!”

“Why? Should I just have NASA send the invitation to the wedding then?”

“Don’t joke about that!” he stammered, feeling flushed. “…Especially not to other guys! That is… Never say never but… You should really be careful about saying things like that!”

Even as he stammered, the girl beside him giggled and didn’t seem bothered at all. He was on the defensive again, but it was so different. It was … Fun. A sensuous tingle ran along his spine as Miyeon rested her head to his shoulder. It was as if someone had thrown a warm blanket over the world.

“…Earlier…I wasn’t lying about hiding away and being afraid of being noticed, you know… Sometimes just existing as a girl is all the invitation someone needs to think they have a right to do whatever they want to you…”

As she spoke, her fingers lifted to her neck… She was feeling the bruises Saeran had left. He felt sick remembering the sight of her then. It was easy for him to carelessly in his flustered state say something like that, when she’d obviously experienced such things more than once. His life experience as a “girl” was non-existent outside the times he dressed up for missions. It was something he could turn on and off. Miyeon didn’t really have that option. She was always small, soft spoken, and cute… He was all too aware of how fragile she was if someone wanted to really hurt her. That was part of why he’d said it, but really it was rubbing salt into the wound. He’d had forward women and men approach him, but that had been more in the US than at home… There was a decidedly less “female” friendly air to his home country that dictated her place in society and how men were to treat her… There were reasons why the sex trade was so profitable and human trafficking primarily worked with successful men who wanted women as slaves... He’d been so afraid of those things on her behalf that he hadn’t really considered how it had been for her to grow up being aware of those things likely much earlier than himself… As a child he had his father’s kidnappers to fear; Miyeon likely feared every man since she was likely old enough for that concept to even occur to her young mind…

“Sorry…”

“It’s okay,” the girl assured him.

It wasn’t, not really… Yet Miyeon continued.

“I know what you mean though… I wasn’t lying about you being the first person I’ve ever really felt like this about… Although you’ve not made it easy to keep feeling that way,” her voice darkened a little. “These past few days have been the hardest on you… It’s not been easy for me either, but I know this isn’t who you are all the time. That’s why I want to support you and help you figure this out. The person I’ve been talking with these past few weeks is the same one who has been such a jerk to me these past few days… He’s also the same person who does little thoughtful things for the people he cares about, not because he wants acknowledgement but because seeing others happy makes him happy. That’s the person I love the most and can’t wait to meet when this is all over.”
“…How can you know someone like that even exists?”

“You know how scientists find really far away planets, don’t you? They look for how the stars around it act. The dips in light and effects of the gravitational pull.”

“They do the same for blackholes…” he noted bleakly.

“You’re not a blackhole, Luciel,” the girl sighed, letting more of her weight rest against him. “…You’re a human being, with all the wants and flaws that go along with it. But if I had to classify you as some sort of celestial body, I’d probably say you were like a red dwarf.”

“…Hey…”

“I’m not saying you’re short! The thing about red dwarves is that they’re easy to miss because of how dim they appear on the visible light spectrum, but they’re also sort of the best hope humanity has for long survival. They much live longer than other types of stars and aside from the bursts of energy they put out, they’re pretty stable. And well… The red.”

As she finished, her fingers lightly stroked the hair away from his ear. The tickle of it sent a chill up his spine. It took every ounce of restraint he had not to lean over and steal a kiss… He couldn’t be sure if it was her knowledge of astronomy or the tenderness of the things being said. To call him stable was a terrible misclassification though. He was anything but that.

“…L-let’s talk about something else,” the hacker stammered out. “Although I don’t usually talk when I work…”

The girl flashed a smile as it was likely she was aware of his habit of talking to himself at times when analyzing something particularly challenging… Or the fact he tapped his mouse…

“How about we talk about the security upgrades? Is there anything you had questions about? The jargon is a bit complicated, and I guess that’d get boring… But just ask me anything you want to know.”

Smooth… It was ridiculous to think he could ever have anything resembling a normal relationship with anyone if he couldn’t even hold a basic conversation. Then again, she was smarter than the average girl. It was easy enough to fake small talk when he knew it didn’t matter. This was like a tactical game with no instruction book or rules – yet he could say the wrong thing again in 18 languages… Miyeon wasn’t at fault, although feeling her warmth and having her aroma so close was distracting at first. It was soothing too. He wanted to lean against her too and rest his head against her, to feel her caressing his hair again.

“Ask you anything…?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“You won’t get mad?” her voice was almost childlike.

He shook his head to confirm that he wouldn’t.

“…When was the last time you saw Saeran?”

Seven’s hands froze as the question settled over him. There were so many answers with variables that didn’t really matter. Telling her about the times he’d looked at that disc wasn’t what she meant nor was his appearance in the apartment… It felt so long ago since he’d seen his twin in the flesh. “God… I suppose it doesn’t really mean anything to hide it now,” he sighed,
setting catbot aside.

Miyeon shifted to let him up and as he stood, he offered his hand. She seemed uncertain for just a flash, which stung, but was deserved after he’d been so harsh to her. After helping her up, Luciel retrieved the book from the nightstand and took out the floppy disc. Getting the modified portable floppy reader with him, he plugged it up to Rika’s computer. As he pulled the file up, the girl pulled up a seat beside him. He’d already decrypted the information

“…I didn’t realize floppies could hold that much.”

“They can’t normally,” he affirmed.

Once he clicked on the first image, Miyeon fell silent.

“Saeran…?”

“Yeah… He would’ve been starting high school in that picture… But he never went to school, not formally.”

“He looks so much younger than that… Poor thing…”

“He was always the weaker between us; he was sick a lot too… The household we grew up in was… Complicated.”

The girl listened attentively. It felt as though he could tell her everything, but… There were still things out there more fearsome than the Agency. At the very least, he ought to be honest with her about that.

“My parents weren’t married when we were born. I don’t even think our father knew we existed until our mother started using us to blackmail him… Considering how important public opinion is for his position, it was something he couldn’t risk getting out. On the outside, he looks like an honorable man, which is probably how he got into congress to begin with. That didn’t keep him from sending people to try to kidnap us or worse… And mother… God… That woman was alcoholic and half insane most of the time, when she wasn’t passed out. She wouldn’t let us out of the house and fed us just enough to keep us alive. We weren’t her children; we were tools. Really… I can’t say it was a family.”

Miyeon’s gaze had shifted to the pictures, while her fingers ran over her wrists.

“Eventually my mother’s alcoholism got to the point where she couldn’t walk or would blackout for hours. The first time she put me outside was to punish me… But eventually she’d send me out on errands to get water or medicine for her hangovers. I was able to figure out her pattern of behavior even back then though and would leave the house on my own while she was out. One day, it started raining pretty bad, and I ducked into the church to find cover. I met Rika there… To be honest, I didn’t trust her at first, but eventually, I started going regularly. The sisters taught me to read and write. I flew through math… Then Rika suggested I maybe learn how to learn to do coding because of how many jobs would likely be available in that field, and because I was so good with numbers. I was REALLY good at it…”

If only he hadn’t been.

“This is, no one will hire a kid, and I needed money to get Saeran and I out of that situation as soon as I could. It wasn’t like we could trust anyone in child services because of my Dad’s position… Rika and V couldn’t just take us in either without them being put into danger. By that point, my father had people tailing me and getting bolder about it… I had to do something. It
was after I was baptized and took the name Luciel that V offered a possible solution. He was the one who told me about the Agency. They agreed to take me on, send me abroad to study, and pay for my schooling provided I work for them. It seemed like a great deal, except… I couldn’t take Saeran with me. I refused at first… But pretty soon my time had run out, and I had to make a decision. Before I left, V and Rika promised me that they’d take care of Saeran. But… I’d promised him I’d always be with him… That I’d always protect him… I broke that promise; I trusted V. I was an idiot to have never doubted for a second! I missed Saeran… Every day I missed him…”

There wasn’t a way to fully express how half of him had been ripped away to someone who didn’t have a twin. Yet the girl seemed to understand judging by the sad expression on her face. She could empathize, although he sincerely wished that she’d never had to experience such a thing.

“My “maid” was my handler… He used to always say that we were like ticking time bombs. It wasn’t really a matter of “if” but “when” we’d go off. When that happens, people get hurt… So it’s best if an agent doesn’t have any “collateral damage” around when that happens. It’s the people you love who are the first targets… Even knowing that, I couldn’t let go of Saeran. I started to ask Rika about how he was doing… So she sent me this in secret as a present for my 20th birthday. She assured me that he was happy and healthy, told me I shouldn’t worry…”

He could’ve said so much, but there wasn’t enough time.

“Sorry… If it’s okay, I’d like to stop talking about this… I didn’t mean to say so much but… Something about talking with you makes me want to keep talking. It’s dangerous.”

“Thank you for trusting me enough to share it. I know it wasn’t easy. Do you feel a little better at least?”

“Yeah… Thanks… I appreciate you listening.”

Miyeon beamed at him. It felt like a part of him that had been so crumbly before had been fused back together with something much stronger. Something indestructible… That was… As long as she was close.

“Until now, V was the only person who knew this story… That’s probably why I relied on him so much and placed so much trust in him. But that blind faith only closed my senses to what was really going on. What you said to me earlier, didn’t fall on deaf ears… When I look back, I understand that now. Miyeon, I plan to find out everything that happened to Saeran, no matter the obstacles, and expose the truth behind V’s lies. After everything comes out – there might not even be an “RFA” left… Even knowing that… Would you still be by my side?”

The girl rested her hand on his and without even hesitating.

“Until the last red dwarf grows cold… And long after that…”

“…How long is that?”

“Around 10 trillion years..?” she sounded unsure.

The hacker found himself smiling. There wasn’t another girl in the world who would have said something so perfect. That was probably well beyond the estimated end of the universe. That might be long enough for him to show her how grateful he was for her existence… He only had a lifetime, one that probably had hours left to share with her. He regretted wasting so many by trying to push her away. They’d found a barycenter and soon, they’d have their own orbits around it, keeping them close to each other in harmony… Unless she was just being supportive.
“Once you’re safe… You can leave whenever you’d like.”

He felt her shake her head.

“Please don’t treat me like a stranger or push me away anymore… Okay?” she pleaded in a tender tone.

Maybe it was the warmth from her skin or the kindness, but the pieces of him felt as though they’d been melted back into something cohesive and strong. Feeling it fill the cracks in his spirit made him so much bolder and eager to finish what he’d began over a decade ago. The dreams he had of being free never really had a set destination except being “away” from the Hell that was his life. Now there was something and someone he desperately wanted. The crazy dreams of a life with her and his brother didn’t seem so impossible now.

As the feeling coursed through him, he felt brave enough to be a little more honest with her… After all, it was because of this precious girl, he could think like this. She was the hope at the bottom of Pandora’s box. Although, he couldn’t be certain of how any of it would play out…

“If God allows it, I’ll always have you in my heart.”

Glancing down, he saw her lovely eyes widen and cheeks redden.

It was nice to be the one flustering her for a change. Miyeon eased back, tucking her hair behind her ear. Part of him felt greedy and wanted her close again as she moved to stand. Had he scared her off?

“I… I should let you get back to it, huh?”

“Y-yeah.”

The two of them gazed at the other coyly before she disappeared into the kitchen, likely to start preparing dinner. It was almost three in the afternoon… But it was clear that Seven’d gotten much more done; it was amazing how much easier it was to focus without having to maintain a guard around her… Sadly this would probably be the last night Seven could enjoy the relative quiet of the apartment. He needed to act quickly, which meant heading to Mint Eye before the party was the best course of action – that meant tomorrow. Saeran was likely holding off anything more drastic until that distraction and would likely be busy with preparations for whatever that cult had in mind. His twin’s digital attacks had also slowed too. That also meant that he wouldn’t be able to put off checking the drawers much longer; there was no telling if he’d have this opportunity again. As much as he didn’t want to involve Miyeon in it, she seemed quite good at organizing and going through things like that already. Entrusting some of it to her while he prepared for the trip was going to be the most efficient way.

There was something even more important than that though.

Taking out his phone, Luciel scrolled to Yoosung’s number. He hesitated. The possibility of the line being bugged was very real. Maybe Miyeon would let him use her phone? After pondering it a bit, it seemed best to handle the apology the same way he had the outburst. Everyone was likely worried. Opening the messenger confirmed as much, although it was clear everyone seemed to understand him. The exception might have been Jumin, who in his way, defended V… Of course, he would.

Since he couldn’t see him face to face, Seven changed his profile picture from the gloomy “missing” outline he’d updated it to hours ago to one of him smiling in his nicer black flannel. He’d
thought about sending it to Miyeon, but he had packed the shirt, so he could do even better for her later…

After a deep breath, he began the message…

707- I’m trying to be positive.

707 – I have to be brave.

707- I have something to say to the RFA Yoosung.

… Not just to him…

To everyone…

He wasn’t going to run away.

His “family” was worth fighting for.
Chapter 23:

Despite all his references to space and the desire he shared wanting to leave the planet, the reality was that Luciel seemed to really thrive when he had something grounding him. One could travel the entire span of a galaxy and never see another green planet; the same could be said of friendships. Good friends who truly supported a person were rare, and perhaps the realization of that had been enough for him to change his tact. It hadn’t been her doing; the redhead did as he liked, and ultimately, he had come to see something resembling reason.

The hacker hadn’t said a word since the apology and had returned to his work, but it wasn’t the uneasy silence from before. He had moved from his spot in the corner on the floor to sitting at Rika’s old desk with her computer; both monitors were full of windows, black boxes, and things that were clearly outside her realm of understanding. Luciel was building a fool proof plan, and here she was thinking of what to feed him and if she’d missed anything for the party… There was no scale to measure how insignificant her contribution felt. It was very different than what she wanted to do… Dinner wasn’t finding out who was responsible for the whole travesty but letting him focus on it was the best the girl could do for now.

There was still some doenjang-ji-jigae, her kimchi, and the fried chicken, although part of her was feeling as though something a bit more exotic was in order. The best she could do was dress up some of the ice cream she’d gotten days ago as dessert after she was done making some fried rice. It was amazing what crumbling the remaining bit of HBC on top and a little drizzle of homemade chocolate ganache did to make it look fancy… It could be his last meal for all she knew, but there was only so much that could be done about that. She could make it up to him with a nice breakfast tomorrow if he was still there…

Presentation as nice enough, with a paper flower she’d improvised acting as a strange sort of centerpiece. Everything was arranged neatly and within reach to let him keep working although he seemed focused, with his arms over his chest while staring at the screen. As she sat it on the desk along with his soda, his eyes flitted up her arm and to her face with a subtle sort of surprise. There wasn’t a trace of the malice from before, but perhaps a bit of guilt as his attention turned back to the food.

“…Thank you.”

She hummed in affirmation and was about to retreat to make her own plate before noticing he was clearing off more room. Luciel then rotated in the chair to face her, his hands folded neatly onto his lap. The surprise of it was enough to make her stop. A flash of uncertainty crossed his face before he stood up, picked up the platter, and walked into the kitchen. Her heart felt sick, expecting him to throw it away or worse, but instead he sat it on the table, pulled out a chair, and looked back at her expectantly. It was a simple request, but it felt like a trap…

“It’ll take a little for that to finish processing… So I… Uhm… Is it okay if we pick up where we left off before?”

Miyeon’s fingers curled into the fabric of her sweater. After steadying herself, the girl toed past him and made a plate for herself. Softly the pressure of his eyes weighed on her, studying every movement.
“… How are your feet?”

“A little itchy, but that just means they’re healing.”

“It doesn’t hurt to walk?”

He had a reason for asking.

“I could run if we have to,” Miyeon affirmed before coyly taking the chair he’d pulled out for her.

Luciel settled before her, seemingly ashamed that her mind even considered such a thing. She was about to lift her silverware before noticing that his hands reached for hers. The unspoken question was loud enough for him to reply.

“I’m not doing anything… like that,” the red head assured sheepishly. Despite his embarrassed tone, the heat of his skin still slipped confidently along the tops of her hands before curling under, holding the tips of her fingers. Luciel’s touch was light, almost as though he were afraid he’d break her.

Before, such a thing would’ve made her blush and feel all flustered. Now? Even when he offered a meek smile, it was hard to reciprocate with any real sincerity. The voice in the back of her mind was clear and cold…

*Don’t misunderstand.*

Luciel lowered his head and closed his eyes. His thumb gently caressing her knuckles before he drew in a breath and began to speak in a language she didn’t know. His voice was purposeful and soft, almost reverent as he continued. It was soothing… Perhaps it was a prayer in Arabic? The feeling that she’d done something irreverent hit her, as she realized he actually was saying grace. Quickly she put her head down. Seven said the last of it in a language she knew,” … And because of her, I will eat well. Amen.”

It was only when she felt his hands slip away did Miyeon raise her head, with a tart reply.

“You *better* eat well…”

The hacker dutifully lifted a piece of chicken and took a bite. He chewed with care, as though savoring every flavor before another crunchy mouthful followed. It was the closest she’d seen him come to looking truly happy. Soon he’d worked his way down through a wing and drumstick. The girl was just getting ready to dig in herself when she noticed him take off his glasses and rub his eye with his sleeve.

The hacker sniffled before lifting a bite of steaming rice to his lips. She could only watch, while taking nibbles, as he quickly polished off the bowl and offered it to her to ask for more. She wasn’t going to deny it to him, although by the time Miyeon sat the refilled bowl back down, he’d already started on the doenjang-jjigae between blowing on spoonfuls to cool it. He poured the remaining soup over the rice and finished swallowing before giving her a curious glance after drying his cheek.

“…You’re not eating. Are you not feeling well?”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve seen anyone enjoy food so much that they got teary eyed. But I suppose anything tastes that good when you’re hungry, huh?”
His gold eyes widened again. As though looking for a reply to surface, the hacker stirred the rice and soup mixture together. “I used to dream of meals like this.” A bitter little laugh escaped him, “That probably sounds really pathetic.”

“Not at all… Even good food tastes bland if you’re eating it alone, and bad food can be good if you’re with friends.”

“It–it’s not that your cooking is bad! This is the most delicious meal I’ve ever had!”

“I understand what you mean,” she soothed. “…I know how lonely it is to eat by one’s self.”

It wasn’t so long ago, but so much of her life had been that. Years of lonely meals spaced with very late dinners with her father whenever he’d get home. Then when he got sick, the deafening silence punctuated by the clatter of silver on a dish... Just thinking about it made her feel tired again. Would her life go back to that after all of this?

The gloom stilled her until Miyeon felt the weight of his concerned gaze upon her. She buried the feeling and offered a meek smile. Everything was fine…

The girl offered her hand up, extending her pinkie. “Whatever happens, let’s promise to not let the other eat alone ever again. Okay?”

“I don’t know if I can keep that promise…”

“We don’t always have to sit together. You can just message me on the phone, or…”

Perhaps how pitiful her voice sounded crumbled his reservations, and his finger interlocked with hers, giving a little shake before their thumbs met. His skin was so warm, and the rough texture of his fingertips brought her out of her daze. Something about it felt so very normal, especially the way his cheeks flushed. As she returned to her meal, it was clear something was still on his mind.

“You know… That’s the third pinkie promise we’ve made, but the only one we’ve made in person,” Luciel’s voice was almost wistful.

The two ate in peace without much said between them after that. He even helped her clean up until an alarm on his phone brought back the lines in his brow. Apparently, something had finished. His steps were slow out of the kitchen, and he didn’t fuss when she tailed behind leaving some distance between them. A few swipes and the quiet of the apartment broke again.

“I think… I’m ready to open those drawers. I don’t know what we’ll find, and there will probably be things in there that no RFA member should see.”

“It’s a good thing you won’t have to do it alone then,” Miyeon stated, rolling her knit sleeves up.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” he affirmed, having chosen to start with the files in the desk.

“Do we need a hammer? There’s probably one-”

“No. I should be able to use the security system to open them. But you should
stand behind me, just in case.”

Doing as asked, the girl stood close behind, using the tips of her toes to get some height so she could see over his shoulder. Her fingertips lightly pressed against his back to steady herself and to let him know where she was in the event he suddenly had to move.

“Okay. On the count of three: One.”

“Two…” they counted.

“Three.”

THUD…!

Miyeon stepped back some as he gave a second pull with a sudden push in, then a jolt back unlodging whatever had caused the drawer to jam with a crack. The sound alone was unnerving, but what was inside was much worse.

There was no mistaking the vibrant, mint green emblem of an eye. Below were what appeared to be floorplans for a building. Just the memory of where she’d last seen an eye like that made her body begin to quiver…. She began to feel a little light headed but managed to feel around for the chair before he noticed. Her attention fell to the little journals he set onto the desk to get better access to the blueprints. They were daily planning journals, not unlike those that she used to use before her father’s passing. Each had a delicate pastel floral pattern. She reached over to take one to look through, only to feel herself pause as his voice broke the quiet.

“These are the blueprints are the same as where Saeran is,” the hacker’s voice ebbed into the rustling as he lifted another sheet. “…I don’t understand… Only Rika could come here, but the Rika I knew would never… V, maybe but not Rika.”

“Maybe none of you knew her as well as you thought,” Miyeon murmured, her fingers resting on the smooth surface of the planner. She slid it over and opened it, finding delicate handwriting that was so perfectly set that it was a little unnerving. Even her own journals weren’t as immaculate. Just a quick flip through revealed a repeating pattern of the eye appearing on certain days of the week. The girl held the monthly planning page open, lifting it for Luciel to see. He lifted it from her hands, giving a quick flip. His grim confusion seemed to only deepen before returning it to her and starting work to open the next drawer, almost as if it’d hold something to damn V and exonerate Rika.

That wasn’t to say that Miyeon wasn’t drawing her own conclusions. Maybe someone had involved the former head of the RFA and his lover into some plot. The concept of “Paradise” was likely very appealing to a mentally unstable woman whose charity organization was created specifically to help others. It didn’t take much to twist something benevolent into something wicked, but there was no way a dead woman could still be pulling the strings. Saeran wasn’t the one in charge. V’s absence could explain a great deal, but Miyeon didn’t get the feeling that he was up to the task. He didn’t seem as much as a leader as much as an intermediary and means to an end. Rika was the organizational heart and driving force behind the RFA, V just opened his connections to her. The girl gathered the journals together. Maybe the one who was still in charge was someone outside of the RFA who had seduced Rika into using the connections V had given her to...

“I have to get to this “Mint Eye” as soon as possible,” Luciel announced as he continued to rifle through the next drawer of what appeared to be accounting books of expenditures. “Even after we go through this, it won’t tell me what I need to know. The only way I’ll know the truth is to go there, but…” He sat on the counter behind the desk, his long fingers rubbing his brow.
“I can’t leave you alone – especially not here… Maybe Jumi-“

He took out his phone and scarcely unlocked it before she rested her hand on his forearm.

“I’m coming with you.”

His body froze except his throat, bobbing with a hard swallow. The screen of his phone was already pulled up to dial the CEO. It wasn’t hard to read the calculations going on in his head or the blush on his cheeks.

“I won’t deny part of me wanted to hear you say that, but-“

“I’m not asking for permission, Luciel,” Miyeon’s voice was stern.

707 sat his phone on the table and with care took her hands into his own. The molten gold of his unwavering gaze poured into her along with the heat of his skin.

“There are lots of people who probably care about you: Your family, friends, the RFA. You won’t be able to say goodbye to them – or tell them where we’re going. I’m not going to stop until I unravel the truth… And even after that… I could be gone for a long time, Miyeon.”

The girl bit her lip.

She already knew what would happen if Luciel dropped her off with Jumin. She’d wither away. It would be like those years wondering if Jun was still alive out there somewhere. The agony of not knowing mingled with the despair of hollow hope. Seven’s vision of a perfectly normal girl, who’d dropped out of school, surrounded by a happy family and friends was a delusion. There wasn’t really anyone for her to say goodbye to. Her neighbor would probably just think she found a husband and moved away. No one outside of the RFA really cared at this point.

The thought of going back to the silent, empty house terrified her more than anything… She’d rather be dead than to live like that again.

“We’re going together.”

To her surprise, he didn’t object further instead giving her hands a squeeze, a strange little laugh coming from him. “You know… When you’re close, it’s like I have superpowers.”

“Nerd…”

“I’m being serious!” he added flustered.

The girl beamed at him, making his cute blush brighten.

“What I want to say… Miyeon…” His voice was sincere but strained as he continued, “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you don’t regret following me. I- I’ll stay right by your side and protect you; you’re more precious to me than my own life!”

Luciel stammered as the young woman’s arms wrapped around his neck, drawing him close. His warm aroma filled her lungs, setting the molten gold of his gaze alight again as she nestled in. He went rigid, seemingly afraid to touch her at first.

That was fine… He’d stay by her side. That was all that mattered to her…

“I’ll protect you too… I’ll protect you forever. So let’s go…”
His head relaxed against her shoulder, not budging even as she gently smoothed his hair. As she eased back, his gaze was fixed on her with wonder. It was enough to make her smile.

*As long as we’re together…*

“Together…?”

“Together.”

Something was missing… Something to seal their promise. Miyeon felt bold gazing down at him, her hands slipping to his shoulders. His knees were touching her thighs. He could totally pull her onto his lap if he wanted… Luciel likely was aware of this too. His pulse raced beneath her hands, but he didn’t dare look away. Rather the gold settled on her lips, before lifting back up, almost beckoning. Her heart leapt feeling the unspoken request. Quiet naturally the magnetism drew the other closer enough for their eyes to close and for her to feel that they’d both stopped breathing…

Just a few inches closer…

The blood began to drain from her as her body. It was only in flashes, but her stomach knotted up recalling being pressed against the wall with the velvet and salt of Saeran’s tongue filling her mind again. She couldn’t move despite her pleas to her subconscious.

Suddenly her phone burst alive, the LOL battle theme meant it was Yoosung. It was enough to startle both her and Luciel. The spell had been broken. Quickly she eased back tucking her hair behind her ear and turning her back to Luciel, apologizing as he shook himself out of the trance. He assured her it was fine, but as she glanced back it was clear he was still a little dazed by what’d almost happened. Thankfully, he couldn’t read minds.

Once she greeted Yoosung, he began recounting how the hacker had apologized to him, shared some about how his day went, and talked a little about his mother. All the while she did her best to listen, but her mind was a million miles away. The conversation ended happily enough, but she knew that his good cheer wouldn’t last. The contents of the drawer would see to that, although it wasn’t her place to say anything about what they’d found just yet. Rika could’ve been simply misguided by someone. After hanging up, Miyeon settled in to the hacker to help organize the items from the drawers, although keeping enough space between them for her subconscious to not associate him further with his twin. It was well after sunset before that portion alone was done. He had taken up post at the desk with what seemed to be the most promising of leads. That left her with the stack that had yet been gone through and Rika’s journals.

Out of habit, she checked her phone again to see a status update regarding the arrangements from the party from Jaehee. The hacker was lurking in the chat, likely waiting for someone to come in so he could share the information.

707 - We’re the only ones here lol

Miyeon – Should we spam the chat with memes until everyone else shows up?

707- Do it

707 – Don’t

707- Do it

707- Don’t
Jaehee Kang has entered the chatroom.

Jaehee – Luciel, hello.

Miyeon – Jaehee! Hello! :3

Jaehee – Miyeon, you seem happy.

Jaehee- Luciel, how are you feeling?

707- Trying so hard that my mind doesn’t shatter into a million tiny pieces!

This was soon followed by his cheering emoji. She’d missed its chubby little face. It was probably the first time he’d used it since he’d shown up at the apartment. It was only then she noticed that he’d changed his avatar again. It wasn’t the gloomy one from before, rather it was him smiling softly, warmly in a black button up shirt. He looked almost professional. If there was ever a sign of him getting back to himself, this was it. Clearly, she wasn’t the only one.

Jaehee – You’re getting back to normal it seems. I’m so glad.

707 – I’m sorry

707 – For making you worry.

Jaehee – It’s okay. I’m just sorry I couldn’t be of more comfort.

707- What? Lol

707- Reading everything you said

707- I could see how much you thought of me

Jaehee- I’m glad.

707- Anyways,

707- I have some important news that everyone needs to know.

707- This is going to be shocking, but it must be said.

Miyeon – Jaehee, you’re going to want to sit down…

Jaehee – I’m ready.

707- I opened the drawer V told me not to open.

Jaehee- Please tell me it was just personal letters and you closed it right up.

Miyeon- I wish that were the case.
An image was sent before she could try to find a way to even explain. It was of all the most damning evidence: the Mint Eye logo, pamphlets bearing the mark, all the paperwork, and the stack of blueprints.

Jaehee- ???

Miyeon – Jaehee, we couldn’t believe it either.

Jaehee- What in the world…

707 – This is an early version of the logo that you got in that e-mail.

707- There’s so many pages.

Jaehee- Oh my God…

707- There are also blueprints for the headquarters of the place I’ve been researching. I am certain it’s this “Mint Eye’s” headquarters.

Jaehee- Why is that at that apartment?

Miyeon – We’re still trying to figure that out…

Miyeon - But if Rika was the only person who had access to the apartment, like Luciel says, then she may have gotten involved with them somehow.

707- We can’t ask her directly.

Jaehee – Then what can we do?

707- Given our current situation, I’m certain that my only way to get to the truth is to go to this “Mint Eye” directly.

707- Once I finish going over the rest of these documents, I’ll start making my way there.

Jaehee- I suppose confidentiality is a luxury we can’t afford right now…

Jaehee – If you’re going there, what is going to happen to Miyeon?

Miyeon – I’m going with him.

Jaehee- That’s - no

Jaehee- I think it’d be best if we kept you with us here.

707 – Saeran already knows everything about Miyeon. She can’t go back to her house, even if you had guards sent there. If you had her secured in Jumin’s high-rise… Not even that would stop him.

707- Anywhere that has street cameras or phones, he’d be able to track her. If she’s alone for a few minutes, that’s all the window of opportunity he’d need.

707- She’ll be safer with me, where his eyes can’t see her.

Jaehee – Luciel…
Jaehee- I’m getting a little scared.

Jaehee – All of this coming out at once and now hearing that you really will have to go there.

Jaehee- And the two of you going alone into that place. I have a feeling something bad will happen.

Jaehee- Can’t we all just go there together after the party?

Miyeon – I trust Seven. He’s spent days going over everything and planning.

She just had to convince her body and subconscious mind that he wasn’t a bad person…

Miyeon - If we all went in after, they’d have more time to prepare.

707- It’s as Miyeon said.

707- After all, isn’t it a little suspicious that V only gave us a week to prepare the party?

707- He seemed a little too eager when I spoke to him about it…

707- He knew these things were in the apartment; everything he’s done just makes me feel like he’s been hiding something.

707- Going there so soon seems rash, I know, but I’m not going unprepared. I have a feeling that the sooner we act the better.

707- I’ll be going there as soon as I can. No later than tomorrow.

Jaehee- I understand.

Jaehee- Please let me know if you need anything.

707 – Thank you.

707- I really do appreciate that.

707- Miyeon being here helped me realize how important that support is.

707- I haven’t been very easy to work with these past few days, but she’s kept me on track.

707 - Reminding me of how much important all of you are and how much you care.

707- When this is all over

707- I want to do everything I can to make her happy.

Jaehee- ^^

Jaehee- You two would look good together

707- She is really cute

Jaehee- If you leave tomorrow, I’m guessing it’s a safe bet that I won’t get to see you two together at the party…
707- Yeah…

707 – Once this is over, I’ll make it up to all of you.

707- I think I should go for now

707- There’s going to be a lot of work to do from now on

Jaehee- Alright, go on ahead

He was good to his word too, as she watched as he tucked his phone into his pocket before taking his bags and a large box into his arms. The hacker disappeared into the kitchen. Only to return a moment later to gather up a few more of his electronics.

Miyeon – Jaehee, I may have a small favor to ask regarding one last guess, if Seven says it’s okay.

Jaehee- I’m surprised you can still think about that.

Miyeon- Even if the ground shakes, the world still turns. And if it does take us awhile to come back, I think they’ll be able to help plan the next party.

Jaehee- I don’t want to think about what would happen if you don’t come back.

Miyeon- We’ll come back. I have faith in Seven, but you’ll need help in the meantime. :3

Jaehee- True enough, but… I’ll be praying. Please be careful.

Miyeon- We will be. You guys too. We still have to go to one of Zen’s performances!

707 – Miyeon, could you come to the kitchen? There are a lot of things I need to pack, and a few extra pairs of hands would really help.

Miyeon- I’ll be right there. Take care, Jaehee!

Jaehee- Good luck!

707- We’ll be back later.

Jaehee- I’ll be cheering for the both of you!

Luciel’s bright red-haired head appeared from around the corner before disappearing back behind the partition out of view. It was a short enough distance to the kitchen from the bed, only to find him at the counter. She eased beside him, letting her fingers brush his arm to avoid startling him. It was enough for him to glance in her direction, but it was clear he was still a little flustered from what had nearly happened before. They’d come so close… It was best not to think about it, there were more important things right now. There were basic tools, but also items that were definitely in the “spy” department. Miyeon had no doubt that most of them were his own handiwork.

“…It must’ve taken awhile to make these. You really are a genius.”
A smile crossed his lips before he settled into why he’d asked her in. While he did need help packing things, Luciel also went over what a few of the tools did and had her test them out to make sure she knew how to use them if the need arose. It was a lot to absorb, but she did her best… His intentions were clearly her being able to protect herself if the need rose, but the truth was, she focused better knowing it would let her help him. If nothing else, it would give him some peace of mind.

They only began packing things away after she passed a “test”, which amounted to a mock battle that gradually devolved into a glorified game of hide and seek. Once it was done, however, the bags were color coded and sealed. Clearly it wasn’t the first time he’d had to do such a thing.

Luciel’s transient lifestyle was most obvious in how he packed his clothes. He had what was easily a couple of months’ worth of clothing bundled up in what amounted to a carryon bag. There were things tucked into secret places and rather discreet hiding spots all over his personal items which he showed her, although she had no doubt he kept a few hidden just in case. It was funny to think that the both of them were living out of their suitcases at the apartment. It did make packing much easier though. Although she was still lacking the strength to push her things in to get them nearly as compact as him. It didn’t take long for him to glance over at her pushing all of her weight down on the suitcase with a little growl.

A soft chuckle escaped him. The girl hummed softly, wordlessly inquiring what was so funny to him.

“The fact that we can play together in such a small apartment, and despite everything, we can look at each other and laugh.” There was the molten gold again in his smiling eyes as he focused on the bag before her, before giving it a push down. She then fastened the latches. “I think it suits us.”

Us…

Her entire body felt like freshly spun cotton candy: warm, sweet, and fluffy… Maybe there was still a bit of pucker powder dusted over from his earlier behavior.

The warmth from him ebbed back a familiar sadness. “I know you’re trying to hide it, but I can tell you’re still hurt about earlier – and worried… There’s no excuse for how I acted. Even now, I can’t help but feel this is something that I should be doing alone... I never meant to involve you in any of this.”

“We both made choices that lead us here,” she reminded him. “Besides, burdens are easier carried together.”

“But I don’t want you to carry any burdens. I want to make sure that you’re happy and smiling all the time. I wanted a relationship where we could laugh and have fun, fight over nothing, share our small worries, feel depressed, and feel better in no time… I never wanted to subject someone I love to something as difficult and dangerous as this.”

“If we can make it through this, then I’m confident we’ll be able to make it through anything the future holds.”

Luciel studied her thoughtfully before glancing aside, seemingly overwhelmed by the implications of what “the rest” would be.

“Do really you think it’s possible that we can overcome this and come out smiling at the end?”
“Definitely.”

“...And one day have a happy family together?”

Miyeon’s cheeks went red. A family… It was hard to tell if he was being serious until he continued his train of thought. Her blush seemed to amuse him as he let out an awkward little laugh, but his voice wavered under the weight of bearing his soul.

“Up until now, I never thought I deserved such a thing; I thought this tragedy should end with me. Then you appeared... And I started to hope. I thought maybe with you… It would be possible.”

He seemed earnest in that wish. It was a simple, wholesome desire. It wasn’t without concerns though. Was it even possible for two people who had no concept of what a normal “happy family” looked like to make one? Having children was one of those distant life-goals that she had put up on the shelf under the “someday, maybe” category. Her plans of the future were nebulous at best, long buried under the grief and responsibility to her family. She hadn’t really dreamed of anything in such a long time. Luciel seemed to have a clear picture though…

It’d only been a few weeks since they’d met...

“I’m getting ahead of myself, aren’t I?” he acknowledged, seemingly reading the flurry of thoughts going through her mind.

“Not at all. I’d rather we talk about it, so we know what we’re on the same page.”

“That’s right… Although before I can even consider starting a family… I need to save my old one…”

“We’ll save Saeran. I owe him that much.”

The hacker seemed confused.

It was all so cloudy in her mind. The one thing that stood out were Saeran’s mournful, vivid green eyes… Wild and desperate.

_You entered the RFA because of me._

_That’s why I wanted to save you first._

Was she imagining him saying that? No… That was a real memory.

“if it wasn’t for him, we would have never met. Luciel, I think he used me to find you. When he broke in that night, he seemed to really think he was saving me from you and V. It’s fuzzy… But I think, Saeran doesn’t hate you as much as he was likely hurt when you disappeared, and to be honest, I understand how that feels.“

“That reminds me of something you said earlier.” His hand rested on her shoulder. “Those hurtful things that you said about yourself… And about not wanting to lose some-“

The girl gave his hand a gentle pat before offering a smile and stepping away, pulling her suitcase with her. Dangling by a paw was the doll that Jun had given her years ago, clinging on... Inside the weight of the consoles her father repair for fun. Unlike him, she had never thought to run away from her problems. She had been drowning since Jun-Seo jumped off the bridge into the frigid
waters below.

“Miyeon, you know you can tell me anything, right?”

She shifted uncomfortably.

“I’ll tell you one day… Just not tonight. It’s been an exhausting day.”

Luciel’s concerned expression didn’t waver, but he nodded in understanding. There were glimpses of regret, as he knew his role in wearing her down all too well. “I understand. When you’re ready, just know I’m here… I’m not going to run away from you. Not anymore.”

“Thank you. Although, I hope you don’t mind if I run away from you. Hide and seek won’t be fun otherwise,” she offered with a weary smile while setting her bag near the pile to be carried out when they left in the morning. It’d been a gloomy enough day, so naturally the girl wanted to brighten things up.

He perked up. “You have an unfair advantage! I hate to mention this, but I think your skirt rode up a little. It’s a little distracting. If you could pull it back down a little—”

“Is that all it takes to get your attention?” she teased, straightening back up.

“I’m a man,” he confessed while picking up the last of the gear to be set by the door.

As he drew close, Miyeon tried to help. He permitted it for a little before a devious smile formed on his lips.

“Hard mode - Initiated.”

The weight she was carrying suddenly increased until she was carrying it all by herself. IT WAS SO HEAVY! Her knees buckled, and an awkward little cry escaped her.

“SEVEN!”

This made him break out into a full laugh before apologizing and taking the bag from her. Despite his baggy clothes, he really was quite strong. She stretched her arms, affirming they hadn’t been yanked out of their sockets while he glanced back at her. They both laughed.

This really did suit them…

The rest of preparations were things she could finish up while he returned to the online offensive as it were… She’d finished packing some extras before a message from a guest reminded her of one last invite she wanted to send. When Rika had passed, the group had apparently lost all motivation. Her coming into the group by Saeran’s machinations had breathed life back into the group. With her and Luciel being gone, and the group having lost faith in V, there was a good chance it may return to that stagnant state. Bringing in someone new who would be eager to keep up the work would likely prevent that. The charities they helped needed the parties to continue… She had just the person in mind.

A glance at the chat showed that the revelations regarding Rika’s involvement with Mint Eye wasn’t going well… Yoosung, in particular, was taking it hard. It was bad enough Seven had been so harsh to him, but this news had sent him into what was basically radio silence. The hacker had tried to call him but wasn’t getting any response, which prompted him to follow up to make sure his friend was safe. He hadn’t left his dorm room if checking in with the guards Jumin had assigned
to him could be trusted. It was likely the blonde was taking time to himself to process everything.

Bringing the hacker a plate of snacks, Miyeon took a seat on the desk beside him. They offered the other a reassuring smile, but they’d both seen the responses in chat. He’d done his part to assure that he’d get everyone answers, and she had done hers reassuring them in private messages although knowing that she was going with Luciel wasn’t helping matters. She watched him work a little before finding the courage to ask.

“...Luciel.”

“Yes?”

“This is probably the worst time to bring this up, but if I don’t ask now, I don’t think I’ll have the time to later.”

His typing slowed, seemingly under the impression that whatever would come out of her mouth next would be something relating to the two of them. She could see that concern written plainly on his face.

“With V being out of the picture, Jumin is basically the one in charge, right?”

“Right.”

“So, under normal circumstances, any new members would require his okay and a security check by you before they’re officially brought into the group.”

The hacker returned his attention.

“I wouldn’t have you bring someone in right now, but I’m thinking of inviting a friend to go in my place to the party to help Jaehee. She could help keep everyone motivated while we’re away.” The redhead was typing furiously but seemed to be listening, albeit, didn’t show any enthusiasm for the idea. “I think, being given the opportunity, she could earn a spot in the RFA on her own. She’s always been more of a social butterfly than me, and I really think she could be a good fit. If nothing else, I’m sure she could earn an internship at C&R.”

“This is the friend that you meant, right?”

He pointed towards the screen, having pulled up Eun-Ji’s personal pages.

“...Yeah,” the girl confirmed quietly, not wanting to admit how creepy it was. Then again, this was what he did for a living. He seemed a bit uncomfortable at having done it but began to scroll through.

“Well... It looks like your friend likely won’t have plans that day.”

There wasn’t much detail in the post aside from her status being listed as “single”. The last Miyeon knew, her friend had been dating the same guy for a while. The breakup must’ve been relatively recent. Within a minute the hacker had pulled up the other profile, revealing recent pictures of the film student in the arms of some other girl, who turned out to be some Instagram model.

She was too tired to be angry, but another part of her wasn’t entirely surprised... Only hours before she’d felt so bitterly about the hacker wanting to disappear off the face of the Earth. She was no better...

“There.”
Miyeon raised her head, surprised. “There, what?”

The hacker didn’t clarify, but the girl got the distinct feeling that he’d done something. Before she could figure out what, he spoke, “It’s okay if you want to invite her to the party to see how she gets along with everyone as a guest. You should just let Jaehee know about any “special” arrangements.”

“Luciel, thank you.”

His eyes met hers tenderly before drifting back to the screen before a breath of resignation escaped him, followed by a flurry of keystrokes. “Even in a situation like this, you’re worried about everyone else’s happiness…”

“So are you,” she reminded him before her phone began to ring. The hacker seemed a little concerned at first as it might’ve been Yoosung. “It’s Zen.”

He nodded as she answered, although it was clear he was still worried about blonde.

“Hey, Zen.”

“Is Seven with you right now?”

“He’s right beside me,” Miyeon replied. “Did you need to speak to him?”

“There’s something I want to tell you - in private.”

The tone in his voice made her stomach sink a little. Only a few days before, they’d seemed to get along. The actor had been flirting with her; it really did seem like he liked her. Was this about that or something else?

“Okay.” Luciel glanced up at her, only or her to give him a pat on the head before walking into the bathroom and shutting the door. “What’s up?”

“So, this may sound funny, but people say the late bloomers are the scary ones, right? The dude got so honest all of a sudden... Uhm... You don't think he'll just explode and try to take advantage of you, do you?”

There was sincere concern in his tone. It didn’t seem like him just being jealous.

“Seven…?”

“I can kind of sense it,” the actor continued. “You should be careful when a man starts staring and peering at you. I’m not saying Seven's doing that! But just keep that in mind. God... I'm getting worried. No. Nope!” He drew a big breath. “What matters is what you think… So... What do you think? What would you do if Seven wanted you – like “wanted” you?” He emphasized that point to make sure there was no misunderstanding.

Even the cold night air couldn’t keep her cool at that thought. She was surprised at how frank he was… It seemed strange that he would be so worried about such a thing, but if he still liked her, of course he’d be concerned. Then again, as someone older and more experienced, he could just be looking out for her.

“I don’t really know… I guess it’s okay, as long as it's mutual.”

"Wow... You're pretty bold, aren't you?” he exclaimed, before gathering himself.
“Well, if it's okay with both of you. It's not my place to butt in. You're both old enough to make your own decisions. I hope I don't sound like such an old man though. It's just... You know... You just, you know, have to be careful, prepared, and safe. Hmm? Maybe I’m just being nosy.”

He was...

Zen continued. “It's just hard not to think about it. I care about the both of you. Oh... Seriously, I’m not going to sleep tonight.”

The actor seemed to have come to terms with the fact that she and Seven were getting close... It was touching to know he was worried for her in that regard. Truthfully, her mind hadn’t even gone there. Exactly what did he imagine was going on?

“You know you can come to me if you need any advice about relationships, right?” He paused. “But I know both of you, so it'd be strange to talk about private things... Never mind! Never mind! You two just do whatever you want. I need to hang up now. I should take a shower before going to bed. Bye!”

Miyeon didn’t even get a chance to hang up. She stared at her phone for a moment, amused and feeling a little bad for the actor. Even if she’d seemingly picked Luciel over the others, he was still concerned for her wellbeing. It didn’t seem to come from a place of jealousy, but out of sincere concern. Her heart ached for him to find someone who would appreciate that tender, nurturing part of him. Really, Zen was a wonderful guy. If not for Seven... She really could fall for someone like him.

Thing was, there was a world with Luciel.

As she stepped back into the apartment, his eyes darted over out of curiosity. He was trying to be discreet about it, but it wasn’t hard to catch. It made her wonder if he felt jealous. Tidying up the desk beside him a bit, Miyeon then got ready for bed. After changing into some loose-fitting pajama pants, redressing her wounds, and slipping old t-shirt she’d left out, the girl sat in bed to do a final check of her messages of the day. Time seemed to fly by as she struggled to phrase Eun-Ji’s invitation. She then wrote a private message to Jaehee regarding the matter. It was getting close to midnight by the it was all done.

The apartment was mostly except the ambient light coming in from the balcony, the lamp on the nightstand, her phone, and the dim glow of the sole laptop screen that Luciel had left unpacked to continue his work. She could tell that fatigue was settling in. Considering how early he had stated they’d be leaving, this was concerning. He was engrossed in whatever he had pulled up. Eventually Miyeon couldn’t take watching him fight exhaustion anymore.

She dialed him.

Wearily he looked down at his phone before picking it up, the outline of a smile on his silhouette.

“Hey... I was tempted to pretend it wasn’t you, but... It's so cute how you just don’t give up.”

“When were you coming to bed?”

The girl patted the bed beside her, getting him to turn his head around.

“C-coming to bed...?” he repeated.
“There’s enough room for three people, and I trust you not to do something weird?”

“N-no! It’s not that, I-ah if I set laptop on the bed then the CPU won’t have airflow, and it’ll will overheat. So, yeah!” The hacker rubbed his brow. “Still, if you want me to come up…. I’ll do it later. After this is done.” Their eyes met. “Maybe we can just look at each other like this and talk while I work… I need to finish this, but I am getting sleepy. If I just can’t stand it, I can come sit on the bed with you for a little.”

“Okay, just… Try to get some rest.”

“I will,” he assured her.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Miyeon.”

She plugged her phone in to charge and sat it on the nightstand before taking a spot nearly on the edge of the bed to leave him plenty of room. They’d already been sharing the apartment for days without issue. Miyeon felt confident that he wasn’t going to force himself on her. The emotional roller coaster of the day left her mind racing, but sleep came surprisingly quick. Her body seemed to realize that the days ahead would likely not allow her the luxury of a soft, warm bed again. Miyeon had turned the AC up and was buried under blankets. She dozed peacefully until the weight distribution on the bed changed. Behind her the mattress dipped and the airflow changed as a form laid out on top of the sheets.

“Luci-…?” she questioned drowsily, rolling to face him. It was too dark to see so instead she reached out to confirm.

A hand met her own. Their fingers interlocked establishing both connection and a boundary upon the bed. He was so warm, but the room was so cool. Within minutes the quiet returned. She listened to his breathing which he seemed to be restraining at first, until gradually she could feel his body relax. Slowly Luciel’s barely audible snores faded into deep, restful breaths. Half asleep, the girl, seeking warmth, nestled closer, her fingers tightly weaving into those of the wizard who held their fate in his hands.
Chapter 24:

Eun-Ji’s phone gave an unfamiliar jingle.

It’d been so long since the blonde had gotten the text from that number, she almost thought it was a prank. Yet there was the gentle smile of an old friend in the picture icon next to the unread note. It didn’t help that it was buried in a slew of less friendly private messages. It may as well have been a call from a ghost…

Thinking about how long it’d been since she last spoke to Miyeon made her feel terrible, as the current speculation was that the quiet girl had to drop school to try to find work. No one in the life sciences program had seen her in months…

What could she possibly say, “Hey, girl! Sorry about your dad and totally letting you turtle up without forcing a visit. So yeah, that jerk cheated on me!”

Instead she sat with a pint of mint ice cream trying to think of things to say to make everything sound like it was fine. The dessert was the only sweet thing the girl could allow herself after a rather energetic kick boxing lesson; truthfully, her partners might’ve deserved it more than her… She might’ve been a little rougher than usual tonight.

This wasn’t the first break up Eun-ji had experienced, but the differences between dating someone as a teenager and as a young adult were night and day to her now. Sharing an awkward kiss and maybe seeing someone for coffee now and then wasn’t even on the same page as having spent over two years together. Being “in love” as a middle school student was passionate but not nearly the same thing as actually working to build a life together. Saying “I love you forever” wasn’t nearly the same as the patience it took to build the foundation for it… She trusted her now ex and was certain they’d have a future; he’d met her parents! But no – he had been seeing some wanna-be idol that he’d casted for a class project for weeks now since classes had started back up. If the bastard had broken up with her before starting to see someone else, Eun-ji might’ve respected him a bit more. Add to that every single one of their “friends” seemed to know, but no one had said a thing to her.

Miyeon would’ve said something…

Even if her voice was soft most, her words were usually well placed. She had a way of quietly uttering truth in such a way it could eviscerate a person; like some sort of strange ninja of psychology. The girl would’ve cut him down on the spot without laying a hand on him… Unlike Eun-Ji. All the blonde could do was throw away everything that even remotely reminded her of him before letting him know what she knew…
His excuse when she confronted him “on set”?

“You’re just too… I don’t know… active? Like, I never see you anymore. How could we even raise a family if you won’t act like a proper wife now?”

That was a laughable excuse…

Who was the spoiled child playing “director” while running up his parent’s credit cards on alcohol, parties, and arm candy?

She was the only one between the two of them in a proper University. Business and law weren’t exactly easy pursuits, but they would be essential if she ever wanted to run her own business or help him manage his. She’d even given up playing guitar to focus on the coursework. If he wanted a niche, she’d have to carve it by building the image that would help popularize it. Someone was going to have to make money to provide for the “family”; it sure as hell wasn’t going to be him!

Eun-Ji was damn sure the “model” he was with now couldn’t do that for him. She’d only just learned how to do the latest trend in nail – that was much easier than learning how to write contracts. Despite his attesting that his new “girlfriend” was so “deep”. There wasn’t that much symbolism in comparing make up brands or which filter to use in her opinion.

Maybe that foundation would hide the imprint of her hand.

Proper wife her ass.

It was his loss.

At least, that’s what the blonde tried to tell herself, but her confidence was still shaken. How many hours had she spent on cultivating a look and studying to have all that mean nothing before someone who had the luxury of perpetually nice lighting in her Instagram and blog pics. The whole thing somehow managed to even make her ice cream taste bad which was why she probably kept shoveling it down. There was a futile hope that eventually it’d taste right again. A few of his film buddies and her classmates had already hinted they might be interested in her, but that wasn’t the point…

She didn’t want them… She wanted to feel valued by someone again and to know she could trust them. Eun-Ji wanted to drop the weakness he made her feel and return to being the fierce and fabulous person she wanted to become.

There wasn’t anyone in her immediate circle she could really talk to frankly about it, no matter how good their prospects seemed over a nice dinner. No way she was going to show weakness to future business partners who would hold it against her later; it was about an image. Besides, they’d want the same thing eventually too, right? She wasn’t content with being some trophy… The girl did appreciate that they’d done their best to cheer her up by depicting him as a leech and rightfully pointing out that he’d regret his choice. It didn’t change the fact that she hurt right now, and that even if it was a stupid dream, for nearly two years Eun-Ji had dreamt of it right alongside him. A bright future with his artistic vision and her behind the scenes cutting deals like a boss – each trailblazers.

Now?

She was just a mess, two years of her prime lost with a half empty pint of ice cream, yoga pants, debating on troubling her best friend: the one person who had seen her at her worst and wouldn’t judge. There’d been a time when they’d sworn to never let a relationship get in the way of
their friendship, yet here they were without a word to each other in months. While it was true that it wasn’t unusual for her friend to go into “hermit mode” and come out on her own after a week or so, this was different…

It was like when Jun-Seo had passed. Her friend disappeared for nearly a month. There were rumors of her having taken her life along with her brother and all sorts of scandalous things… She’d likely been taking classes at home. Later Eun-Ji found that the girl had transferred to another school. When her parents divorced shortly after, Miyeon would often stay the night so she wouldn’t be alone in the Ko family house. With her father being an officer, he felt it would be safer. It was around then that she began to ask questions about housework. Granny was usually the one to help her. Perhaps it was because she was lonely or had nothing better to do, but the girl would drop in to help with everything from making soap to kimchi. It became a little bit of a weekly ritual.

Until a few days after their trip to the amusement park, she missed without as much as a call.

It was only when she’d talked to the neighbor that Eun-Ji’d heard about Mr.Ko being taken to the hospital. Even then, the old woman only knew because she’d seen the ambulance and later Miyeon had asked her to watch over the house. The girl had apparently asked for an academic leave of absence from the University while overseeing her father’s care, and the fact that he was ill was only known to a few. Updates about his death followed. By that point it was too late to even get flowers for a service.

She hadn’t returned to classes that semester, likely to grieve alone in that house…

At the time, Eun-Ji had justified it to herself as giving Miyeon the space she needed. In hindsight, she was just too engrossed with school and the drama of her own life to have spare energy to be a good friend. If she tried to apologize now, it’d just look like the blonde was wanting someone to whine to, which was partially true… She did want to whine, but a part of her wanted to know that her friend was okay too.

Miyeon’d would probably tell her that was normal and that’s what friendship was about, yet she never took her own advice… Trying to get her to open up about anything was nearly impossible. Eun-Ji was a dam that occasionally opened the floodgate. Miyeon was an impenetrable fortress when it came to the things that really bothered her.

Nothing would happen if she just sat watching bad dramas and poking the melting green mass in the tub with a spoon between sniffles. A groan escaped her but was quickly answered by a pounding on her wall from her little sister, who up till that point had been blaring one of Zen’s newer songs. There’d been a time when she would’ve been singing along with it. Right now, she didn’t want to hear any man’s voice.

Eun-Ji pounded right back!

The music was turned up louder until their mother and grandmother ordered that the both quiet down from downstairs. A tense few moments passed as she heard her come upstairs, but fortunately mom went into her younger sister’s room. Although she couldn’t make out the words being uttered, Eun-Ji could hear the tone in her mother’s voice. It was very much authoritative until the end, at which point it softened up. Her sister let out an exasperated sigh and soon both marched back downstairs. Not much longer after, there was a knock on her door before Min-Ji popped her head through. With her came the aroma of food. Her mom was more likely to purchase food than cook, but this was a special circumstance.

It smelled so good.
They could negotiate terms…

“…Want to watch a movie or something?”

“…It’s past midnight.”

“Mom made sundubu jjigae.”

“You know how weird mom gets when Dad works late…”

“Wan Kyun broke up with you, didn’t he?”

Eun-Ji wasn’t going to dignify that with a response, although her puffy red eyes said everything. This wasn’t the first time her sister had been through this routine. She wanted to correct the girl, she had broken up with him, but… He’d severed his affection for her long before that.

Thankfully, the “warden” was more sensitive…

Her little sister sighed and worked her way into the room, setting the tray with its two bowls of spicy stew, steaming bowls of rice, and little side plates with sautéed perilla leaves on the floor. With a look of annoyance, she picked up the half empty pint of melted ice cream.

“You’re going to replace that,” Min-Ji stated – not asked.

“Yeah… Sure. Look, I’m really hurting here,” grumbled the older sister as she flopped back. It’d be too hot to eat just yet…

Min-Ji puffed on her spoon to cool the soup between bites. Even if she was young, the girl was sharp and had never liked her boyfriends… It was hard to tell whether that came from their grandmother’s scathing commentary or was something genetic, she couldn’t be sure. A frown crossed her lips as she saw a poster of Zen on her wall… How could that stupid prick make someone even as handsome as that unappealing? It wasn’t the actor’s fault he was a guy; nature had already cursed him with irreproachable beauty. That disappointment only lasted as long as it took for her to feel the sting of her sister’s gaze.

“Don’t say it.”

“…”

“DON’T SAY IT!”

“I told you so.”

The older sister covered her face with a pillow and let out a muffled scream of frustration, before laying on the floor to sulk. Another text jingle, followed b another. Not even a minute into that her sister piped up.

“Hey, since Mr.Useless isn’t taking you on a date... You’ll be free the day after tomorrow, right?”

“…I’m not hanging out with your friends!” griped the blonde from under the pillow.

“I’ll tell Miyeon you said no then.”

It took a minute for Eun-Ji to process the words. There were many words that simply
didn’t belong together– “Miyeon” and “party” were on that list. Her mind went immediately to the worst-case scenario. Had the quiet girl completely gone buck wild after her father’s death? Was she having to sell her body to make ends meet!?

The blonde practically flew up and snatched the phone from her sister, too shocked to even chide her for looking through her messages. She had to reread it twice to be sure.

Miyeon- Hey Eun-Ji. I know it’s been a long time.

Miyeon- Sorry for falling off the face of the Earth.

Her sister had clearly replied for her…

“It’s my fault for being a terrible friend and sister. I had my head too far up that loser director’s butt and wasn’t focusing on the world. I’ve learned better, although I really am an idiot. Seriously I’m so stupid sometimes. But I’m definitely up for making it up to you!”

Miyeon- I understand; it’s fine really. Although there is a favor I could use your help with.

Miyeon – There’s a party that I helped put together taking place the day after tomorrow. Something came up so I won’t be able to attend, but I’m hoping you could go in my place.

Miyeon – It’s being hosted by a rather well-connected charity organization with ties to C&R, so there would be lots of potential contacts for you to network with – and good food and wine. Jumin Han, Zen, and other celebrities are among the guests.

She had her with networking, but it was hard to turn down the other delights…

Miyeon - It’d be semi-formal attire. I know it’s short notice, but I’ve included the contact information for Mr.Han’s executive assistance, Jaehee Kang. If you’re interested, please contact her to RSVP and confirm the address and time to arrive. She can assist with finding an appropriate outfit if you don’t have one available.

Miyeon – Assistant Kang can be reached at ----------. I’ve already let her know to expect you.

Miyeon - PS- she’s a HUGE Zen fangirl and LOVES coffee. / Mr.Han loves cats!

Eun-Ji’s mouth was so agape that a dragonfly could’ve easily flown in… This had to be some sort of prank. Then again, maybe the girl had found a job. Maybe she was one of Mr.Han senior’s secret lovers! He tended to go for older, glamorous ladies, but she could easily imagine the old dog keeping a sweet, pure little thing like Miyeon as a kept mistress somewhere. Pampered and fawned over. She read the message again and again, quietly mouthing the words to herself.

The blonde snapped out of her daze when she felt her sister take the phone back. The two of them struggled until she felt something press against her ear. It was ringing!

“Min-Ji!” she hissed before hearing the smooth, cool voice of a grown woman after a click.

“Good evening. This is Mr.Han’s executive assistant, Ms. Kang. How may I assist you?”

She sounded so cool!
Eun-Ji took a deep breath and summoned her “business tiger” self. “Good evening. It is a pleasure to speak with you directly, Ms.Kang. This is Eun-Ji Ahn. A mutual friend had asked that I reach out to you regarding participation in charity event occurring at the end of this week.”

“I see. At this point Ms.Ko has signed you up as a guest. Is it safe to assume that you would like to RSVP for this event?”

“Before I do, can I ask something a little off topic and off the professional record, just as one woman to another?” Eun-Ji’s tone softened. “How is she? I’m assuming you two are friendly.”

There was a soft breath on the other end of the phone. “Miyeon is… She is a good friend, although I’ve only known her a short time. As for how she is… It’s an uncertain situation right now. There are some important matters that have come up that will keep her from attending. However lamentable, it is her wish that we continue on.”

“I see…” the blonde’s voice trailed.

Maybe something had come up with her friend’s estranged mother? Despite whatever dark spot she was in, it was just like Miyeon to open the door for someone else. Sure, it was a chance for the blonde to make connections, but more importantly, she could demonstrate her appreciation of the girl and pay penance. If her friend worked hard on the party, then by God she was going to ensure that it was a smash hit.

That’d teach Miyeon’s harpy of a mother… She was going to make sure her friend was going to the top with her, then grind that witch’s face in it.

“Forgive me. This is terribly unprofessional and on short notice; I’m not sure what responsibilities she would have had, but I would very much like to do my best to ensure this party is a success. Is it possible that I could volunteer my services in some way? It feels wrong to just sit back and drink champagne.”

“As you’re not a member of our organization there are some limitations to what we can allow you access to. However, as you are a friend of Miyeon’s, I am certain your assistance would be most beneficial. I was told that you are a student. Is that correct?”

“Yes, but I have a short day tomorrow. This has become my top priority.”

“Good. If you could arrive at the venue tomorrow morning at around 9:15 AM, I can brief you on the itinerary.”

“Thank you so much. I am very grateful for this opportunity.”

“You’re welcome, Ms. Ahn. I look forward to meeting you. Good evening.”

“Good evening, Assistant Kang.”

Eun-Ji hung up the phone, feeling some resolve and purpose. She vaguely recalled of hearing about a charity organization with ties to the young heir of C&R. There would no doubt be photographers. This was for Miyeon and for charity, but it wouldn’t hurt to make sure she was absolutely stunning in the event she appeared in any press photos.

Wan Kyun was going to eat his socks! She was going to be a femme fatale the level of Hollywood! There was so much preparation to do! She quickly went into a flurry of looking up style guides and calling out to see what her options would be for a suitable dress for the party.
From the side, her sister watched, satisfied with her work. Even though she’d never admit it, her older sister could be cool sometimes...

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The dim light, the whimpers, and the tang of stale alcohol permeated the atmosphere. A chill ran through him recognizing the small room... Before him stood a lithe figure with pale skin, long nails, and manic eyes that glared at him intensely from behind a tangle of red hair. There were gashes along her arms and slashes across her chest, all seeping scarlet.

“Don’t you even dream of going outside!” rasped the female voice. “You’re my children… MINE! Not his! I am the only reason you boys are alive! This is our world… If you step outside he’ll get you, cut you up…”

Saeran, pale and curled into a ball, lay in the corner sobbing quietly and rocking. His frail little ankle was bruised but the rope was loose. Saeyoung felt like he was trying to walk through syrup as he tried to dodge the wraith that flailed at him. He couldn’t move or even cry out despite his attempts.

Sharp nails dug into his wrist as he was jerked up by the arm and shook.

“Saeyoung! What did I tell you?!” The stench of liquor and stale perfume made him sick. “Why is he wandering around the kitchen? I told you to watch the rope!” He was shaken again as her hands wound around the collar of his hoodie. “Do you want to be tied up this time?”

The only thing he could see were those manic, blood shot eyes.

No matter how he fought, there was no loosening the hold until he felt her let go… His head hit the wall, sending a sharp pain through his skull. The tiny kitchen seemed to grow narrower and twisted as the ghoul yanked his whimpering twin up. They both knew there was no point in screaming, no one would come to help. There was a thud as the woman pinned the frail boy down to the linoleum floor and wrapped her hands around his throat, tightening them to stifle his cries.

“Sae-*cough*-younhhnnng!” his brother gagged between gasps and sobs.

He couldn’t move... He couldn’t move! He pleaded for God, anyone to make it stop… Hurt him, but not Saeran.

“You can’t leave me... He’ll kill you... He’ll kill you both and your bodies will be lost. You’ll be ghosts wondering alone forever. You’ll never see each other again. Is that what you want?” the woman hissed. “If you don’t want to die – stay here.”

Stay here...

Only now did he realize the room was filling up with the vile, blackened blood ebbing from her. Saeran’s eyes were back in his head as the disgusting fluid filled his half open mouth... He couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe! His mother was vomiting the black miasma now.

Stay here.

You can only live here...

The gold in Saeran’s eyes flashed green just before he felt himself submerge.
Miyeon woke as warm body next to her suddenly shot up with a startled yell breaking the peace of the room. Something resembling a sob escaped Luciel as his legs curled up and his chest heaving chest hanging between his shaking arms.

Careful not to startle him, the girl groggily eased herself up before wrapping her arms around the hacker’s tense frame. He was quivering, although she wasn’t sure if it was fear or from how intensely he was hyperventilating.

“It…was just a dream… J-just a dream…” the hacker repeated softly, almost as if he needed to convince himself.

After a moment, it seemed to work, as his head eventually relaxed against her breast. Miyeon’s cheek rested against the top of his head. There wasn’t any protest from him at the prolonged contact. In fact, she noticed that his breaths gradually slowed to match her own. It took only a little shift in her weight to ease him back into lying beside her. He lay facing her, but his gaze was somewhere distant.

“Sorry… I just… was more tired than I thought and… I really need to pull myself together.”

His eyes relayed a quiet desire to get up to continue working, but the girl began to slip blankets over him. Any resolve he had was quickly melting under the warmth of the comforter and the body under it. After a little more adjustment, Miyeon was sure that he would be cozy and eased back down herself, running her fingers through his wild red hair.

“It’ll be a long drive tomorrow… So let’s try to get a little sleep, okay?”

“Yeah…”

She nestled back in, but after several minutes, it was clear that he was still too shaken to sleep.

“Maybe I should sing to you or read you a story.”

A ghost of a chuckle escaped him, although the light from her phone soon revealed his weary, almost boyish expression. Miyeon sat up a little, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear while pulling up one of her favorite stories. She had been reading “The Little Prince” to him before. Scrolling through a few links, she was eventually able to find an online copy of it in Korean. Rather than pick up where she left off before, the girl chose her favorite chapter…

(- Excerpt from Chapter 21 of the Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry-)

"Who are you?" asked the little prince, and added, "You're very pretty to look at."

"I'm a fox", the fox said.

~Miyeon was careful to use different voices for each, although, it made her sad recalling how just hours before she was reading with the robot cat… ~

"Come and play with me," proposed the little prince, "I'm so unhappy."

"I can't play with you," the fox said, "I'm not tamed."
"Ah! Please excuse me, "said the little prince. But after some thought, he added: does that mean—'tame'?"

"You do not live here," said the fox, "What is it you're looking for?"

"I'm looking for men," said the little prince. "What does that mean—tame?"

"Men," said the fox, "they've guns, and they hunt. It's very disturbing. They also raise chickens. These are their only interests. Are you looking for chickens?"

"No," said the little prince. "I'm looking for friends. What does that mean—tame?"

"It's an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."

"To establish ties?"

"Just that," said the fox. "to me, you're still nothing more than a little boy who's just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you I'm nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you'll be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world ..."

"I'm beginning to understand," said the little prince. "There's a flower. . .I think she has tamed me..."

"It is possible," said the fox. "On earth one sees all sorts of things."

"Oh! But this is not on the earth!" said the little prince.

The fox seemed perplexed, and very curious. "On another planet?"

"Yes"

~The hacker seemed a little more interested as his head was now against her shoulder, looking over the screen. ~

"Are there hunters on that planet?"

"No"

"Ah that's interesting! Are there chickens?"

"No"

"Nothing is perfect," sighed the fox. But he came back to his idea. "My life's very monotonous," he said. "I hunt chickens; men hunt me. All chickens are just alike, and all the men are just alike. And in consequence, I am a little bored. But if you tame me, it'll be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that'll be different from all the others. Other steps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music out of my burrow. And then look: you see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair that is the color of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat..."

~Luciel gently reached over and began to scroll for her. ~
The fox gazed at the little prince, for a long time. "Please---tame me!" he said.

"I want to, very much," the little prince replied. "But I've not much time. I've friends to discover, and a great many things to understand."

"One only understands the things that one tames," said the fox. "Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things already made at the shops. But there's no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends any more. If you want a friend, tame me..."

There was a settling against her side as he seemed very engaged now. To her surprise, he read the next line.

"What must I do, to tame you?"

Her cheeks felt warm, but she continued reading as the fox.

"You must be very patient. You'll sit down at a little distance from me - like that - in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you'll sit a little closer to me, every day..."

The next day the little prince came back.

"It would have been better to come back at the same hour. If for example, you came at four o'clock in the afternoon, then at three o'clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o'clock, I shall be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is ready to greet you... One must observe the proper rites..."

"What's a rite?" asked the little prince, although Luciel’s deep, sleepy voice was hardly childlike.

"Those also are actions too often neglected," read Miyeon. "They're what make one day different from other days, one hour different from other hours. There's a rite, for example, among my hunters. Every Thursday they dance with the village girls. So, Thursday's a wonderful day for me! I can take a walk as far as the vineyards. But if the hunters danced at just any time, every day would be like every other day, and I should never have any vacation at all."

So, the little prince tamed the fox. And when the hour of his departure drew near---

"Ah," said the fox, "I shall cry."

"It's your own fault. I never wished you any sort of harm; but you wanted me to tame you," Luciel half read, half confessed aloud.

It was hard to tell what story was and what was real as the girl continued.

"Yes, that is so."

"But now you're going to cry."

"Yes, that is so."

"Then it has done you no good at all!"
"It has done me good," Miyeon soothed, resting her head against his, "because of the color of the wheat fields. Go and look again at the roses. You'll understand now that yours is unique in all the world. Then come back to say goodbye to me, and I will make you a present of a secret."

The little prince went away, to look again at the roses.

"You're not at all like my rose," he said. "As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You're like my fox when I first knew him. He was only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But I have made a friend, and now he's unique in all the world."

And the roses were very much embarrassed.

"You're beautiful, but you're empty," the man lying at her side read softly. "One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think that my rose looked just like you --the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she's more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is for her that I've killed the caterpillars (except the two or three we saved to become butterflies); because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is MY rose."

And he went back to meet the fox. "Goodbye" he said.

"Goodbye," said the girl as the fox. "And now here's my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

"What is essential is invisible to the eye," Luciel repeated.

"It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important."

"It is the time I have wasted for my rose--" said the little prince so he would be sure to remember.

"Men have forgotten this truth," said the fox. Yet as Miyeon recited the next portion, she was very clear in her meaning, "But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose..."

"I am responsible for my rose," the hacker read aloud before feeling the weight of the phone lift from her hands and the blanket of darkness settle back over the room. He sat the device carefully aside before she felt his hands at her own. "Between us… Who is the fox, who is the prince, and who is the rose?"

"It's hard to say."

Before she could elaborate their eyes met in the glow of the moon, and she became very much aware of how tenderly he studied the lines of her face. Her body felt so very hot in preparation for something that her instinct understood yet consciously she had not yet grasped.

"Miyeon… I’m… Glad you’re here with me,” he confessed across the pillow. The girl offered him a bright smile before he guiltily looked away and seemed to shift uncomfortably. "Good night."

He rolled to where his back was to her. In her heart, relief and disappointment fought to see which was the greater. Luciel clearly wanted more but was resisting, maybe for the fear that he
wouldn’t be able to stop himself. That thought terrified her as much as it excited her. Yet she felt somehow shut out with not being able to see his face or touch him now. Things were going to be increasingly dangerous over the next little while. Something about having one’s mortality so keenly felt made such primal stirrings into a thrashing.

Miyeon watched as his chest rose and fell… The two of them would be alone together for a while. It wasn’t a matter of if he wanted her, but when. Knowing that only made her nervous and want to push him farther away as much as it made her want to hold him. Whatever “this” was between them was already confusing. When that moment came, she hoped that the reservations she had would be resolved. It was hard to tell if this was him at his worst, but there were traits that were very unattractive to her within him. Breaking robot cat showing his anger at its peak and how destructive it could be… His ability to suddenly grow cold, eagerness to throw everyone he cherished away, and wallow in self-pity were things that brought up old demons in her… Familiar demons.

That person was beside her and only moments before was resting his head against her. These behaviors were Luciel at an extreme. If the years before that described by the RFA were any clue, even behind the mask, at his core, he was a person who had sacrificed his own happiness for the sake of others until it’d reached this breaking point. Yet the hacker always seemed to do little acts of kindness in ways he could see the effects without accepting any responsibility. If there was to be any relationship between them, that wasn’t going to be a sustainable approach.

She was far from perfect herself though. Pondering how long it’d be before he saw how unremarkable she was and lost interest made her quite gloomy. She wasn’t special… If anything, she was going to just get more in his way. He’d get bored of her, she’d mess it up, he’d run away… Everyone got bored or frustrated with how useless she was and left eventually. That made her want to enjoy whatever it was between them while it lasted.

If nothing else… If she could get him to a point where he and Saeran could resolve their issues and live happily, that’d be enough. It would take a long time and lot of proof that he could trust his twin again; time that Luciel would likely stay by his side. That wasn’t even considering the fact that there was still the Agency he worked for that could potentially end all of it. Both twins were capable and likely valuable. Luciel seemed to have a plan, but…

She played the scenarios out in her head, watching the body next to her in the dim glow of moonlight and the streetlights outside… At some point he rolled onto his back, his fiery brow furrowed until a stroke of his cheek soothed him. Her hand came to rest on his slowly rising chest. After a few minutes, he seemed to pout then rolled to face her, his long fingers wrapping around her hand, holding it close to him as if she would run away. His lips were parted slightly in his slumber, it’d be so easy to steal a kiss, but he looked so innocent.

For just a little while… She wanted to pretend those doubts and fears within her didn’t exist. She wanted to cling to the hopes and dream that one day they could be happy together. The future terrified her though. Miyeon had to settle for the moment. A beautiful man was lying next to her, and she’d be going on an adventure…

After watching him for some time, it was clear to her that the restlessness in her heart wouldn’t ease, and it wouldn’t be long before the alarm would wake him. With some care, she managed to extricate herself, although not without a little fight. He looked so troubled once Miyeon had pulled away. His hands remained outstretched to where her lingering warmth had been like a child grasping for a beloved toy. She took this time to shower, quietly, and dress.

During the little training session Luciel had given her on some of the tools in his kit, it was
made clear that they would be going into the mountains. Rather than risking shoes that would slip, she removed her boots from her bags and set them out. She took more than care than usual to bandage her feet with enough salve and extra padding to withstand activity, although the reality was running for any long distance likely wasn’t going to be an option for her. Carefully she cut open a portion of the lacing of her boot and slipped in a nail file… She’d read that they could be useful. Miyeon also opted for a few layers and a sweater when it came to clothes… A sports bra over a wired one, which could be used in any number of ways If there was an emergency. She could always rip off a layer for bandages and still have something to cover herself with. Not to mention elastic was highly valuable. There were leggings under her jeans to make it harder for any attackers with more violating intentions… Plus it gave her space to hide things if needed.

Exiting the restroom, the girl found the hacker waiting for her with his hands behind his back. It was still dark outside, yet he’d turned the lights on. The bags were ready. He seemed a little nervous, but not in a frightening way, moreso like a schoolboy asking to meet after classes to confess his feelings.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” he greeted before a troubled breath escaped him. “Miyeon, I apologize if this sounds as though I’m doubting you, but… This is going to be a dangerous journey. Once we step out this door, there is no turning back. Are you really… ready?”

Was she ready? She was dressed for it, but that wasn’t what he meant. Being alone in that house surrounded by the memories of those lost was infinitely more terrifying to her than what a future with Luciel at her side held. The long hours of dreamless sleep, alone in dead silence, a perpetual waking death with no direction and no energy to push herself towards it… Not knowing what became of him, or God forbid, if he was killed knowing she sat by idly failing someone else important to her.

Miyeon’d rather die than go back to that.

If there was any chance at her finding happiness, this was it…

“I’m ready for anything as long as we’re together.”

Any trace of the ice within him seemed to melt with that as a loving smile warmed her.

“Thank you. Thank you… I just really needed to hear that one more time. Before we go… I should give you this.”

From behind his back emerged a familiar, sleek, yet pudgy, white body. The robot cat sat happily on his hands, it’s little head turning to her before beaming. Almost immediately it lifted its paws to her while sitting on his hand, beckoning her to pick it up.

“Meowy-on!”

Miyeon covered her mouth, feeling her eyes starting to sting.

“I promise to protect you with my very life, but if something happens, I hope this can comfort you and keep you safe… It’s been programmed to act like the bright, joking 707 in the chatroom. Originally, I had planned to give it to you before I… Was an idiot and broke it.”

“We made up- meow~!”

The girl had pulled up her sweater to hide her face as the tears came. Gently the hacker coaxed the robot into her arms. She held herself tighter, squeezing the little bot who was trying to dry
her tears, ineffectively with its paw. Warmth soon enveloped her as his arms wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her close.

His voice was so soft and soothing. “I’ve never given anyone a gift like this before… I’ve always thought of myself as someone who should be forgotten, so it seemed pointless to leave a momento. But being here with you made me realize I can stop pretending to be that person. After the way I’ve treated you, I don’t deserve it… But I hope God will hear my prayers and will let me be a bit selfish – so that we can make it back from this together – and so I can give you so many more gifts in the future.”

With one hand, she clung to his back, while the robot cat was supported in the other, its metal cheek resting against her, while she buried her face in his chest.

“Miyeon, I promise you, I’ll protect you, even if it costs me by life…”

Her fingers dug into him.

“Why don’t you-!” the girl snapped through her tears. “I don’t want it to cost you your life! You’ve sacrificed so much already for everyone else… You deserve so much… Why can’t you… Luciel, I want you to live! To go on dates… To laugh… To cry… To fight… To make up… To be with friends… To get married… To have a family… To grow old… You’re always giving of yourself so that everyone else can keep going on like everything is fine… So they don’t have to worry… While you’re alone and so miserable… I want you to be happy! I don’t want you to d-….!” She couldn’t even say it! “So please…! Please…”

The girl was practically pleading, whether it was to the universe or him, she wasn’t sure anymore. His hold tightened as he nestled against her. She was soaking his hoodie, but he didn’t seem to care. Rather he was stroking her hair like Jun-Seo used to do. She felt so very small again…

“I promise I’ll do my best at living, so we can meet that future together. I promise.”

The warmth at her cheek pulled away some as the hacker gave her some air. Her bangs hid her face and she was still desperately trying to look down, so he wouldn’t see how ugly she was when she cried… Yet palm of his hand brushed the tears away, his long fingers tucking her hair behind her ear. He was offering a smile, but there was the glimmer of tears in his eyes as well. Seeing her upset had apparently bothered him that much. It was embarrassing… She had tried so hard not to cry in front of anyone in so long. It looked weak; it made her seem weak – he needed her to be strong – he needed…

“I’m sorry, I just…”

He sniffled a little but was beaming from ear to ear like an idiot. Then the realization occurred to her…

He just needed her.

She made an attempt at wiping his cheek as well, only to feel him lean into her hand with a goofy little smile at realizing he’d been caught. A strained chuckled escaped both as they wiped the other’s tears.

*This suits us…*

Quietly she offered her pinkie to him…
The hacker laughed, and the pinkie promise was made with a shake, thumb stamped, and Miyeon’s heart stopped as he coyly looked around before pressing his lips to her pinkie, sealing it with a kiss. Nervously, she did the same, letting her lips press against his knuckle. For a moment, their fingers remained locked in the agreement as their eyes met, looking for affirmation as to whether a true kiss could follow… They each had only enough time to moisten their lips before the robot cat announced:

“It’s time to leave - meow! Right meow~!”

A flash of disappointment passed between them.

“There goes the alarm I set earlier,” the hacker acknowledged. “I’ll show you how to use more of its features later. Er… You got everything packed, right?”

Nodding the girl cleared her throat and gave a last little sniffle.

“Good.”

He began to hoist his equipment up after slinging the strap to his laptop case round his neck. Miyeon still had her rolling bag from before, which would definitely make things easier, although he still ended up taking one of her bags from her. KISA the robot cat took a perch on the girl’s luggage.

“Let’s go,” Luciel beckoned, his hand taking hold of the door handle.

“Together?”

“Together.”

The door swung open and in step with each other, hand in hand, they crossed the threshold of the apartment. He locked it back before taking her hand. It was so strange… Anywhere there could be an agent or his brother waiting around any corner, but instead of fear, the girl felt strangely calm. Discreetly they both seemed to be keeping an eye out for any unusual behavior as they rode the elevator down to the ground floor and walked out of the apartment building hand in hand. It felt like forever since she’d been outside, although it’d only been maybe a day. His stride was longer than her own, meaning that she had to step a little quicker than her natural pace was accustomed to. Sensing this, he apologized but affirmed it was a necessary thing. The sooner they got to the car and got moving, the better.

They had to take a rail and another brisk walk until she recognized that they were near D Cube City with its myriad of department stores. Her legs were practically on fire! He didn’t even seem winded. With it being so early, the electric lights from within gave the whole thing a dreamlike glow. Eventually, the young man brought her to a silver sports car which unlocked and roared to life at the press of a button. He was already moving to start putting things in the back; Miyeon did her best to not trip over her own dropped jaw. When Jaehee had first picked her up in the C&R company vehicle, she’d felt like keeping her feet from touching the carpet. With this car, she wasn’t even sure if human hands ought to touch it. Despite seeing pictures of his car collection, it was like being in a commercial. Standing this close to something so expensive made her very aware of her peasantry. The shock was enough for him to get most of the luggage into the vehicle before she could even attempt to help with the last of it.

“Is it okay to put that in there…?” she asked quietly, feeling like somehow her belongings or mere presence would irreparably soil the vehicle.
Luciel took her hand and guided her to the passenger seat, giving a grand opening of the door for her. Before she could ask whether or not she should maybe take her shoes off or put a towel down he guided her in by leaving her less space outside the car than inside. After he closed the door, she sat in the car alone, overwhelmed by her senses. His aroma filled the vehicle along with the artificial sweetness and tang of petrol that came along with a new car. It was immaculately well maintained inside… Her body went stiff, afraid that shifting around or moving too much would scuff or damage the leather interior. A less savory part of her was already calculating if it were even possible to be physically intimate in such confined space on such lovely leather seats. The vehicle’s vibrations and purring around her wasn’t helping.

She didn’t feel even a little comfortable until Luciel fell into the driver’s seat, passing the robot cat to her. Miyeon couldn’t help but watch as he did a cursory check around before suddenly the car flew back and around, before they were moving forward. A hearty little laugh escaped him at the girl’s squeak of surprise.

“You’re so cute…”

She stuck her tongue out at him, which only made him smile more. He had the GPS pulled up to read directions as needed, although he’d likely studied the route multiple times while planning. It wasn’t a direct route out though. Luciel took his time driving around to make sure they weren’t being followed. To be fair, he was a very good and safe driver, although she didn’t know how to drive herself and thus had no real basis for comparison.

That belief was a little shaken when he pulled into a drive through. It was a new experience for her that wasn’t helped by the fact that they were in what was essentially a priceless car, although he assured her it was fine. Even if this Herrari California was his, “Every day” car, the vehicle was still probably worth more than everything Miyeon owned combined. That didn’t help when he asked her what she’d like from the menu. She felt embarrassed by how long it took for her to voice anything resembling an order; she felt very self-conscious about what to order in front of him, and the feeling worsened when Luciel was getting out cash before she could even get her wallet out. The car was a clear sign he was good for it, but it still felt strange to her. Not to mention it did seem like something heavy to start the day off with, but it would probably be a bit of a hike to get to where they were going. The brightside, any calories she took in would likely be burned, and she didn’t have to cook.

“I’ll get the next one,” Miyeon protested quietly accepting the warm WcD’s bag.

“Hmm?”

“The next meal.”

The hacker got his change and slowly let the car roll to where they could rejoin traffic.

“You’ve been cooking days now,” he reminded her. “Please let me try to make up for how I acted before.”

It was only reconciling the fact that he had a point that permitted her to accept it. After he was satisfied, he said grace over his bag of WcD’s while waiting for a spot to open up between cars. She’d gotten a simple sausage and egg muffin and golden kiwi chiller, although he’d also asked for an additional bottle of water for each of them. His breakfast was a bit more grand with a golden egg burger – no onion, Dr.Pepper, and fries, which he adroitly ate with the experience of someone who did that sort of thing more often than any human ought to. It wasn’t a fancy meal, but time was the key factor…

“Do you need help?” she asked.
“What do you mean?”

“If you need to focus on driving...”

“...Will you feed me?” he inquired, half joking.

It wasn’t a joke to her, which a glance over from him confirmed. To her surprise, he opened his mouth expectantly. Not one to back down from a challenge, she slipped a fry into his mouth. He chewed slowly, as if wanting to savor it before finding Miyeon was already ready with the next. The hacker chuckled, a little embarrassed, yet a pattern emerged.

“I wonder if there’s a French Fry equivalent of the “pocky game,”” he pondered aloud, making her blush, and steal one of his fries instead of giving it to him outright.

She gave him the next and soon mixed in sips from his drink until all was gone.

Slowly the sun was starting to come up as the city of Seoul faded behind them and soon they were already an hour out of the city. They were on their way to the mountainous regions near Hwasun and Boseong counties in South Jeolla province. It would be roughly a four-hour trip in total, not counting any additional checks Luciel made along the way to ensure they weren’t being followed, that and any hiking they’d have to do once they got to the mountains. The farthest she’d gone away from the suburbs around Seoul was Everland months ago... Vacations weren’t something her family had ever done. She’d never even been to the beach even though it was so very close. She could’ve gone on her own, but traveling anywhere alone was terrifying to her...

The thought that she may die without seeing the ocean bothered her, but then again considering how bodies of water made Miyeon feel, maybe that was best. At least she’d see the rest of the heartland and maybe catch a glimpse of the rolling hills and their tea once they got there.

“You don’t know how happy I am to finally be taking you out on a drive... But, I wish the circumstances were different.”

Miyeon leaned against him as much as the console between them would allow, closing her eyes to simply enjoy being close. She’d resolved herself to enjoy whatever time the both of them had left. “This is fine.”

“You had trouble falling sleeping after I woke you, didn’t you?”

The girl continued to let her head rest against him.

“It’s alright if you want to lay the seat back some and nap.”

A soft hum of protest escaped her as her fingers held onto his upper arm to keep herself steady. She could feel his body relax after a content sigh escaped him; he wasn’t tensing up at her touch anymore... It was nice being able to feel another human being so close after so long. Greedily she nestled against him, savoring the uniqueness of his scent. The more she grew accustomed to it, the more her body recognized the differences between it and that of the twin that had attacked her.

“Do you want me to turn on the radio?” he asked softly.

Now that he’d seemed to open up to her and had set the mask aside, Luciel’s voice was dark like fresh coffee with heaps of smooth cream and rich, toasted sugar. It wasn’t like the playful 707 tone he used when he’d first greeted her, and it certainly wasn’t a voice that matched how he looked. It felt more mature. This was the voice that would slip through sometimes on the phone, although then it was always a little melancholy. Now it felt strong and soothing. Miyeon could listen
to it forever. Turning a radio on would just mean she’d hear less of Luciel in whatever time they had left together. Although… It may be fun singing with him again, but she was feeling a bit tired.

Selfishly the girl wanted the world to stop so the two of them could just be alone for a little without any worries.

“…I think I want to listen to you a little more.”

She didn’t have to look to feel the happiness hearing her say such a thing brought him.

“The car doesn’t have autopilot, or I’d read a story for you. Maybe I could read the one you were working on… The one with the kittens.”

Miyeon’s eyes opened. She had been working on a little popup book for him with the stationary she’d brought to give as a present… He wasn’t supposed to have seen it, although she hadn’t gone out of her way to hide it either.

“…That story… It was about you and Saeran, wasn’t it?”

The sad smile on his face told her as much. It was his story; she’d just added onto it and fleshed it out. Maybe it’d been a mistake to make it; seeing it would likely only hurt him. How stupid could she have been to think such a thing would’ve made a good gift?

“I’ll stop working on i-“

“No! I want you to finish! Just… Make sure to give it a happy ending, okay?”

Miyeon hummed an affirmation.

“Hmm… Maybe I could tell you a little more about myself.”

She hummed again.

“Ah… Let’s see… Something happy-something happy… Ah! A few summers ago, Yoosung and I were the terrors of the local arcade scene. See we-“

He continued on. His rich voice rising with a little laughter now and then. Yet between the sound of it and the gentle purr of the car… She listened but soon, the world felt like warm, fresh spun cotton candy around her… It took the robotic, navigational system’s voice giving directions to break her from it. The pale morning had transformed into a brilliant topaz blue, although it wasn’t quite noon yet. While it was good that it wasn’t raining, it felt like a shame that such a beautiful day should be spent doing such frightening things. Around them, the landscape was decidedly greener and less of the sky was visible behind the verdant mountains that were growing ever larger along the horizon. There was a surreal quality to the way nature and the less dense population of houses and buildings dotted the trees and roadside. It felt more open despite the way the world seemed to crumple between the hills.

At some point Luciel had turned the air conditioning on, as she could feel the heat of the Summer sun warming up her dark jeans while his car blew a refreshing, fragrant breeze on her. Apparently, the girl had been more tired than she realized. Desperately she wanted to stretch but room was limited. Her arms and legs did their best with the limited space before her as she reached out with all of them, allowing her head to lazily remain against the hacker as a small yawn escaped her. Immediately she glanced up to see if he’d noticed. There was no doubt that he had, yet the smile on his face was a tender one.
It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen her sleep or stretch before. Yet she felt so embarrassed… Naturally her body recoiled back in on itself to try to cover up.

“Sorry. You’re not cold are you?”

“N-n-*yawn*-no,” she protested, rubbing her eyes.

This seemed to appease him, although it was clear within a few moments of idle chat he was a little more focused on their destination. She couldn’t find words other than the occasional remark of how beautiful it was or a little bit of encouragement. It was only an hour and a half away from their stopping spot now, not counting any hiking. He seemed just as eager as reluctant to continue, yet Luciel’s foot kept on the gas pedal, albeit slower the denser the forest road became and the higher they climbed into the mountains.

The girl had resisted the urge to check her phone, although he reassured her that he’d set up a VPN for them to use to communicate with the RFA for just a little longer. It was enough for her to check in with Jaehee and confirm that they were on their way and everything was fine for the moment. Her heart ached a little seeing the amount of worry. She did her best to convey a cheerfulness through text, but ultimately, they both knew there was no helping it. The realization that maybe someone would miss her bothered her more than the fear of what could happen to her… They would miss Luciel more though, so she had to make sure he made it through it all at least.

She’d missed a call from Zen and Jumin both…

Part of her felt as though she were betraying the actor in a way, although it seemed she’d made her choice. In her heart, this was what she felt was the right thing.

Any sign of civilization soon faded behind walls of deep green, making the open fields and road disappear. Miyeon couldn’t help but feel a little claustrophobic… The foliage would give them cover, but it would also do the same for any would be attackers. It only soured her gut more when the pungent smell of forest soon filled the vehicle. Not long after they came to what was likely parking for forestry personnel before the engine went quiet. She primed herself to get out only for him to gently order her to remain in the car. It was a tense couple of moments as he removed a drone from the kit and did a quick aerial view. First to ensure they hadn’t been followed and secondly to confirm where the compound was.

“We’ve got about an hour hike to get there from here,” he advised, setting the drone on hover so he could keep an eye on the compound discreetly. “It’s okay if you want to wai-“

Miyeon didn’t even let him finish. She was out of the car and taking in a lungful of fresh mountain air. A cough escaped her – perhaps it was a little too fresh. After a quick stretch of her legs, she was meeting him at the front of the car. Unlike before when he’d brought everything with him, for now, he just had his hacking equipment and a bag with some basic rations and emergency supplies. Despite a little protest from him, she soon convinced him to at least let her carry the later bag.

“Stay close.”

“Roger.”

There was little in the way of conversation as both of them were focusing on the sounds of the woods around them. Under different circumstances, it would’ve been a lovely hike, but the girl was under no delusion that this was a pleasant first date picnic in the woods. She did her best to keep up with him so as to avoid being a burden but being less athletic than him and shorter was clearly
impacting how fast they were going. Between the mountain air and dense canopy, the Summer heat was nowhere to be felt, making her glad she’d opted to wear a sweater over layers. He took a break halfway there to let her breathe and get a drink of water under the guise of him checking the feed from the drone. Thing is, he was doing that periodically anyway.

Doing her best to not let her awareness of that show through, the girl settled on a mossy rock and soaked in the atmosphere… Such beautiful things she’d seen digitally but not once on her own. The other little living things came to her attention, ants marching along the stone she sat upon, and birds singing quite happily, ignorant of the danger the humans hiking through their home were in. She could see why a cult would come here… Other than being remote, it really was quite peaceful and did give one a feeling of transcendence. The crisp, clean air, and the natural splendor. Honestly it was paradise to her. She could probably do well in some remote area like this, which made her wonder where the hacker’s house was. The most she’d seen of it was his garage, but other RFA members had been there and had described it as a bunker a little out of the way. Maybe she’d ask, but not now as Luciel had an intense look on his face as he furiously worked on his phone.

She sipped just enough water from the canteen to moisten her lips before capping it to keep any flying bugs out, all the while not letting her guard drop.

“That long carried didn’t make you too uncomfortable did it?”

“Not at all. I’m just out of shape,” she admitted with a shamed half laugh.

He closed the distance between them before taking a spot beside her on the rock, holding his phone in such a way that she could see their destination through the bird’s eye view given by the drone. Amid the forest was a palatial, Western inspired building with lush gardens being worked by people in deeply colored robes. There were both agricultural and purely visually aesthetic gardens and greenhouses around the white building with its multitude of windows to soak up the view… The roof was an all too familiar mint green. It reminded her of a strange mix of a Christian church, Versailles, and something from a dream. There was no denying that a great deal of money had been spent in the creation of the building. Part of her chided herself for not asking for access for more detail on how the RFA earnings from previous events had been spent. Surely none of them had intended it to be used like this… People were everywhere. Getting in wasn’t going to be easy, they couldn’t just walk in the front door. With a building so big, it’d be practically impossible to figure out where his brother was without getting noticed.

She’d overheard him talking softly to himself as he worked about things that now made sense… Although Luciel explained.

“I was able to traceback Saeran’s signal to that building there. Between the blueprints and signal strength, I’m pretty sure his set up is here.”

The drone moved to a different portion of the building, which he pointed out before the hacker brought out a paper map and stretched it out over both of their laps. “The green areas here are the perimeters of the cameras. Red are the alarm devices. Once I trip the security, we’re going along the blue path. After we get in the building, this is our destination.”

It was circled in black.

“I’m going to disrupt the security first, then we’ll slip in. We’ll dash in, copy the data, then dash out. Hopefully there will be a way for me to safely see where Saeran is… Although there is a chance we’ll run into him. I just hope to God I can find a way to make it, but out here, there isn’t really a good rendezvous point if we get separated, so stay close to me.”
“I’m not going anywhere without you, Luciel. If we do run into your brother… Are we going to try to capture him? If so carrying him and your equipment out may be a bit of a challenge.”

He looked a little uncomfortable, but it was clear he was troubled by the same thought. They both knew Saeran wasn’t going to come willingly. At best they could hope to have the element of surprise on him… Coming here before the party, after all, was to give them an edge via preemptive attack. If her vague memory of the night they’d all met was anything to go by though, Seven would have to keep his composure. As much as she trusted him, Miyeon wasn’t sure if she could count on him not to freeze up at the sight of his twin… The twin he seemed to still view as the sad, lonely child he used to know. Whether or not he could marshal his protective instincts into overpowering his sibling was something she couldn’t rely on. Granted, the girl didn’t trust her odds in a fight much either.

Offering his hand, Luciel helped her up and the two continued the trek to a section of forest that would get them to where they could begin their sprint along the blue marked path. They remained within the treeline, but soon the Mint Eye Headquarters came into view.

He got out his phone and began to work again. Her legs tensed with the anticipation of making a sprint, but instead, the hacker asked her to take out her phone as well. No one was in the chatroom, but there were a flurry of previous messages from everyone about how concerned they were and wishing for their safe return.

“Everyone’s still so worried.”

“Yeah…”

“We have to come home to them.”

He nodded.

Without thinking Miyeon’s fingers began the natural process of typing reassurances while he tinkered with his phone, only to find that Luciel had sent a few messages of his own to confirm their arrival.

“I’ll have to cut the connection shortly…” he noted in a whisper. “… Come here.”

Come here….? Was someone coming?

Miyeon’s body stiffened in preparation for things to go terribly wrong before she felt a sudden grab and pull. She was too afraid of drawing even more attention to even make a peep before noticing the camera and familiar yellow and black sleeve before her. Her heart went from racing to a dead stop to racing again as she realized he still had his arm around her while sending the picture to the group chat.

There for everyone to see was Luciel was peering with a cheeky little smile and bright gold eyes up into the camera while a pale, confused girl stood beside him, her long bangs obscuring her eyes and her pink lips parted in surprised gasp. Even though Miyeon herself in the mirror regularly, there was a sense of detachment from the reality that the person next to him in the picture was her. Maybe it was the lighting or the fact that her long bangs were in the way hiding the face she hid… Next to his handsome face with its clever features, the girl in the picture didn’t look like the frumpy, listless creature that Miyeon recognized herself as being… She was sure she was much shorter and fatter than what the picture was showing. He had to have done some sort of photo magic
to it to make someone vaguely resembling her fit into that spot… Someone who wouldn’t look out of place at his side. The pale girl with long dark brown hair couldn’t be her.

But it was. Afterall, she was still standing next to him… His hand still rested along her waist, holding them hip to hip as he texted with one hand. The playful blushing grin slowly mellowed into a sad one. He pulled her a little closer but couldn’t seem to bear to look down at her.

707- I feel a bit strange.
707- This won’t be the last time,
707- but I can’t help but think that
707- this may be the last thing I say here

A sigh escaped him as he continued to avert his eyes.

707- I shouldn’t let Miyeon see me like this.

Saying it aloud was tough and god knows who could overhear them considering how close they were to the compound now.

Miyeon – “I’m certain we’ll come back to everyone safe.”

The hacker’s hand raised to just under her ribs, keeping her right by him…

707- Yes… we will.
707- Still, I’d like to say this.
707- I’ve said thank you to Miyeon so many times already…
707- But I am sincerely grateful to everyone in the RFA
707- I had to meet all of you while hiding who I truly was
707- You all trusted me and have been so kind
707- I was so happy to talk to all of you as 707
707- but it was always a little sad
707- because I knew one day I’d have to leave and feared being forgotten
707- I did my best to hide it, but it really did get to me
707- 707 was always meant to be temporary
707- and Luciel was never really me either…
707- It was a name I took with the hope of escape
707- I’m done with hiding and pretending…
707- From now on
707- Everyone will meet the real me…
His fingers gently tightened into her sweater, as the hacker bit his lip anxiously.

She watched him erase the words… What was he trying to ask?

The golden depths of this nameless man eyes sought hers out again after realizing that she’d seen the incomplete message. He looked so vulnerable and small as he searched her for an answer to a question he hadn’t even fully asked. Slowly his arms wrapped around the confused girl. She could feel his heart racing against her breast and how very firm his belly was against her own. His hair caressed her cheek while his shoulder pressed to her lips. As dangerous of a situation as it was, feeling his body so close was comforting, and feeling his breath against her skin made it so hard to think. His fiery hair tickled her as he lowered his lips to where he could whisper in the girl’s ear.

“Miyeon…”

Her body shuddered as a feeling not unlike the tingling one got when listening to beautiful music ran through her sinew. Desperately she wanted him to say her name again or to feel the slide of his cheek against hers and more… Instead, the delightful prickle of his hot breath teased her ear…

“Do you… want to know my real name?”

His heart was racing because he was afraid…

That realization and all it entailed eased the primal wants coursing in her blood. For an agent who likely had worn so many names… He’d remembered the one that he had thrown away… A name with ties to a past that he had sworn to forget but simply couldn’t. It was probably the greatest weakness he had. It was best if she didn’t know it so that he could be safe, but… She needed to know the name of the man who could hold her like this. Someone whose embrace spoke to layers of affection beyond merely wanting to bed her. This was much more intimate… In order to face his brother, this was what he had to do. His soul had to be free…

Gently she stroked his hair and nestled against him with a nod.

A labored breath escaped him as his body seemed to relax some in her arms… Then his breath grazed her ear again.

“Saeyoung Choi… My name is Saeyoung Ch-”

Tenderly the girl kissed his cheek before he could finish repeating it, feeling how hard it was for him to say. His entire body tensed up, making her nose lightly graze his glasses. Then she felt the corner of his mouth brush against the edge of her own.

Was that an accident?

Luciel’s… No… Saeyoung’s breathing had changed. His nose grazed her cheek before she felt something soft and warm envelop the side of her lower lip.

“Sae-“

Then gentle heat returned to the side of her mouth, before she could finish… A third,
bolder caress of his lips against her own followed. He scarcely opened his eyes again before Miyeon, not satisfied that it was anything but an accident, stole one by merely standing on her toes to close the distance. His breath warmed her as she felt his mouth curl into a smile against her skin before one held the other and savored a fifth… Though relatively chaste, there was no lack of passion. The heat and urgency of it… She felt lightheaded. All too soon, it ended as he broke. She’d expected another, only to feel the hacker tenderly place the expected kiss on her forehead.

“When this is over… Is it okay if I stop wearing the clown mask that was 707… Stop being an agent and bury Luciel… And go back to living as Saeyoung?” he whispered.

“Of course.”

His arms tightened around her as the former agent nestled against her, his heat and aroma removing any fear from her soft frame.

“I’m so happy to hear that… So very happy.”

The girl soaked up his affection like a long germinating bloom under warm Spring sun.

“I can’t wait to meet you there, Saeyoung.”

He nuzzled against her nose with his own before easing back and quickly texted out…

707 – My name is Saeyoung Choi.

707- Once everyone sees this…

707- Wish us luck!
Chapter 25:

It was hard to stay focused… Getting ready to go into the office, the commute, getting there early, and preparing things for Mr. Han’s morning meetings before going to check progress on the venue were all overshadowed with the uncertainty of the situation unfolding somewhere half a country away. Jaehee’s mind found itself busy even in those rare flashes of idleness, quietly praying.

She’d never been particularly fond of Seven or his antics, but it was hard to deny his genius and capabilities. For years he’d been just a playful, overgrown child to her whose talents were wasted in her eyes. Knowing what she did now, the woman felt a bit guilty. The more she thought about it, the more it troubled her. After all, he’d done so much to help Zen’s career. There were likely other things he’d done for all of them that she’d never know about yet benefited from. Things he never expected a “thank you” for. He’d been protecting them, and it seemed wanted nothing more than friendship. Yet she’d always scolded him. He’d only wanted to cheer her up by being strange. Even if he had gotten on her nerves, there was now a small part of her that might’ve found it endearing in the way a younger sibling might vex an older one. Not that she had any comparison to confirm that.

The Seven she knew was like a cockroach. Nothing kept him down and he always managed to make it out of a situation, no matter how bizarre or strange. That strange person apparently wasn’t him though. Although, the executive assistant doubted that all of it was a lie. No human could live that long without parts of their true selves coming through. Over the years, she’d become an expert at hiding what she was feeling, but even that wasn’t flawless. The red head had once called her a robot for that very trait… Yet she could find herself in tears at one of Zen’s performances.

Now, that very part of her he’d teased was keeping the front up while he went on the offensive.

After the morning meetings, she left a few tasks with capable members of staff before making the trip to the party venue. It was impossible not to check for updates in the RFA chat… There was an announcement that they were leaving, then some chat between Yoosung and Zen. But nothing else since. Miyeon had been on for a little now and then, judging by the final preparations for some of the guests being nicely confirmed in her email box, but not much else.

As she stepped out and entered the venue, she felt terribly lonely… The two of them had worked so hard to get the party to this point, and rather than being here to see it all coming together, Miyeon was with Seven on some dangerous mission at a cult compound. All she could do was make sure it was a huge success in spite of everything. Professionally that was what was required of her, but as a friend, she had a vested interest in it. Miracles could happen… Luciel and she could show up tomorrow dressed up and ready to celebrate.

She buried herself in her work, as it began to pour in from all fronts, only occasionally able to steal a glance at her phone. How she could manage juggling that and the C&R workload was a mystery that not even Jaehee herself could answer. The flow was uninterrupted until one of the staffers asked if she was ready to see the 9:15. It was nice having someone bring guests to her…
Moments later, the aid brought a well put together, brightly smiling blonde.

Jumin would’ve hated her…

She was relatively tall, athletically slender build girl, and dressed professionally but not in a way that would inhibit her from getting her hands dirty while on site. The girl wore a practical but feminine medium cut. If she wore any make up, it was well managed to look as natural but radiant as possible. Her motions were graceful and purposeful. There was an aura of confidence that came from the girl. No doubt she was going places, or she simply hadn’t had reality humble her to the life of paperwork that likely awaited her. Jaehee was almost jealous of the hope in her eyes.

God save that little spark… Would it be terrible to tell her to run away from C&R…?

“Good morning, Miyeon’s friend Ms.Ahn, correct?”

“Yes. But since this is for a mutual friend, Eun-Ji, please.”

They shook hands. She even shook hands like a proper business man. Jaehee maintained her own formality as the line between personal and professional for her was a very unclear one when around others. The woman provided the blonde a tour of venue, it’s expected amenities, and the current itinerary for the following day – as well as their respective roles. Remarkably, the girl was sharp enough to keep up, saying little, but clearly absorbing judging by the questions she asked. Soon, the executive assistant felt confident enough in her to give her tasks for the day as well as time to check in. Eun-Ji set to it immediately.

It was nearly eleven before Jaehee felt her phone buzzing. At first, she wondered if it was Jumin inquiring why it was taking so long. So she answered, with the usual professional urgency. Seeing it was RFA related however… She quickly opened the chat.

There was confirmation that the hacker and girl had arrived at their destination accompanied by a picture… Luciel was beaming up at the camera, with the newest member of the RFA tucked under his arm, with a surprised expression. Really, it looked like any candid shot of a playful young couple. Seeing it was equally relieving and worrying. It was good to see they were safe for now, but a part of her couldn’t help but feel that the hacker had shared it with the intention of it being the photo to be used at their funerals. A picture capturing what could potentially be the last time anyone may see them alive and happy, the only proof that they were together… Judging by the words she glanced on the way down to the bottom, it was clear he was uncertain about the situation himself, although he was doing his best to seem optimistic.

707 – My name is Saeyoung Choi.

707- Once everyone sees this…

707- Wish us luck!

She did… Although luck wouldn’t likely be enough. The dark part of her wondered about funeral arrangements in the event things went wrong. Did either of them even have families that would handle such a thing? If so, as the acting head of the RFA, was it Jumin’s – and vicariously her – responsibility to see to it they were properly interred? No… No. She couldn’t think that way. She had to have faith.

On the way back to the office for afternoon meetings, Jaehee asked, and was granted, permission to stop by a church along the way… It was a short and simple prayer; she only hoped it would be heard and God willed it.
Slowly, Miyeon’s warmth faded from his skin as Saeyoung turned off almost all connection to the outside world, keeping only a line open to the drone, the kill switch to Mint Eye’s security system, and robot cat in the event that things went South. Otherwise, the two of them were invisible to any electric based defense, that just left the feat of making it across the green without getting spotted or standing out. He was surprised he could return to focusing on the situation at hand as well as he was after what had just happened… But now more than ever, he wanted to succeed. This happiness was more than angry little Saeyoung could’ve imagined from his small, dark corner…

His dark nights had a constellation to follow now. The RFA with the brightest star being the gentle sparkle that was Miyeon… Her warmth guided him back to the future he’d promised his twin after being long adrift in the void of space. With her, they could place where they could live on their own and be free from their mother. That had been such a vague thing then. He had hope then, but no real direction but “out”. Now Saeyoung was fighting for a future of sharing tender kisses like that and more. A future where he could hold her on their wedding day with everyone there with Saeran as his best man… To give himself, his true self, to her… To live a normal, happy life with a family that he could share with her and his twin. To watch that joy grow on the smiles around him and the children their love would no doubt bring into the world… The good they could do and happiness they could bring others.

It was even brighter than the future he promised his little brother all those years ago. He wouldn’t fail… He was no longer a slimy cockroach doing the occasional good deed to pay off the shame every dirty job made him feel. Little Saeyoung could be the hero he always wanted to be. To do good things, to be good. This was the power he had in his heart, the long dormant desire he wasn’t going to ignore anymore. He wasn’t going to be a fallen angel like Luciel had become. Saeyoung was going to live up to the meaning of his name.

That didn’t mean he wouldn’t have to do a few more bad things though…

Tucking his phone back into his pocket, he realized that Miyeon had been holding his hand the whole time with one hand, and the taser he’d given her in the other, all while her eye-maintained watch on the compound and thicket around them. It wasn’t a look he liked on her, but for now, it was necessary. The trick then became a matter of getting in. Sprinting in was an option, but that didn’t help what they would do once inside. He knew how to avoid cameras, but that didn’t protect them from people who may be in the halls. It was obvious that there was a standard for dress in the form of a shrouded hood. He could leave her here, but he didn’t want to risk someone finding her without him there to give protection. Sneaking in alone would leave both of them vulnerable and weaker.

No, they had to go together. He had to get a set of those robes.

From what little he’d observed on the CCTV on previous recon, they seemed to ring a bell to call the members in for a meal. It would be time soon enough. If they could just get robes, they could walk in with the group and hopefully go unnoticed. Then again, there was also the risk someone would recognize them as outsiders.

Miyeon seemed to be a step ahead of him with a plan. Quietly with hand signs, she pointed out that the vegetable garden had a couple sneaking mouthfuls of cherry tomatoes between those they picked. It seemed too perfect. He signed out his intention… He could take out one of them on his own, while she could shock the other into submission. The problem was whether they could do
so quietly. Getting her hands dirty wasn’t something he wanted to do either, but he didn’t even have
time to question it as she nodded affirmation and began moving to take her position. This was an
opportunity neither could afford to miss, and he knew that.

There was no doubt in his mind watching as she stood up, her usually sweet expression
focused on her prey like a jungle cat… It was cute and a little scary at the same time.

He took point, slipping silently from the brush. It felt as though his heart stopped beating as
all sound from the former agent ceased. There was some cover from the tomato vines and their
supporting stakes. A spade had been left, giving him a perfect weapon. Drawing closer, he held the
tool with the handle to be used as a baton, catching only a little of the conversation between the
cultists as they were knelt over to get the “good ones” under the leaves.

There was a thud as the handle made contact with the back of the hood. His eyes met with
the other cultist for just a flash before he heard a zap and watched their eyes roll back into their head.
Their body jerked before going still. Little Miyeon was crouched down low, with the taser giving
another spark in preparation that one hadn’t been enough. Fortunately, it had. He gave her a
reassuring nod, but her eyes still darting for any sign that their position had been given out as he
began to drag the couple back one by one. After checking to make sure they wouldn’t suffer any
long-term harm, Saeyoung used some duct tape and zip ties from the equipment he’d brought to bind
them. It was a dirty thing, but it was necessary. Quietly he apologized to their unconscious bodies
while he and Miyeon stripped them. Under their robes were some plain clothes. The bit of skin they
could see though bore bruises and marks that made it clear to him that they had been tortured.

Hopefully once they were free from Mint Eye, they’d forgive him and find happy lives
themselves.

With Miyeon’s help, the hacker used the tape to work his equipment onto his frame in a
way that wouldn’t stand out. It took some padding, but soon the gear was tucked away, and covered
with the vestments. After their less than noble induction into the cult, they retrieved the baskets of
tomatoes, returning some of their spilt contents before the tolling of the lunch bell. With hoods up
and heads down, they walked hand in hand to avoid getting separated in the crowd, following the
others into the building.

The throng moved along a main open corridor. There was undeniably a feminine touch to
the décor. Everything was luxurious and spoke to being well funded. Fresh flowers were kept in
vases all over, filling the chamber with a freshness. It was so deceptively nice… The fragrance was
familiar, but he had no time to ponder where from.

He could make out portions of conversations that sounded so normal outside of the walls
of this place, but other snippets were so alien. There was talk of the “savior” joining everyone for a
meal to celebrate an event that would “surely” lead to more member. He knew that they were talking
about the RFA party, although what capacity they meant to do earn members from that gathering he
didn’t know. They had to get to the information room…

Carefully he guided Miyeon more to the side of the meandering group, before they slipped
out of the crowd entirely and into a vestibule that he knew held restrooms for the members as if they
were going to wash up some before the meal. Once inside, there would be no cameras. Closing the
door behind him, he was surprised to see the girl pull her hood down for a minute to catch a breath.
The poor thing was pale but undoubtedly hot from having so many layers. Before he could help
himself, Saeyoung brushed some of the sweaty strands behind her ear. His concern must’ve been
obvious as the girl gave him a small, nervous, but reassuring nod. Quickly he took out his phone and
began the program that would killed the security system.
They had 5 minutes to get to the information room, 20 minutes to get the data and get out…

Wasting no time, he again took her hand and lead her, hoods up along the blue path, walking briskly, but not enough to draw attention. Soon the opulence gave way to a more austere look with plain walls. Then… The stairs down… This was it. Ordering her to stay, he went ahead just a little to check for any signs of life. There was only the silent hum of mainframes and servers whirring away in what would’ve been the equivalent of any grand company. Near that what was likely a series of rigs set to mine crypto currencies… There was a whole hall of them… At the end of that hall, was what was no doubt the room where he needed to strike. After doing a check of the perimeter, the hacker slinked his way back to Miyeon, who practically ran to him halfway down the steps.

Taking her hand again, he took her through the most obscured path, before they reached the heavy metal door securing the room. After listening through the wood, he was certain there was no one behind it. A tense moment passed until the lights flickered and the door popped open, with the wheeze of a long-sealed crypt. The heat from his angel’s body stayed close behind him as he cautiously stepped forward.

There was an array of screens in the dim light, all flickering for a moment as they entered a series of reboots. He pulled off his robe and began the process of accessing the system. Miyeon helped him remove his gear, and within a minute, he was in.

Saeyoung spoke the commands through his head set, keeping his voice low. His priority was to upload the data with the most recent being the most important to older taking secondary… The immediately accessed things were usually the most vital.

“You’re really good at this,” she whispered.

An uncomfortable smile crossed his lips. He already knew that, but it was good to have outside validation. Although he would’ve preferred it not be here and under these circumstances. There were terabytes upon terabytes of information that he suspected were largely on members, prospective members, their families… It’d take a while to get it all. Each second that passed was nerve wracking.

The both of them seemed to be looking for any information they could about his brother based on the surroundings too… One thing stood out… The keyboard his brother apparently used was dull with hard use. There was no shiny finish left on it. It was raw. It was clearly a custom-made system judging by the eccentricities of it. The parts were top notch, but not necessarily compatible which was a benefit and hindrance depending upon the skill of the person using it. It was almost as if there were an original portion that had been turned into a technological equivalent of Frankenstein’s monster, albeit much more elegant and efficient. To Saeyoung, it gave the impression that his brother had been at it for a long time… The question was, who taught him? Had he taught himself? Even then someone had to encourage him and fund it… Who would even do such a thing?

He wanted to find the person, if only to show his “gratitude” in a way that only someone who knew the pain of what had been done to his brother could. That rage silently soured his gut, despite the warmth of the person he cherished being so close. The room was kept cold to keep the system running at optimum, yet now and then he could catch Miyeon’s scent. It made him question about whether or not devoting 100% of the processing to the data transfer would lead the patchworked thing, with all the other processes it was expected to run while security rebooted, to overheat. The girl’s attention was on the data stream while he extended a hand to feel for the temperature from the air vent only to hear…
“It’s okay. I attached a nice cooler.”

Saeyoung’s gaze shot towards the door only to confirm his fears… His twin moved seemingly in silence under the whirring of the fans. There was a coldness in his eyes. Miyeon’s small frame shifted protectively in front of him and his laptop…

“Saeran…”

That was all he could manage, the rest of him felt heavy.

“Hello,” his twin answered before his attention turned to the girl. “Nice to see you again, should I say?”

“Saeran,” the red head repeated, coming out from behind the girl to guide her behind him while his twin drew closer.

“I expected this. I knew this would be where you’d first come if you came to Magenta. I saw the traces; I knew it was you.”

…Quick work was shoddy work, no matter how much of a professional one was… His twin’s eyes darkened.

“I had no idea that you’d hacked into the satellite to see the exteriors though – and the blind spot… I have to admit, you’re pretty good. You even saved me the effort of bringing her here, where she belongs.”

Saeyoung used his body to push the girl back for an added measure of safety, only to feel her standing firm. For a moment, he feared that he’d made a terrible mistake, until the girl’s voice broke out from behind him. It was a tone unlike any he’d heard from her before…

“You’re being used. You don’t have to keep doing this-”

“You’re very naïve if you think that,” he answered her. “You should know better than anyone why I do this. We’re the same you and me… It’s why she hated you and loved him more, you know…”

“We’re not…” Miyeon stammered, the strength in her voice crumbling.

“Savor told me why you were chosen… That woman who did those things, she’s here, seeking Paradise. Savior says she may enter, but I don’t think she should… I make her suffer for what she did to you – to him. Every single, horrible thing I carved into her flesh so she would never forget her sins… I wanted only to save you so you wouldn’t end up like me. Do you think he’d do that for you? He’ll just abandon you like he did me, and like she did you. You and I will always be weak and disposable to people like them. You deserve happiness, you deserve Paradise – the Magenta.”

He didn’t know what he was talking about, but it was enough to rattle her… Did she know someone in the group? The girl was quivering behind him, although with fear or rage he couldn’t be sure.

“Saeran, I never abandoned you. If we could just talk-”

His twin’s eyes lit with fire. “…Why should I talk with a liar who sneaks unannounced into another person’s home to steal information? I’m not a naive little boy anymore. I’m not going to stand by idly and let you trick me again.”
“If we’re so much alike, then I know part of you wants to hear him out… To know why… After all, you’ve worked so hard all this time to find him, right?” Miyeon offered, her voice quaking.

His brother stared past him to where the girl was standing… He could hear the pain in her voice, but he was powerless to do anything about it. Was Saeran just toying with her? What did he know about her that he didn’t?

“That liar doesn’t even know who we’re talking about, does he?”

“No…” she answered quietly.

Saeyoung felt a little sick at the confirmation that his brother somehow knew her better. It could all just be an act to get the better of both of them…

“But… I don’t… It doesn’t matter…” her small voice was so frail but picked up a modicum of strength. “And It’s not going to change anything, I mean, we’re where you want us, right? It can’t hurt to hear what he has to say. I mean you have all the time in the world to get the truth out of him however you want.”

Gently he felt her fingers grip onto his sides, counting out how much longer the download had… She was playing him and buying them time. Although, it still didn’t lessen the ache in his heart knowing that somehow his twin knew the woman he loved more intimately than he did. From what Saeran said, someone Miyeon knew was a member of Mint Eye… They were trapped there… Did she even know? No… She seemed just as surprised.

They had to keep him talking… Maybe, maybe he could reason with him.

“Why should I listen to him?” his twin asked, glaring at him.

“Saeran… When it comes to why I left… There’s a misunderstanding.”

“Is that how you’re going to justify the pain I went through? A misunderstanding?”

Wrong word!

“I’m so sorry… I-”

“You’ve quite the ego if you think I care,” snapped his twin. “Let me tell you what happened, since you don’t want her to know the sort of person you REALLY are. You used your own brother to escape that hellhole-“

“I didn’t use yo-“

Saeran’s voice roared over him.

“And left him to rot so you could travel the world and have happy little parties with your friends.”

“That’s no-“

“How else would you explain it?!?”

His brother’s eyes were wide with rage born from hurt, yet the rest of him was deathly still and rigid. Stupid him believed that V and Rika would protect this boy… Saeyoung’s eyes burned
knowing all too well what their mother likely did to him, and his twisted reflection glared at him with the affirmation that those nightmarish things had indeed come to pass. All he could do was tell the truth of how he felt in that moment, not what he knew now…

“I didn’t want to leave, but I had to – to protect you. Please listen to my side—“

“To protect me? That’s your excuse?” Saeran scoffed. “I expected that, but that doesn’t change that it’s a lie. Do you tell Miyeon those sorts of lies too? Tell me, does he promise to protect you to make you happy?”

The girl didn’t answer…

“As someone who has been there before – don’t trust him… He’ll abandon you too one day.”

“Maybe you’re right… But I do know Saeyoung would sacrifice anything and everything for you, including me.”

…God please let her be bluffing. She didn’t really think that, did she?

“Then you’re more of an idiot than I thought, letting him bring you along if you believe that.”

“I came because I want to save you too, because he will never be happy without you Saeran… Believe me when I say Luc—. No… Saeyoung never wanted any of this to happen. He was given a hard choice and did what he thought was best to protect you. It seems to me that both of you were children who were used by people who only cared for themselves…”

The pink haired man began to laugh, each breath becoming more unhinged. “Wow… He’s really got you brainwashed.”

It was unsettling… Was that sad, lonely boy still in there somewhere? The former agent found his voice.

“No! She’s telling the truth. Please, listen to me.”

“If you’re going to spill out another lie then there’s no need. I know the truth.”

His back was cold as the girl had moved.

“Saeran, I’ve never lied to you. I meant it when I said that I’d protect you, that I’d get us out of there together… I swear!”

“You expect me to believe that just because you’re saying it louder?”

“I didn’t become an agent and give up my name to hide from you. I didn’t have any other choice! I didn’t want to leave you—”

“Liar…”

“But the agency wouldn’t let me bring you with me—“

“Liar!”

“And those men in black were getting bolder and bolder… I had to leave to keep us both safe – and we both had to change our names to hide us from our father—“
“LIAR! Who would come up with such an insane plan?”

“V… V did…” he stammered, his eyes burning with tears. “He used his connections to get me scouted by the Agency. In exchange for me, they’d erase any trace of us so we could hide from that man. I begged V and the agency to bring you with me, but they wouldn’t allow it… I didn’t want to leave you, Saeran, I only agreed because V and Rika promised me they’d take care of you… This whole time I thought… I thought they kept their promise.”

His brother’s head was tilted to the side. He looked… Confused and hollow. Maybe he was getting through to him, yet Saeran’s anger soon returned. God… What’d happened to him?

“Lies… more lies…”

“He didn’t know that V broke that promise until you came to the apartment,” Miyeon answered, the strength in her voice seemingly returned. “…He was so hurt and sick with worry for you.”

“…How convincing. Anyone less intelligent might fall for such a crazy story.”

“It’s not a story; it’s the truth,” Saeyoung answered firmly taking a step forward. “I didn’t just come here for data. I came to save you from this place.”

“I have another story. It starts with a boy using his weak little brother as a decoy, so he could leave the hellish home they lived in. He used his own sickly twin as bait so he could make an easy escape, leaving his own little brother to be tortured by their mother. He used to pretend to care for him to soothe his own shame. ‘I’ll take good care of him since I can keep him around and look at him and remember that my life will always be better than Saeran’s. Then one day that wasn’t enough. Instead he ran away to America, then around the world to have all sorts of adventures, and returned to V to create the RFA, throw little parties, chat online with friends, and have fun without that weak little brother to hold me back. He was always a burden. So I’ll just disappear without a trace so he’ll never bother me again.”

“That’s not true! I never felt that way about you! I am you, and you are me… We’re the same… Remember? How could you ever think that I felt that way about you. I love you… All this time, I missed you so much. Not a day has gone by where I didn’t, “ his tears brimmed over. “I never wanted to leave you! I-I wanted to say something, but I was afraid of what mom would do to you if I told you beforehand.”

At the time, he felt if she just thought he’d been killed by their father, she’d perhaps ease up on Saeran a little… Afterall, he had to be left alive if she wanted to keep getting money. Right?

“If your intention was to keep me safe from her by keeping me ignorant, then you’re in for a surprise. Do you want to know what happened when you didn’t come home? How miserable I was alone with that woman…?”

“He needs to know… Tell him what happened to you, Saeran.” Miyeon’s voice came from behind him, gentle and concerned before he could find the words himself. Her hand rested on his back to steady him…

He didn’t want to know, but he couldn’t find the words to protest.

“What happened…? Yes… All night, I looked for you… When morning came in that hell, you weren’t there. I looked all over the house; I snuck out to look for you outside. I was worried that our father’s men got to you. I cried. Even when that woman strangled me, beat me, and threatened me for making so much noise – I cried. For days I worried about you… Naïve little me
missed you… I kept wondering why you left. Were you just sick at me? Had I made you angry? Were you hurt? I wept but kept telling myself that you’d come back. You were my brother – you were the strong one. You always made it home… You promised me that you’d protect me, that you’d never leave me alone… When you didn’t come home, I believed you were dead. Then for days I cried mourning you… Then mourning myself because I wanted to die from loneliness…”

“Saeran…”

“Then… Then I found out that you were alive. The shock…! I can’t even put how I felt into words,” there was an ominous tone born of misery.

“I swear… I would’ve never left if I’d known that V and Rika would break their promise. I would’ve never left you alone. I-“

“Whatever you would’ve done doesn’t really matter… You are why I suffered for so long. The only reason I survived till now is because of the Savior. She saved me from that woman… If it weren’t for her, I’d starved to death in my own filth with rope around my ankles right where you left me.”

“Savior…?” the girl behind him asked softly, but Saeyoung’s anger was already boiling over at the years of lies.

“What the hell happened!? Did V and Rika really do nothing to help you after I left!??”

“You’re digging for information, so you can twist the truth even more. I’m not the foolish little brother you used to know. You don’t know how hard it was to lure you out into the open, so I could expose you. I spent years tracking you… You’ll never understand the hell I’ve been through!”

… Even in his darkest moments, he could always had the hope that his little brother was out in the world and happy. His empty existence had some meaning… His sacrifice had a purpose. That wasn’t the case for his little brother though. God only knows how much he’d been tortured, starved, and beaten. All the while, that lost sad little boy had been looking for him. At some point, that search had turned him bitter. It was his fault his brother was like this… He should’ve stayed. If he’d stayed, then none of it would’ve happened. He’d been such an idiot to trust anyone with someone so precious to him.

Yet, his brother had survived in spite of all of it. His pride had led them here… God was punishing him.

“I didn’t know… Saeran… I’m so sorry.”

“You’re apologizing?!”

There wasn’t any excuse, yet he tried his best to rationalize and put an explanation into form.

It was hard to get the words through his throat. “I truly believed that V and Rika had saved you – that they took you in – and were looking after you. I brought you a present one year, V said he would give it to you… But you never got it did you?” he sobbed. “They told me you were doing well – that you were happy… I believed them. I should’ve never have trusted them to keep a promise that I made! Because I trusted them, I broke my promise to you in the end. I’m so sorry…”

“Don’t apologize now! It doesn’t change what I went through,” Saeran snapped.
“Nothing will change… Liar… Traitor!”

“I asked how you were, even when I wasn’t supposed to… I was so miserable without you, but I got through it because I believed you were happy and doing well. They told me you were… I asked Rika so often that on my 20th birthday she gave me a floppy with pictures of you and an update on how you were doing. I believed it.”

“Stop lying. That never happened.”

“I’m not, Rika-“

The monitors lit up… Both twins stood in shock at the sight of a young, happily beaming Saeran, then another picture, and another. Behind him he could hear a series of furious clicks as Miyeon brought every image file open. His eyes were too bleary to see the bright light of the screens, but he could see them reflected in those of his twin. Saeran’s face lit up with recognition of having taken the photos on the screen, but quickly that faded into confusion and hurt.

“Saeran…”

“These photos… How…?”

“You remember when these were taken, don’t you?”

His twin shook his head and began to back up, every ounce of menace he might’ve had wavering. “No way… How did you get those?”

Making use of his brother’s unsettled state, he quickly looked back to see the storybook Rika had given him out from where Miyeon had removed it from his gear. In it was the letter she’d sent. He lifted it and extended it towards his brother who was recoiling.

“This is the letter she wrote me. Look!”

“It’s a lie…” his twin muttered, his thin arms wrapping around his chest while his eyes widened.

Saeyoung took a step closer, again offering the letter.

“Brother, please…”

His mint eyes darted between the letter and the ground. There was no denying he recognized Rika’s writing. Afterall, she taught them both.

“I don’t believe it. No… No…”

His brother’s movements and sudden soft muttering were all signs of torture methods used to illicit obedience. Their mother was an abusive monster, but this spoke to something more sophisticated and intentional… He was doing his best to adhere to programming that had been beaten and likely drugged into him.

“…My God… Saeran… What happened to you?” he asked, softly through tears.

The pale eyes studied him like a pet long since gone feral before he began to shake his head again. “No… No… No… I don’t want to listen to you anymore. You stole those photos… You wrote that letter and copied it from Rika’s notes in the apartment… You’re lying…”
If he pushed a little more, maybe he could put a dent in the conditioning.

“Rika gave this to me herself,” he repeated stepping closer. “Let’s leave here, we can figure it out together.”

Saeran suddenly lunged out, knocking the letter from his hands before retreating, looking frantic.

“SHUT UP! It’s a lie… It’s just a lie! You made it up!”

Too far… Too soon… Yet being so close, he didn’t want to give up. His little brother… He was scared and confused. His old instincts roused. Saeyoung drew closer, arms outreached to embrace his twisted reflection.

“Calm down… Please. It’s okay—”

“DON’T COME NEAR ME!” Saeran shrieked, slapping his arms away. He began to snarl. “Don’t you dare come near me… I’m going to kill you!”

“Saer—"

“DON’T SAY THAT NAME!”

His brother was running away! Before he could control himself, he was reaching for his brother’s coat. He was so close. If he could just reach a little farther—

The metal door slammed shut, missing crushing his fingers by just a hair. Saeyoung slammed his shoulder into the door as it all happened too quick for him to change his direction. He slumped against the cold metal door. A series of tumblers began to roll. Saeran brother was so close! He couldn’t leave him here! Desperately he clawed at the door, tried the old code to no avail, before he began to jerk handle.

“NO! NO! Saeran! Come back! Come back… I won’t leave you here!”

He felt a hand on his shoulder, yet he pulled away.

“NO! I’m not going to leave him! Not again… Not like 7 years ago! Saeran! Saeran, please! I promise… I’ll never let you go— please - open the door! SAERAN!”

He pounded on the door until a sob left his knees buckling too much to muster the strength. Yet he rose his fist again, giving another weak strike to the metal. A frustrated roar broke through his tears as he gave one last assault, before he felt something wrap around him pulling him to his feet and steadying him.

“…The transfer is almost done, then you can hack the door,” a soft familiar voice assured him. This time, it wasn’t in his head… Miyeon was here with him, speaking to him. “But… We probably can’t stay here much longer if he tells their security we’re here…”

She was working so hard to hold him up and to hold him together. Unsteadily, he drew her close, giving her a tight squeeze. She didn’t fight or resist. Rather, the petite girl stood firm and steady before gently rubbing his back. If he didn’t get his shit together, he’d lose her too… That couldn’t happen… After a moment, Saeyoung forced himself to stand without leaning on her, clearing his throat.

“Sorry… I’m okay I just…”
Her palm gently caressed his cheek. “No… You’re not, but we can handle that after we get out of here, okay?”

“Y-yeah…”

“…Let’s take what we have and regroup. We’ll come back for Saeran… He’s important to whoever their leader is, so I don’t think he’s in danger. When we take down their leader, then we’ll get him…”

“Right… Okay…”

It was a logical enough plan and it was probably the best course of action, but it wasn’t what he wanted… He wanted his brother.

The girl guided him to the seat his brother likely used when he’d been searching for him all those years… All those years looking and hurting. He couldn’t help but get teared up while hacking back into the security system on the keyboard that’d been no doubt witness to his brother’s efforts. Miyeon’s soft hands would occasional reach over to dry his cheeks or rub his shoulders until he calmed enough to focus… Soon there was a pop as the tumblers released. The girl was hoisting this heavy equipment bag over her shoulder and running to hold the door open to make sure they didn’t get locked in again. Quickly he tucked his laptop under his arm and took her hand with the other as they made their escape. Surprisingly, there was no one waiting for them at the top of the steps… Or in the halls… Everyone was likely still enjoying their meal with the savior, although it’d felt like hours had passed.

Maybe Saeran didn’t want him to get caught… Or maybe he was afraid of being punished…?

With care, he lifted the heavy bag from Miyeon, and they began their escape.

Maybe they’d be lucky… Although whether that meant seeing his brother again or not was hard to tell. He had to keep it together.

Vanderwood’s morning had been rough as he had been working his ass off to complete the jobs that Luciel had left unfinished. He was running off coffee and nicotine, but at the very least, his target was moving. He had confirmation of his target, rather than aimlessly trying to search buildings for him. The car had been going South quite fast since before sunrise. It was only after confirming with the boss that he took the liberty of borrowing one of the hacker’s car to try to catch up with him. Truthfully, he’d been eyeing the car for a while with its brilliant red paint job and stylish rims. The practicality of the red didn’t occur to him until later.

There were lots of little towns and remote islands that 707 could be heading for. It wouldn’t be hard for him to slip onto a boat either, but wherever he was running, Vanderwood was sure he probably had that girl with him. He hoped that wasn’t the case though. She seemed like a nice girl, who he really didn’t want to involve in such a nasty business. Not wanting to have innocent blood on his hands, there was also something unsettlingly familiar about her features that he couldn’t quite place. He really hoped his former charge was smart enough to not put her into the line of fire…

The closer he got to where the signal stopped, the more anxious he became.

Vanderwood had killed people, but not many, and not easily. There was a reason why he’d taken the red head in… It was easier to protect and do behind the scenes work than “wetwork”. Frankly, he didn’t have the stomach for it. He preferred being a watchdog who occasionally barked
orders, not someone like “Ophelia” who regularly took out people for the agency provided the cost was right. Really this was a job for him, not Vanderwood, except it was his charge that ran off… That and Ophelia wouldn’t give Luciel the luxury of coming of his own accord. It would be shoot on site – cold, efficient.

He didn’t want that…

Part of him hoped that he could capture the red head alive and talk some sense into him. The guys up top may work him over, break a few bones, and send him to re-education, but he could live after that and keep working. It’d hurt to see him broken, but he’d prefer that to seeing the kid dead… If he had no one to watch over, he’d be back to doing grunt and wetwork – if they didn’t outright kill him too for incompetence. Considering how genius Luciel was though, he could maybe make a case for himself. At least, that’s what he told himself. The pack of cigarettes he’d smoked over the hours on the road told him that he wasn’t convinced.

Eventually the agent found himself in the dead of the mountains. He couldn’t find the car, but if his recon was of any use, he knew the only real hiding spot was apparently a compound that the locals referred to as “Magenta”. It took bribery to get the location as the people he talked to seemed very wary of the place. He wasn’t afraid… No amount of “savior” was going to really protect anyone from a metal slug to the skull.

Was Seven really thinking he could hide himself in a secluded cult in the mountains?

He took his time driving up to scout the place before noticing a seemingly familiar frame stumble out from the ornate doors. The hair was pink and he seemed slimmer, but the face was Luciel’s. The idiot had put contacts in and a fake tattoo. That wasn’t going to be enough…

Vanderwood began his approach. All the while the hacker seemed unaware, muttering to himself while pacing. Whatever nonsense was coming out of his mouth was likely due to some drugs. He couldn’t blame the kid, if he knew he was going to die, going to some crazy cult to get high off his nuts probably wasn’t the worst idea.

“Hey!”

Luciel ignored him, still muttering while clawing at the leather jacket slouching around his shoulders. The kid usually had better taste than that. How the hell could someone not stand out wearing that lame punk looking get up? Now acting like he didn’t recognize his voice.

“I’m not stupid, 707! I know you can hear me.”

The young man finally stopped and wild eyes flashed back at him. Not a trace of recognition. Maybe he was just too drugged to really understand his situation?

“You… You’re Luciel’s “assistant”."

“Assistant my ass!” snapped Vanderwood, reaching for the young man’s arm. There was a short scuffle until he held the wiry frame by the neck with a gun to his temple. For someone so wiry, the kid was still pretty strong – he was just stronger…

“Look I didn’t want it to come to this, Seven, but you REALLY fucked up… The guys up top aren’t going to let this slide. If you come along with me now, they may just rough you up and reprogram you.”

“I’m not Seven!”
The man in his hold began to writhe and struggle, it was hard to keep him under control while forcing him towards the car.

“You’re the only idiot who would struggle with a gun in your face… You know that? The only reason I’m not putting a bullet in you now is because I don’t want your brain on my new coat.”

“LET ME GO! I SAID LET ME GO!”

“I’m not an idiot. You think I could watch over your ass for nearly a decade and not know what you look like?”

“I’m NOT-“

If this kept up, it’d draw even more attention. There were probably other cult loons around that’d make a scene. He threw the young man against the back of his own car before punching him hard in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. The kid had enough gumption to try going for the gun again. This time he gave a quick tap to the back of his head, making him slump forward into his arm.

“Damn it…” the older agent sighed, holding him up while opening the trunk.

Careful not to damage him anymore, Vanderwood rolled his body into the trunk before slamming the hood back down. With a frustrated sigh, he lit up another cigarette. He could call the boss now to let him know he had the kid, but that would mean he’d have to turn him over sooner. That wasn’t entirely good news for him either. His brain pondered the full extent of his situation as he plopped back down into the driver’s seat. Right now, he could use the kid as a bargaining chip…

Luciel would get to live a little longer until he could be sure the boss wasn’t going to take him out too. Without another moment’s hesitation, the agent peeled out and began a search for a safehouse while he figured things out…

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His head was swimming and aching… It all felt familiar.

Mother would hit him if he was late…

Saeyoung… It’s dark… I’m scared…

Cold stone… People in robes… Talk of the parties in Paradise…

Saeyoung… Save me…

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“Miyeon, this way,” the former agent urged.

The girl was doing her best, but the bindings on her feet were getting to a point that they were doing more harm than good. He seemed to have realized that and had made the trek back to pick up the car to bring it closer. She waited anxiously in the abandoned greenhouse keeping watch… There was no sign of his brother. When he met back up with her, he gazed at her expectantly, but there was no good news to give him.

“I think we missed him…”

Saeyoung’s eyes darkened. “I want to believe we’ll catch him soon…” Before she could
clarify her concerns, he continued. “He didn’t tell anyone about us being here… I don’t know if he was just too shocked or if he’s changed his feelings about m-.”

He was interrupted by the smell of petrol. They were downwind of it. With reluctance, the girl followed him until they were near what was likely the area meant for parking and deliveries to the compound. A long black set of streaks told of someone having peeled out of there at quite a speed. Maybe Saeran had sped away?

The red head was already studying them to get an idea of the direction.

“Do you think it’s Saeran? He would’ve had to have had a car to come to the apartment, right?”

“Yeah, but… There’s not enough evidence for me to just follow it…”

Seeing how she was walking on the edges of her feet, the hacker frowned before putting his arm around her to help take some of the weight off. They were soon within sight of his car, he opened the door for her.

“For now… Let’s get somewhere safe so we can fix your bandages. Get in the car, okay?”

It was an order, but one born from concern. Miyeon hobbled and had a foot in the door before they both heard a voice…

“Luciel…”

The girl found herself holding onto the sleek metal door, as the hacker had shifted his weight to act as a barrier. She could feel him body tense up… From the rear-view mirror, her eyes glimpsed an unexpected sight… Someone she’d only seen in pictures and who she knew only from the unusual color of his hair.

V…?

“V…”

“Luciel… Thank God, it’s you…”

Why would he be happy to see him…?

“Why are you here?” Saeyoung asked warily.

“Oh… That…”

Miyeon had questions, but the red head was a mile ahead of her.

“Don’t give me cryptic answers either. Why are you here?”

No reply.

There was a scoff… “Of course, you knew about this place. Right? I’m not even surprised. You’re with them, aren’t you?”

V wasn’t denying it, but there was clearly a lot he wanted to say that he just couldn’t put into words. Something told her that whatever he said, Saeyoung wasn’t going to hear him out…
“I know you won’t believe anything I say to you; so whatever I tell you about why I’m here, you won’t believe… and that’s my fault too…”

A crazy thought occurred to Miyeon in that moment… If everyone was dining with the savior, that meant it couldn’t be V. That left one other option that seemed so impossible that she couldn’t even entertain it.

“V… Di-“

“Miyeon, get in the car… He could be dangerous.”

If he was going to hurt them or call for backup he would’ve done it already, yet the tone of Saeyoung’s voice made her obey… Despite his feelings on the matter, her intuition told her that the tall man was no threat.

“You don’t have to fear me… I would never hurt you,” the older man assured, raising his hands to show no weapon.

The hacker shut the car door with force, while he continued to level a glare at the man he once considered his own father. He slowly crossed the front of the car. Though muffled, she could hear him, albeit muffled…

“You want me to believe that after what you let happen to Saeran? Don’t come near me.”

V’s lips moved, but his voice was too soft to carry through the glass.

“You knew about what was in that drawer didn’t you. How long have you been lying to me? Who the hell are you really!?” Saeyoung growled. “Rika was the only person who could get into the apartment…! Yet you KNEW! And don’t lie to me with that innocent face.”

She could make out, “I’m sorry…” But Luciel’s shoulder blocked V’s face from her line of sight after that…

“You’re not going to say anything about Saeran? You’re not going to tell me what the hell you did to him!?" He was quaking with rage again. “He wouldn’t even listen to me. He thinks I’m lying… Why the hell does he think I’m a liar!? What did you do to my little brother!?”

A pause for a response she couldn’t hear from a man who she only knew where he was by the angle of the hacker’s enraged posture.

“You’re not RFA’s leader… This whole time… You’ve been Mint Eye’s- is that right? You faked Rika attacking you and your eyes getting damaged for sympathy… Playing us so we wouldn’t notice, is that what happened? … Say something! Say something with that noble mouth of yours! That lying mouth that promised me Saeran would be safe!”

Miyeon jerked as Saeyoung roared… He’d lost all sense of reason and composure. All those years… It was understandable, but he wasn’t really giving V an opportunity to explain himself. With him still blocking her in the car, she had no way to try to mediate.

“Dammit V, answer me!”

She could hear the other man’s voice but couldn’t make out the words…

“Calm down? In THIS situation?”
V’s soft, deep voice returned. It was calming, but there was no doubt of the remorse in it…

“Don’t give me that excuse,” spat the red head shaking his head violently. “I hate you… It’s your fault… It’s your fault my little brother is like that… You’re why I became an agent, why I suffered – hated myself… I’ll NEVER forgive you! That- THAT is the truth! I would’ve never left him alone if it hadn’t been for you!”

He was practically hysterical at this point… Miyeon covered her ears… The yelling… She’d had enough, she wanted it to stop…

V’s voice was there again, this time urgent.

Then Saeyoung’s…

“…n’t… ay…ame.”

The older man said something again. This time it seemed to break the young agent’s anger.

“…W-what…?”

The driver side car door flung open.

“…I can’t be sure… But if it wasn’t you… It must’ve been him.”

“I won’t forgive you if you’re lying.”

“I swear, but… I couldn’t see properly. I don’t know who took them, but… The car was red. It really stood out. I think it had silver lining.”

“Silver lining…” The hacker’s fist tightened. “No way… Shit! Vanderwood.”

“Vanderwood…?” V repeated softly.

“If you’re lying to me about seeing Saeran…”

“I swear, it’s the truth. Saeyoung, I’d like to help – but… You probably don’t trust me.”

“You’re damn right I don’t trust you. There’s no way in hell I’m going to let you interfere with my or my brother’s lives ever again.”

“Saeyoung…”

He began to sit down only to stop part way through. “By the way,V…”

“Yes…?”

“…If Rika knew the real you, I can see why she messed up your eyes like that. If they even really are damaged… Either way - I hope you really do go blind.”

With that, he slammed the door shut and before Miyeon could even register it, the car jerked back, then forward. For several minutes, she was in sheer terror as he drove like a bat out of hell through the woods with an intense look on his face. They skid onto the paved road and he began to go even faster. Did he even know where they were going the right way? She felt like she was suffocating! He wasn’t slowing down! He could really kill them both! The vitriol in his spirit and unwavering pursuit was going to get them both killed if he didn’t calm down.
“…If Vanderwood has him – there’s no telling what he’ll do to him.”

The girl couldn’t hold it in anymore. She had to have air! “Please stop…”

“If we just hurry we can…”

“STOP!”

Her body jerked forward as Saeyoung slammed on the breaks, hastily pivoting the vehicle to where they were on the shoulder… Hastily the girl unfastened her seat belt and quickly stumbled out of the car.

“M…Miyeon…?”

It was hard to keep her shivering body still as her knees began to buckle. She swayed back to the car, knocking the little bit of air she had in her lungs out. The tightness in her throat and chest leaving her feeling light headed… The girl slid down to the concrete in a heap fighting for breath while trying to steady her stomach. It was like she was drowning and going to throw up at the same time. Other than that, Miyeon wasn’t even aware of her own body aside from the pain in her feet.

The seed of Saeran’s words and their meaning came back to her full force… She didn’t want her mother back in her life! Saeyoung’s volatile emotions, how very hot and bitter he could be. Had she made a mistake? Would he ever hate her that much? Were they going to die? She didn’t want to save that woman, if that woman was indeed who the gaunt twin mentioned… She wanted her to hurt, but at the same time, that was wrong and…

Why was this happening now? Why not before? Why now!? What if there were people after them? She had to get herself together! Her mind raced…

She was going to suffocate! The girl began to tug at the vestments, as everything felt tight.

It felt like forever, but in truth, it’d only been seconds before Saeyoung got out to check on her. Her body curled up quite naturally to hide the sight from him as running away wasn’t an option… Despite her feeble kicks pushing her closer against the unyielding metal of the car and concrete scraping her hands. It only made her shake worse and breathing harder as she thought about how pathetic it must’ve looked. Her limbs were shaking too much to fully cover her head, but her knees curled up, quivering against her chest.

It was her fault they weren’t going to find his brother… Saeran was dead. He was going to hate her. He was going to leave her alone… She’d never see him again. It was her fault!

Even with her pleas and attempt to hide her face, he knelt beside her quietly. An embarrassed little sob escaped her making it only harder to get it together.

“Hey…”

Her mind was conjuring all the horrible things that were going to happen. There was a shuffle of fabric as he pulled the cultist robes off and threw the rags over his shoulder.

A yelp escaped her as suddenly her body lurched forward, away from the safety of the hard surface. Her knees rolled forward until she was practically in his lap. His knee supported her from behind while the rest of him was draped around her protectively. Saeyoung’s body surrounded her with warmth and practically everything the girl could feel was him. Her reflex was to push him away, only to feel him grip her tighter.
“Just breathe.”

How could she? He was blocking all the air and-

“I’m so-—hic—sorry. I’m sorry!” she began to repeat softly.

“In… 2… 3…” his chest rose against her. “Out… 2… 3…”

Without meaning to, Miyeon began to follow his slowly uttered mantra if only because his chest was right by her cheek. The calm rhythm of it was hard to fall into, although she couldn’t help but hiccup as her body wasn’t ready to relax just yet. Saeyoung’s large hand smoothed her hair as he repeated it a few more times until the girl could feel her lungs expanding fractions at a time.

After a moment, the dizziness waned into a mild headache as her rapid shallow breaths eased to deep, but still fast. With care, the former agent helped her to her feet before sitting her back in the passenger seat with her feet on the ground, so she could continue to get fresh air. It didn’t help Miyeon couldn’t unfold herself fully just yet… He was clearly glancing around to make sure they weren’t being followed.

“Just relax here a little… I’m going to check the car, okay?”

She nodded as he disappeared behind the vehicle. There as a little bit of noise as he ordered catbot to do something related to tracking and then opened the trunk, rummaged around, then it closed. Eventually the girl was able to sit up fully, only to not see any sign of her companion. A shred of panic began to set back in until she caught a glimpse of his red hair at the back. Miyeon carefully removed the cultist vestments before attempting to stand, setting the robes in the back just in case they needed them for later. Using the car to balance herself, she unsteadily made her way to see what was going on. Saeyoung was slowly passing a device over the interior of the trunk, before quickly checking the other parts of the car. His intense gaze softened some as he glanced up to see her, but soon focused again on the task at hand.

“Feeling better?”

“…Yeah… Do you need any help?”

A troubled smile crossed his lips. “Not yet. For now, just take it easy.”

He didn’t mean it in a mean way, but it was enough to make her flinch with the realization that she wasn’t of any use to him at all… It must’ve been obvious because of the worried knit to his brow.

“If Vanderwood really was there, it means he had a way of tracking this vehicle. I wouldn’t have thought about that if you hadn’t asked me to stop… I wasn’t thinking at all; I could’ve really gotten us hurt.”

“…You don’t have to pretend…”

“No, Miyeon. I mean it…” he sighed before kneeling to run the scanner along the housing of the tire. “For the record, I’d never sacrifice you… If it hadn’t been for you, I don’t know if Saeran would’ve shared as much. I wouldn’t have known how much he really suffered.”

“I don’t know if that helped you at all… That’s why you were so upset to begin with. And then V… How come he was even there?”

He sighed softly, finishing up a pass along the underside of the car before standing. “It’s
because I was careless… He still has access to the chatroom… And Jumin. Of course, he’d be waiting for us to try to cover his trail.” Saeyoung’s voice was full of disgust. “… I’ll fix about that later once I get us to a safehouse. I can’t keep making stupid little mistakes.”

Fairly soon he’d checked all of the car, but he hadn’t found anything judging by the frown he wore.

To her surprise, he then tossed her his keys and guided her towards the driver side door.

“L-Saeyoung…? What’s-?”

“I need you to drive my car just a little bit. Here…”

She sat in the driver seat, which he pulled up a little to help her legs reach the breaks and pedals. He was clear in basic controls, but the main thing was… “For now, I just want you to let it coast just a little bit while I walk around it.”

“I could hit you.”

“It’s fine, just keep your foot on the break and keep it really slow, okay?”

Miyeon didn’t protest, but he had to encourage her to let off the break a little more as the vehicle slowly began to roll forward down the slope of the mountain while he trotted behind and alongside. It took a minute, but soon she heard -

“Okay! Stop!”

The car eased to a standstill. To her surprise, she was greeted with the sight of his camera before he opened the driver side.

“…Really?” she murmured.

He chuckled a little. “I can’t help it… You were so cute, but I have a good reason – I swear.”

Saeyoung reached over her, putting the car into break and taking the keys back out. He took off his hoodie and red shirt, leaving only the white undershirt before his upper half disappeared under the passenger side of the car. Miyeon followed him but could only watch and wait. His long legs bent a little as he gave himself another little push farther under the car. It was making her nervous… She glanced around, then back down, seeing the occasional glimmer from the flashlight on his phone. It was several minutes before she heard a muffled –

“Gotcha…”

There was no amount of craning her neck that was going to let her see what was going on, but soon his hand emerged, blackened, but holding two small round devices that appeared to have a magnet on them. He scooted back out from under the car, his shirt coming up to reveal a little of his belly. There was toned definition there, with fine lines marking the muscles beneath.

“GPS…” she asked softly.

“Yep. This kind doesn’t signal until the vehicle moves.”

He gave a final push before sitting with his back against the car to study the devices in
better light. Afterwards, the former agent got up with her help before throwing the devices far into the woods. “Think you could get behind the wheel one more time for me?”

She nodded and after a repeat, he seemed satisfied that the vehicle was bug free. This time when she was able to break the car by herself. Miyeon was stepping out to give him the keys when she noticed his purposeful stride towards her. His arms wrapped around her waist, bringing her up off the ground just a little as he squeezed her tight. At first, she took it as a sign they were in danger until he eased and offered her a little smile…

“Thank you.”

Her hands were touching his bare skin. The girl felt even hotter realizing just how developed his arms really were. She had to look away, which seemed to amuse him. He got her attention back though by gently cupping her face. It seemed as though he wanted more, but at the moment, Miyeon didn’t feel much like a kiss… He seemed to pick up on that and eased up some, but not before rubbing her nose with his thumb. Maybe he was brushing hair from her eyes?

Weird.

She was a little confused but didn’t protest much as he let her aside, although he seemed to be more cheerful than for the situation they were in called for. It wasn’t long after she sat back down in the passenger side that he joined her, his hands rumpling the vestments before they were thrown in the back. He seemed to be grinning suspiciously wide after a glance at her.

“When we get somewhere safe, I’ll teach you how to drive. It’s easier to do on an automatic, but if you can learn how to drive this, then you’ll be set for anything.”

The engine soon came to life again, and they began the descent from the mountains. It seemed like they were headed South as they were taking a different road than the way they’d come up. He set the GPS, although she wasn’t sure where they were going now.

“Are you sure you can trust me with that? I mean… I know that I may have to at some point, but I don’t want to wreck your car.”

“I’ve got a few cars, and there’s insurance on them. Besides, if end up getting married one day, you may need to use them.”

Miyeon felt herself blushing realizing how deliberate his wording was. “…You’re serious.”

“I am…” he answered warmly. “The more time I spend with you, the more certain I am.”

A quiet settled over the car as he focused on the road, although there wasn’t any doubt he was wondering where his brother was. Quietly she moved her hand closer to the gear shift before his fingers laced with hers. It came so naturally…

His gold eyes shifted from the road to her before slipping back.

“…There should be another town coming up soon. We’ll stop there for gas, food, and some supplies. I also need to take care of a few things while we’re there.”

“Okay.”
“Right now, though… Is it okay if I ask you something? And I need you to answer as honestly as you can… Who was Saeran talking about?”

Her heart lurched. “…I don’t know…”

Considering how he glanced at her, she knew he wasn’t satisfied with that answer.

“I mean - I have a thought, but I don’t know for sure.”

There was no denying the concern in his eyes before Saeyoung drew a deep breath and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“From what Saeran said, how you seemed to empathize with him, and just the short time I’ve been with you… It seems like some pretty sad things have probably happened to you too. Haven’t they?”

The girl leaned closer to the window, slipping her hand free so she could hold herself.

“Did that person hurt you?” his voice was calm, but his concern was mixed with a tempered anger.

She bit her lip. “Hurt” was a very vague and broad term… It applied to her complicated relationship with the woman that had given birth to her, although not in quite the same way. Considering how terrible his mother had been, Miyeon didn’t even feel that it compared. Really, her life was charmed by comparison. It made her feel pretty weak considering how easily she’d been worn down by the reminder of what the woman thought of her.

What was even worse was wondering what would happen when they put an end to Mint Eye, if such a thing was even achievable. Would that woman show up on the door step and expect her to be a dutiful daughter after having left her alone for years? It was “expected” of her. She was the only family that was left, afterall. She’d have “a right…” The girl felt otherwise.

If she and Saeyoung were truly a couple by then, there was a good chance that the woman would never approve. Even if he was handsome and a genius, knowing her daughter had contact with Jumin Han would’ve led to her being raked over the coals for not having her “priorities straight”. Plus, something told her she would’ve found him too much like her father and his red hair ridiculous. She didn’t care what her mother thought, but Miyeon loathed the possibility of constant nagging, belittling, and snide comments…

That very same negativity left scars in how she thought about herself and her place in it…

It’d been so peaceful with just her father. He worked hard to provide for the two of them, but he was never harsh or demanding. In return, she did her best to take care of the home and learned to cook. She gave up so many science classes and clubs to take courses to do just that, since her mother had never cared to. If not from school, then Eun-Ji’s family... His desire to see her married and with children was born of a sincere concern for her happiness, and to perhaps ensure he himself had a legacy. He’d wanted to be a grandfather... Not out of greed or the sake of having a trophy to show off. The only people who seemed incapable of seeing anything of worth in her was her mother and subsequently herself.

What if they had children and she turned into a monster like that? Could either she or Saeyoung even hope to be good parents…?

No… She’d never be that callous and selfish.
Miyeon was willing to risk having to deal with her mother if it meant Saeyoung could have his family back and Saeran could recover from whatever the cult had done to him. It was a small price to pay. It was a toll her father or Jun-Seo would’ve paid, without hesitation.

“…As awful as that person was, I wouldn’t be the person I am without the lessons I learned from them. No matter how painful they were. I learned a lot about people from them. It’s because of her I can understand some of how your brother must’ve felt.”

The hacker’s expression was contemplative before a pained smile crossed his lips. “I almost envy how strong you are.”

“…Don’t tease me.”

“I’m not…”

“You’ve only known me a few weeks.”

“They train agents to be able to read people, you know. At their base, humans are simple creatures with common behaviors having genetic and common experiences that shape them. Really, people are just self-teaching AIs that model behaviors from those they encounter and may later adapt based upon additional input. I don’t need to know everything about you to see a simulation who selflessly gives so much of herself for other’s happiness because she genuinely cares, rather the person who thinks so little of herself that she’d give everything she is to see others happy…”

Miyeon eased over from where she’d curled up near the window, back to where their shoulders touched.

“I’m not a program.”

“No. You’re not… You’re my 606.”

“I’m not a reset code either, Saeyoung.”

His eyes widened realizing that she understood the meaning.

“…I looked it up. If there’s anything about 707 that you keep, don’t forget what it is you really want so you don’t lose your way again. Remember everything, so you know you’re not alone… And use those sad things to be the person you want to become.”

“See… You’re so cool when you do that. Right now, I really want to kiss you, but I can’t take my eyes of the road.”

The both glanced to the other only to catch the other smiling a little. This did suit them… They’d made a vow after all… No matter how desperate the situation; they could look at the other, smile, and get through it. She’d already lost one brother. Between the both of them, there was no way in hell she was going to lose another.

Once they stopped for gas, Miyeon confirmed whether it was okay to message out again. He confirmed after having catbot switch tasks to act as a VPN. There was a series of messages from V, but there was no time to read them. For now, all the girl’s access permitted was a simple text.

“Saeyoung and I are safe.”
Hey guys!

I'm going to apologize in advance for any errors or disjointedness in this chapter. It's been months since I've been able to work on it because of final semester of the medical program I was in. I've graduated and passed my registry for that though, so I should have more time to focus on getting this story back on track!

I do need your guys opinion on a few things though. Saeyoung and Miyeon aren't the only romance that'll be going on. It's not fair to Zen, Yoosung, Jumin, and Jaehee to be left out. So would you guys like me to work those into this narrative or would you prefer that I "space" them out into their own separate tales with crossovers between. A few of those love interests have already been worked into the narrative. There's the first RFA party for us to cover too. Do you guys even want to read about what's going on there? Or do we want to stick with our main couple for now? XD I'm open to opinions.

Thank you for bearing with me during that hiatus. You guys are the very best.

Chapter 26:

It hadn’t been hard to obtain security footage obtained from the parking garage that 707’s vehicle had been stored at. There was no mistaking that red hair, but what got to Ophelia was the person with him. Long dark hair and fair skin under baggy clothes. A more innocent soul there couldn’t have been. Under those unkempt bangs was face that they wished desperately to unsee…

Ophelia’s new orders came from above and outside. Despite his recent lack of productivity, there was no denying the skill of the hacker and to that end the Agency “boss” wanted recovery. Ophelia’s client wanted blood. Normally it wasn’t hard to reconcile those goals, but there were two things…

1.) Per the Agency’s intel, Vanderwood had recovered a target, but he had captured the hacker’s identical twin. A surprise, but it wasn’t a total loss. Seven’s twin was useful bargaining chip for sure, but that left Seven out in the wild and likely preparing a counter offensive. That was a big loose end.

2.) Seven wasn’t the only one with a past.

Ophelia didn’t like loose ends…

Vanderwood hadn’t mentioned the girl or the RFA. No one in the Agency knew about her; Ophelia intended to keep it that way. The only reason Ophelia knew was because they were going outside the usual operations for the client. That was the “sweeper’s” specialty after all, quick, clean targeted kills. Efficient...
If Seven was serious about defending himself or his lover, he’d go for the throat, burn it all to the ground, and salt the Earth after. That wasn’t like the young man he knew from previous ops. The hacker wasn’t malicious, Ophelia wondered if the boy even had it in him to do what was necessary. He had too much heart to do the sorts of things Ophelia and Vanderwood had. Leaking information would lead to agents being killed, but it wasn’t a direct death sentence. That seemed more Luciel’s speed…

The more the “sweeper’s” eyes watched the footage, the more conflicted their thoughts became. There were selfish motivations…

Looking over the arsenal, Ophelia pondered the options before selecting a Barrett M82 from the wall and set out to the rendezvous.

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The meager light from the sparse villages was long gone, leaving only the headlights to light up the dirt road. They’d been driving for hours while catbot sat quietly purring as she processed the large volume of data he’d collected. It was getting quite late, and despite his assurances that he loved to drive, it was obvious to Miyeon that the man next to her was getting tired. Thankfully, the cabin safehouse was just a little farther according to the GPS. The lack of civilization around would make it easy to hide, although it did make connection to the outside world a little hard to establish. That was as much of a blessing as it was a curse considering the work he mentioned still needed to be done.

Saeyoung soon turned the headlights off, and by some miracle managed to navigate safety through the dark path. Soon the silvery outline of a building came into view before she could make out the wooden walls of the cabin. Saeyoung had her wait in the car for a little while he scouted around. After what felt like an eternity he returned, took her hand, and helped her up. The girl’s body quite naturally drew close to him as they walked; it didn’t help that her legs felt stiff and sluggish from having ridden most of the day.

Despite it being Summer, the mountain air was cool and fragrant. His hands were so very warm though… Above them was a sparkling, cloudless sky. Here the Milky Way was so vibrant, painting the darkness with a beautiful array of colors. It was enough to make the girl stop in her steps. In the city, the glow of artificial light had obscured the majesty of her own home galaxy. In turn, Saeyoung eased just a step ahead, his hand gripping hers before his gaze shifted from the girl to the stars.

Her cheeks felt warm as she brought herself back down to Earth at the feeling of his fingers slipping out from her own. Soon they found a new place along the small of her back as he helped guide her up the steps. It was a light touch at first but as she wasn’t protesting as he drew Miyeon near to steady her. It was only then that she noticed that he had apparently changed the lock while “scouting” the place. Knowing this was property they weren’t supposed to be made her a little uncomfortable, but it wasn’t like they would be safer checking into a hotel.
“Sorry that we can’t turn the lights on… I know it’s dark, but we’ll be here just for tonight,” he soothed.

Miyeon stayed close to him as the door creaked open. The only light was the flashlight from his phone. It was enough to confirm that there were the essentials in the cabin at least. It was furnished, but clearly hadn’t been used in a while. With care, Saeyoung guided her to a sitting area of sorts before hastily setting up his gear. The only light came from his laptop screen and Catbot’s eerily glowing eyes. The robot was still working to decrypt what they had gotten from Mint Eye. Their visit earlier had been fruitful and with his brother indisposed, there was no one to counter further efforts to mine data from the group…

Saeyoung’s main attention was now to the Agency. He didn’t give her details, but she suspected he was gathering intel on them as well. Really the less she knew the better. Even while they were stopped for gas and to grab a few things to eat from a convenience store, he had been focused on it. She’d basically hand fed him a boxed lunch piece by piece. Although they’d joked about it at the time, it was a clear sign of how important whatever he was doing was.

With care, he set her bag of essentials near her leg and took a few minutes to get his gear up and running. It was hard to read his expression by the way the light reflected from the lens of his glasses from the screen, but it seemed as though he had forgotten something.

“I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Be careful,” she urged.

He nodded before the cabin fell dark again, and she watched his silhouette slip out. For a moment, she listened fearfully for the sound of the car starting. Part of Miyeon dreaded that he would change his mind and would leave her somewhere relatively “safe” while going on ahead… The dull glowing black screen with its green lines of code didn’t put out much light. The dark stillness began to get the better of her imagination, until she couldn’t take it anymore and pulled out her cellphone to light the cabin and take in her surroundings. There was a fireplace, a sitting area, a basic kitchenette, and a bed all in an in a single-story open floor plan. This was clearly a cabin meant for no more than a couple judging by the size of the space. The bed had a cover sheet over it but nothing else.

It wasn’t quite cold enough to be uncomfortable but being still had a way of making one feel cooler than it was. Starting a fire wasn’t an option though. Smoke would be a dead giveaway that someone was there. Thankfully she dressed warm…

The silence soon broke as she heard a familiar foot fall. Saeyoung’s wild mane appeared in silhouette at the door with a few more bags in his hands. He followed the light from her screen before taking a spot beside her. A sense of relief settled over her knowing he wasn’t going to just run away or try to hide from her. After confirming it was safe to do so, Miyeon checked the RFA chatroom, sharing with him the overview.

V had written a lot but managed to say little in his own defense. It seemed strange to her… Saeyoung
made up his mind earlier. All mentioning the chat earlier had done during one of their stops was agitate the hacker and remind him to block the former RFA leader from accessing the program. She didn’t voice her concerns after that, knowing that they’d fall on deaf ears and take away the few scraps she had to piece the mystery together.

There were years of hurt and resentment that the man beside her had experienced all coming to a head. He had told her some of what he’d done as an agent before and during the long drive. Although he’d never killed anyone, he had hurt people and ruined lives with his actions. He hated it, but at the time, the hacker felt there were no other options. Till now, he’d traded in being a scared boy hiding from his father to being a tool who was denied a normal life in exchanged for borrowed time. In her heart, she knew that wasn’t entirely V’s fault… It was surprising such a seemingly benign person even had such connections. Then again, he was from a well-off family with military contracts, so was it really that odd? Still, V didn’t seem the type of person to even suggest a thing unless there was no other way. Was Saeyoung’s father really that formidable of a person?

There had to be more to the story. The only people who could answer what’d happened were either dead, silent, or too unstable to see it clearly. When it was done and after Saeyoung had time to let cooler heads prevail, maybe V would explain himself to the twins then.

The thing that bothered her most, other than V being there, was that he was sneaking around as well. If he was truly such an important person to that organization, wouldn’t he have been at the lunch where everyone was supposed to meet the “Savior”? If he was the “Savior”, wouldn’t he be more likely to have called out his cult the second he saw his prized hacker captured?

No… V wasn’t in charge of Mint Eye by her figuring.

That lead her thoughts back to who could be and what their ties were to Saeyoung and his brother. Hopefully Saeran was okay… It was strange that she could feel concern for him despite the way’s he’d hurt her. The stinging of her feet and memory of him practically suffocating her with an unwanted kiss still tainted her worries. She wanted to believe Saeyoung in that his brother had been twisted by Mint Eye, although another part of her was much less accepting of that. Sometimes there was no way of retrieving someone from such a dark place. She had to believe for Saeyoung’s sake, that such a thing was possible. There was no guarantee that she would ever be able to fully trust his brother, although she’d never admit it.

These were the thoughts racing through her head as she updated everyone and did her best to keep them focused on the party so they wouldn’t worry. If something happened to them, the party would be the only real legacy that would be left. To that end, she wanted it to be successful enough to make them continue helping others. Maybe children’s charities to keep situations like the twin’s from happening to anyone else. Jumin, despite his seeming detachment, was clearly hurt and trying to figure out his best friend’s thoughts. Yoosung felt vindicated in his doubts of V, which wasn’t helping matters. Zen was just confused and hurt. Jaehee was worried but doing her best to keep things focused. From what she gathered in a private message to the administrative assistant, Eun Ji had indeed shown up to help with the party and would be going in her place.

Something good had to come from all of it…
Yoosung, Zen, and Jaehee had all worked so hard helping her get everything together. She had gotten some amazing guests and done so much on their behalf. Only a week ago the girl had dreamed about meeting 707 at the party for the first time and seeing him light up at her hard work. That seemed so simple and distant now. Miyeon didn’t care about going to the party herself, but she remembered how much it meant to the man beside her at the time. Things had changed.

She wasn’t the useless girl her mother always told her she was… Real people were going to something she had organized and real good was going to come from it. Miyeon tried to block herself from dwelling over the things Saeran had said. His claims that he’d personally saw to it that her mother had answered for her “crimes” against her. Subconsciously, pieces were falling into place, but she desperately tried to distract herself.

To try to calm herself, she dug through her bag to take out one of her favorite handheld consoles. After assuring Saeyoung it didn’t have any connection options, she sat about playing a portable cartridge of one of the Chateauvania series to try to calm herself. It felt selfish and didn’t take her mind off anything, but it would give the illusion of normalcy… Hopefully that, in turn, would help him focus.

It was getting late and the longer she played, the more her body seemed to sink into Saeyoung. Partially because he was warm and somewhat because the child inside her was scared… His firm body was reassuring. He didn’t complain, rather, the man seemed comforted by the odd position they soon found themselves in, with her switching to letting her back rest on the seat of the couch while her legs draped over the back. Now and then he’d glance over and move his headphones away from his ear to hear her response to a small question before returning his attention to the screen, a ghost of a smile fading from his lips.

It felt natural…

Eventually, she flipped back around, sat the game aside and quietly excused herself to the restroom, taking her bag with her. It was more traditional than the one at Rika’s apartment, which would make washing up a little tough for someone who had been stuck in a car for an entire day. She’d bathed in candlelight before during a power outage, but never by the light of her phone. The girl made sure to lock the door as she removed her garments, setting them in a spot that seemed as though it could remain dry in the tight space. Once she looked up into the mirror in the dim room, the strange looks she got from people in the convenience store made sense. On her nose was a smudge of grease from where Saeyoung had thumbed her nose. It brought a smile to her face, although it was the first thing to be washed off. From there, it was a matter of trying to strip down in the tight space. The worst was removing the bandages from her feet…

Despite Saeyoung’s insistence on helping her, she’d redone the dressings that afternoon at the convenience store in the bathroom. She didn’t dare confess that some of the deeper cuts had reopened, bleeding through the dressing, her socks, and leaving bright red stains in the soles of her shoes. It was a good thing it was dark or else she was certain he’d make a fuss over it… The skin around them was looking a little raw from the day’s activity and having been in shoes the whole time, which meant it’d probably be best to keep them up and let them dry as best she could. To that end, once she was done washing the rest of herself, Miyeon put only the minimum of bandages on to
avoid the skin touching the holed flip flops she had brought in with her. She’d be taking them off soon enough.

After dressing in loose comfortable clothing, selected with the potential dangers of being found in the night in mind, Miyeon exited the restroom, finding that her eyes had somewhat reacclimated to the dark. Saeyoung was still deeply focused on his work, and “Kisa” had been given a new task judging by the fact her eyes were glowing a different color and she was hooked up to his laptop. She made use of his distracted state to better familiarize herself with the cabin. In the event they had to run, it was important she knew where any potential weapons and obstacles would be.

There was a refrigerator and what was likely an old-fashioned coffee pot in the kitchenette. Neither had been used in a while as there was no light or cold when she opened one and the layer of dust on the other left a noticeable chalkiness to her fingers… If he really was going to be up all night, it would’ve been nice to at least be able to make him coffee or cool some of the soda he’d bought earlier so he could have something refreshing while he worked.

“Miyeon…?”

Reflexively the girl waved, only to realize he probably couldn’t see her in the dark after he’d been staring at the screen so long. This was confirmed as he lowered his headphones and moved to stand.

“Mi-!”

“I’m here,” she soothed, using the light on her phone to light up her face and wave.

Saeyoung immediately relaxed, pushing his glasses up while he rubbed the bridge of his nose. Slowly the girl worked her way back towards where he was sitting. His body eased as she rested a hand on his shoulder.

“You must be getting tired… Are you going to be okay staying the night here?”

She hummed an affirmation.

“I know it’s not the coziest place, but it’s quiet and pretty secluded…”

“It’s nice… You know, I’ve never seen the stars like that before. When this is over - let’s come back and bring a telescope, okay?”

That seemed to cheer him up a little, although it was clear the day was wearing on him. He took off his glasses, setting them near the keyboard, before sitting back and rubbing his eyes. There were a series of pops as his body tried to realign itself after hours of sitting with poor posture. This may have been “normal” for him, but that didn’t make it any easier to watch.
“… Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked softly, taking a spot back at his side.

He took her hand while a throaty breath escaped him. The girl felt very self-conscious as his attention shifted to her feet. Even in the dim light from the monitor they were clearly a bit red.

“…They were getting a little raw. I’ll put dressings back on them in a little.”

“I’m sorry…” he murmured. Miyeon leaned against him to offer some reassurance. It didn’t work. “I wish I could take care of you more, but in an emergency like this, I don’t have a choice.”

She shook her head before taking his hand into her own. “This is fine…” His voice started as though he were going to protest until the girl offered a smile up towards him. “I’m happy as long as I’m at your side.”

The hacker looked away for a moment as though she were a bright light, a gentle smile on his face… Although she could almost hear his thoughts wondering if it’d be necessary to pop by a clinic for the sake of her health, but this eased some as she nestled against him.

“You’re really content with sitting next to me in a dusty old cabin without a word being said for hours?” There was a hint of incredulousness to his voice, or perhaps amusement.

“It doesn’t take much to make me happy, Saeyoung…” her voice trailed. “But if you think you’re being too quiet, maybe you could tell me how you feel about me? So I don’t misunderstand…”

“…Can I really be honest?” Saeyoung asked timidly.

The girl nodded, although they both were clearly unsure. He shifted his weight to where they sat facing each other, before taking her hands into his own. The earnest look about him warranted her attention, especially with how intently his eyes met hers.

“Miyeon,” He started off confidently, but his voice ebbed some. The hacker seemed to find his words though. “You can’t even imagine how important you are to me… I know I told you this earlier. Please don’t get upset… But as an extreme example of how I feel: I could die for you. That’s why I’m here.”

She wanted to protest as she had earlier but a gentle grip on her hands hushed her.

“Without you, I would still be working for the agency, being miserable, and wearing a mask… I would’ve never known the truth of what happened to my brother. I wouldn’t have had hope that there was another way and a way to really live. When I die, I hope God will let my soul stay here next to you. Really… If there is anything I’m truly afraid of… It’s being forgotten by you.”
The girl’s heart was in her throat.

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear at all.

A simple affirmation of love or hope of a future together, maybe…

Not “I could die for you.”

All Miyeon could do was lower her head and try to force a smile.

His grip eased, and she felt the tension of his want to seal his confession with kiss. Miyeon merely bit her lips and kept her chin down. The hacker hesitated, starting to realize that he’d perhaps said something wrong. The coarseness of his fingers slipped up along her face, trying gently to lift her face. A defiant part of her lead to her getting up. The ungratefulness of that action kept her from doing more than standing.

What mattered was how he felt…

As a boy, he’d likely been told from a young age that it was honorable and good to die protecting their country and those they cared for. That was how he showed the depth of his love for Saeran, suffering while wearing a brave face... Sacrificing his life was, to him, the ultimate demonstration of his love. The paradox wasn’t lost on her, as he seemed to value his own life so little. It wasn’t like he’d ever seen a truly happy or functional relationship or experienced love that wasn’t one sided. Part of him perhaps felt that she could only be happy without him, and as a result, such a one-sided show of his love was the best he could do. The thought of living happily together with someone was so foreign – to both of them – but especially him, no matter how he longed for it. Afterall, every single form of media he’d been exposed to likely showed such offers as deeply romantic. People loved the start of new love and dramatic ends… Never the middle. The gift of his life was how he knew to express the depth his feelings, although there was no way he could know that it was painful for her…

In that regard, he was still a child... Then again so was she, especially when it came to something like “this”. Whatever “this” was between them. All she could do was be honest with a display of her feelings, as her throat was tightened in a way that would betray her feelings.

Miyeon cupped his face with quivering hands and gently planted a kiss upon his forehead. Any utterances of assurance he tried to give her were quieted as the girl folded her arms around his neck. He became rigid, likely from surprise and to restrain himself from doing anything that might offend her. It took her guiding her hands to her waist to reassure him, although Saeyoung was still quite unsure of how to react. His eyes lifted before she let his head rest against her breast, her fingers weaving through his wavy red hair. There was a sudden breath drawn in from him before the unfamiliar, but pleasant sensation drew out the lost boy within him. A quivering breath escaped him as years of tension and longing from a child who ached for a tender touch was answered. It was enough to make her hold him all the tighter, letting her fingers smooth his wild mane.
After several moments, he hadn’t released her… His hands dug into the loose knit of her sweater as he hid his face. It reminded Miyeon of how her cat used to nestle into her lap and hold her hostage for hours for fear of waking him. Unlike the feline, Saeyoung was still very much awake, although it was a tenuous grasp. A chime from another of his alarms eventually broke his respite, leading to the hacker glancing wearily at the screen. The girl took that as her cue to lay down before he realized the lack of joy his confession had brought her. The question was written on his face as she stepped aside, although he seemed to piece it together as she sat down on the mattress. The way he glanced at the spot beside her said everything, although his self control took him back to the keyboard with a sigh of resolve.

As she lay, Miyeon scrolled through past messages and old pictures on her phone while the hacker’s tapping at the keyboard grew softer. He could be very thoughtful when he wanted to be. Vague memories of her father came to mind… The old man would come home so late, warm up the dinner she’d left for him, and would keep working on a case until he’d fall asleep on the couch. Sometimes she’d wake up in the middle of the night before class and they’d talk. He wouldn’t tell her about the cases he was working on but always promised he’d take a break soon… Even when he was in the hospital, he tried to keep up with his work. He said it was something very important and that no one else could do, but she couldn’t understand what was more important than his treatments.

If he were alive, maybe he could’ve helped them… Why didn’t she see that he was sick sooner?

The lines of text grew blurrier and blurrier until Miyeon woke to feel the presence of another body close by. It was hard to tell when she’d fallen asleep, but her phone was no longer near her hand. The pressure at her side and noise before her seemed to infer that Saeyoung had laid it on the nightstand. Shortly after there was weight behind her that ran along her back followed by a familiar sigh as the young man stretched out behind her. Saeyoung shifted to get comfortable. His motions were enough to keep her just on the cusp of consciousness. There was a part of her that expected something… Although she wasn’t sure whether anything more than this was welcome or not. As nice as the warmth coming from him felt, another part of Miyeon wanted desperately to push him away for a little. They had been within arm’s reach of each other all day. Another part of her desperately wanted to be held and petted again.

Eventually the girl sat up a little and to ease the ache in her hip shifted to where she faced him. The gold in his eyes lit up the dark circles around them as he offered a weary smile.

To her surprise, he rolled towards her to where their knees touched. There was a flutter in her chest, but thankfully he didn’t dare to get any closer. He was within reach, but not in her little “bubble”. His affectionate gaze was mellowed with exhaustion, judging by the flutters his red lashes made while trying to stay awake just a little longer.

“I had a little time between downloads to try to figure out a way for you to enjoy the party,” he murmured. “I’ve asked if they can put up a feed for you to at least see some of it… You worked so hard on it for everyone. We can take a break for lunch and to watch around noon. You’ll be able to see everyone all dressed up.”
“Even Elly?” she asked with a smile.

A soft chuckle escaped him, but he shook his head. “I wish, but Jaehee won’t let her go because of Zen.”

“That’s if Jumin listens.”

He beamed wearily. “We will have to leave early though... From what I can tell, the fastest path for us to catch up with Vanderwood is going to be taking the coastal road.”

She raised her head a little.

“Will we be able to see the ocean?”

He nodded.

Miyeon felt a small rush of childish glee along with a reverb of bitterness. She’d never seen the sea in person, let alone stepped on a beach. Vacations weren’t something her family had ever done. After her brother’s passing, she and her father had avoided bodies of water. Subconsciously they shared the fear that they’d run across Jun’s body along any riverbank or shoreline. With it so far away, her mind could view it as an adventure instead of a sad reminder. Maybe they’d be close enough for her to smell the saltwater. The unspoken thoughts must’ve been clear on her face as his weary expression turned into a loving smile.

The girl edged closer for just a small cuddle, only to find him pulling her into his arms. Saeyoung held her just enough for her to feel secure without making her feel confined. His natural aroma was so very strong as she nestled against him with its peppery notes. The beat of his heart and rhythm of his breathing lulled her. For once, her outreached hand found something to grasp as it dug into the fabric of his shirt. She was too tired to feel self-conscious or to wonder if it was too soon to be so close… All Miyeon knew was that she felt safe for now, and the mountain air was getting colder as it grew later.

Saeyoung, a man so sure his life couldn’t embrace anything, now held her in his arms as though she were a treasure. The tenderness in how he nestled against her was enough to convey his thoughts, where his words had only hurt her. He understood his mistakes… Or maybe she was just lonely and scared enough to live in that moment without recalling how cold and cruel he’d been just days before. Miyeon wanted to believe in a happy future where she could trust the man holding her.

The words just slipped out…

“I love you,” she murmured.
The rhythm of his breathing ebbed as a weight seemed to fall from him. He held her so tight, almost as if the wall around his heart had ruptured and whose debris could fall and harm her. The lost boy within him and the man clutched her for support as the deluge of his emotions crested.

“…I love you too. Today… Tomorrow… Forever and ever…” his voice was almost childlike but grew firmer as he continued. “As difficult as it was for you when I kept pushing you away - I will give you that much… No – much more love. Whatever happens…” Saeyoung nestled against her, “I will care for you. I’ll love you forever. I love you.”

Their lips met tenderly in the dark as he confessed again and again, increasingly softly until they lay enveloped in the other with only their clothes separating their hearts and bodies.

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**Yoosung**- It’s obvious you like her

…It was. Only days ago he’d been trying to set her with Yoosung. But in a way, he’d stolen her away from his friend. The little puppy Yoosung in his mind had seemingly accepted that fact as the text rolled out of his mouth, although he was still sad and lonely.

*I’m so sorry, Yoosungyi… I’ll make it up to you.*

**Yoosung**- All that’s left is to ask her out

Did running away together count? His dream shifted the two of them living in Siberia as reindeer herders now. She could be his Ms. Claus and he could really be Santa Claus. He could make a whole factory and robotic elves to make toys for children… He wanted children. Did she? He hadn’t asked.

**Yoosung**- the start of a romantic relationship!

Three doors were before him, each guarded by a version of himself. He could hear Saeran and Miyeon calling to him from behind each one. One his twin was bitterly laughing at him and taunting the girl, treating her harshly as he had when he’d first come to the apartment. God! The horrible things he could hear him doing to her. Behind another door both were crying for help. And behind another, they were beckoning him to come home. One door was guarded by his sullen child self, one of his persona from the chatroom, and the last was merely a mirror on the door reflecting a faceless him. It was hard to focus with the 707 he’d created in the chatroom laughing so loud at him while jumbled letters flowed from him like some sort of twisted manhwa.

**707- lololol**
He tried to tell the clown to shut up but found that his faceless self couldn’t utter a word. Reaching for his mouth to undo whatever held it closed, his fingers felt nothing. He was empty. Desperately he reached past the “Happy go Lucky” part of him to where he could hear Saeran and Miyeon calling him home. The future he wanted… He wanted everyone to be happy and able to eat meals together in a warm sunlit room. The people he cherished most and wanted to see smile without a care in the world. He wanted Saeran to be there, safe and able to see the clouds whenever he liked. In this moment, more than anything, he wanted Miyeon to be truly happy… His dreaming subconscious was able to recall every trace of hurt in her face, followed by the depth of the tenderness that followed just before they’d fallen asleep in each other’s arms. He wanted to live… A lifetime of nights in her arms, the sweetness of her being, and the warmth of her very soul washing away his pain. Any price was worth that to him… His faceless self felt cheeks warm with tears as he struggled with the part of him that wore that damned smiling mask. All as his twisted self recited chapters from the book on how to be a playboy…

707- Romantic lolololol

He wasn’t just using her for comfort! Yet he’d been so cold and harsh to her to push her away days ago. Then he’d been so willing to condemn himself to death. It was illogical; that wouldn’t have protected her. He knew that now. What was to say he wouldn’t become so harsh again and justify it as something for her safety. His father could find them and -

...What’s so funny about my feelings?

Saeyoung was back in the apartment, breaking down the closet door as fire blazed… The girl was curled up as she had been earlier near the car, pale and breathing sharply.

Nothing was funny her feelings... They were divine revelation to him. A blessing like the Virgin Mary’s… She was God’s gift to him, and he’d nearly forsaken her!

“If someone is important to you, you make the effort to be honest with them,” her voice was clear although there was clearly disappointment on her brow as his faceless self was embraced by her. She didn’t feel warm… He couldn’t move to hold her either, he was frozen and helpless to listen as he felt the world slip only to watch her clothing fade into those of a black mourning dress as the red of his hair turned into a field of spider lilies… So vibrant and red… His gravestone turned into multiple ones around her as she seemed to grow younger and younger. Lines of code seemed to fill the otherwise dark sky.

Be honest with them…

I want to live in a world where that’s possible…

Strangely, his voice and the girl’s were in unison.
I’m not the bright, happy person you think I am.

He had risen behind the young Miyeon now as she lay sobbing until falling asleep in an ever-deepening sea of her own tears. Her little hand was outstretched as it always was when she slept. She was alone again… There was no one she’d said goodbye to before running away with him. Was she so lonely she’d just run away to be with someone who’d been so harsh to her?

*If something had happened to me, there would’ve been no one to call…*

That wasn’t true… Surely someone so kind hearted and good was beloved. Normal people had families – Miyeon was a normal girl. There had to be a family who’d miss her if something happened, which was why he had to protect her. She needed to make it back to them and to the RFA to keep everyone bright and smiling.

*I won’t lose someone important to me! Not again…*

*There was nothing for me to be happy about, not really…*

He was missing something.

*I make her suffer for what she did to you – Saeran’s voice echoed menacingly.*

*I wanted only to save you so you wouldn’t end up like me.*

Saeran knew more. One more reason he had to get his brother back, not just physically, but spiritually.

*He’ll just abandon you like he did me, and like she did you.*

*It’s why she hated you and loved him more, you know…*

Who was he talking about…?

As he moved to comfort her, Saeyoung’s hand went right through the girl’s shoulder. His voice fell on deaf ears as he called out to her. No matter how hard he tried, there was no contact. Then he felt himself being lifted higher and higher until there was just the Earth floating in the distance.

Saeyoung was on the moon.

Saeran.
Miyeon.

I don’t want this!

He wanted to cry out to be taken back, but there was no air. In the diminished gravity, he did his best to get a running start and leapt as far and high as the void would let him. Earth was so far away! He had to get back!

Saeyoung’s body jerked.

The red glow of the clock showed the time as 4:38 AM…

He’d been asleep for three hours. As the hacker drew a breath to steady himself, his eyes lowered to the beautiful face nestled against his chest. Miyeon’s little hands were balled up into his shirt, and her petite frame was curled up close for warmth. Swallowing back the desire that was building in his blood, Saeyoung pressed his lips to her forehead and did his best to not think about how lovely her fair skin would be in the moonlight, blushing to his touch. Amid the kisses they’d shared the night before, he’d caught a glimpse.

Selfishly Saeyoung’d wanted to rouse her and indulge more, but he restrained himself.

The timing was all off… Not enough to share and not the right time for more than this…

He wanted to do things right by her by getting them through this mess and properly date her and marry her before… consummating things. Another part of him was very aware of the dangers beyond the warmth of the bed they shared. Right now, could be the only time they’d have to be safe enough to enjoy the other in such a way, but there were practical considerations too. It felt too early to bring any of them up; time wasn’t a luxury he could guarantee her… Even these few moments savoring the feel of her against him and the way running his fingers through her hair made his skin tingle were ticking away time for them to get moving and for Saeran to be saved.

Vanderwood wouldn’t kill him though. There was enough for him to know that his former handler had figured out that he had the wrong twin. The agency was coming up with a plan… So there was some grace on their side.

His fingers tightened over Miyeon’s hand, giving it a light squeeze in silent acknowledgement of the promise he’d made the night before he slowly coaxed himself free. For a moment, his body couldn’t do more than sit on the edge of the bed as the ache and longing to be close to her again anchored him. Eventually, his blood calmed itself enough for him to stand. Freshening up took less than ten minutes before the hacker found himself browsing the emergency food options with one hand while checking how to prepare them on his phone.
It was true he wouldn’t be the normal boyfriend for a while, but the night before, he’d promised to care for her. He could cook if needed, although Saeyoung wasn’t terribly good at it simply from lack of experience. That was something he hoped to rectify. If they lived through this, there would be no more “secret agent” 707 or Luciel. There would be Saeyoung Choi – loving husband, devoted brother, entertaining friend, and maybe one day – doting father. In his mind the dream and hope were there, giving him the will to do what was needed. All he could guarantee was the “now”. They may only have the next few hours or days together; he wanted to make those count…

He wanted to believe they’d both make it through to the end to live the idyllic life his heart yearned for, but the pragmatic part of him had already taken efforts to handle the worst-case scenario. After the girl had gone to rest, the hacker had begun work on a “will” of sorts. He’d sent Jaehee and Jumin a basic request, essentially asking that they seize his assets in the event of his death and have them transferred to Miyeon and Saeran so that both would be provided for. The document featured some of his information to ensure the easiest possible transition, although the more detailed form of the agreement was still incomplete. It was far enough along though that Jaehee could likely finish the rest on her own. As much as he hated to dump work onto her, immediate priorities were hunger and getting back on the road.

Saeyoung was careful not to make too much noise or use too much light while preparing breakfast. After he set the table the hacker took a seat at the edge of the bed, letting his hip rest against her back. It was nice being able to look over and see her resting peacefully. The sight was one he’d gotten accustomed to over the past few days. At first, he welcomed it because it meant he wouldn’t have to talk to her and deal with uncomfortable truths. Now? It was comforting to see her feel so safe and trusting of him that she could completely relax. She did seem to sleep often. Maybe it was the drug Saeran had given her before lingering in her system. Then again, he was so divorced from a normal sleep schedule that his point of reference was off… A playful part of him wanted to startle her awake to see how cute her surprised expression could be, but instead, he chose for something much gentler. Leaning over her, Saeyoung gently kissed her cheek and gave her a little rub of the arm.

“Good morning, princess.”

Miyeon’s honey colored eyes fluttered open wearily, focusing on him.

“Morning-“ her voice trailed off with a yawn that she desperately tried to cover with her sweater.

With tender touch he smoothed the hair from her precious face. How badly he wanted to kiss her until she was red and breathless… She stretched her limbs out before curling up against him like an overgrown cat. He couldn’t help but rub her back. Under the fabric, he could feel the supple give of her skin.

“We have a little time before we need to go, so I made breakfast.”

Miyeon looked a little surprised by that, before a bit of rose filled her cheeks. As she sat up, the girl leaned against him with another covered yawn. He adored being this close to her now… He could
I see every little nuance of her thought and expression in ways a camera would never allow. Maybe when this was all done, he’d catalog them and the fifteen different ways he’d seen her smile.

“…I know I’m mess,” she pouted.

Saeyoung chuckled. Really, she had no idea of how lovely she was.

He leaned in whispering his thoughts on the matter, kissing just below her ear. It was amazing to feel her body jump at the sensation. The greedy part of him wanted to push a little further and kiss down her neck, but he restrained himself. Instead Saeyoung forced himself up onto his feet and offered the girl a hand to help her up. Her cheeks were a dark peachy pink now, despite her attempts to cover it. After a moment, she raised her hand to his and they walked hand in hand to the table.

It wasn’t a glamorous breakfast, but there was coffee, crepes, and steamed egg.

Miyeon gave him a little smile assuring him that all was well, or at least she was opting to be polite.

“So… Shall we do the ritual?”

The girl blinked, a little confused.

“Look in my eyes and say those words… Then a hug and a kiss.”

“Are you sure? I haven’t brushed my teeth ye-“

He stole a kiss, savoring the bright honey tones in her surprised eyes before they warmed and melted into another, more confident kiss. The tingle running up his spine as her little hands cupped his face made him want to carry her back to bed… Saeyoung got as far as picking her up by the waist and giving her a little spin, before his sense of restraint led to him setting her back down. He didn’t want to let go, but the former agent eased his hold enough to look her directly in the eye while uttering:

“I love you.”

How she smiled! God it was so beautiful. The smile on her face was so pure and free of any of the sadness. The girl popped back on her toes, throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing so tight he could feel the yield of her breast against him and her dear little heart beating against his own.

“I love you too.”

Saeyoung rested his head to hers, letting their noses touch as his hands came to rest at her hips and hers on his chest. “Ah… This isn’t good. We’ll have to do it again.”
“What?”

“It was a hug then a ki-“

He felt himself hushed as her body pulled him into a tight embrace and the sweetness of her lips stifled him. It was like she was melting in his arms! Reflexively, his hand traveled up along her side cupping her face as he supported her at the waist with his other. As Miyeon eased to get a breath, he boldly deepened the kiss. Her body stiffened at first with surprise, but she didn’t resist as his tongue caressed her own. By the second pass, she was reciprocating. The pressure building in him and the sensations rippling through him were so delightful. There was no denying that she felt it too as she clung to him, her knees having gotten so very weak. Knowing that it brought her pleasure made him want to do more...

The heat from her was interrupted by the cool air as Miyeon broke the kiss to draw in a sharp breath.

“Saeyoung… I can’t breathe.”

A chuckle escaped him as he eased, running his thumb along her cheek while letting his lips press against her forehead. “You’re not supposed to hold your breath,” he teased.

“…But I sti-“

“I love you,” the hacker assured, giving her a last peck and a reaffirming smile. “I love everything about you… Really – it’s fine.”

Miyeon looked as though she wanted to object, but there was no denying the blush confirming her deeper feelings on the matter. She didn’t protest as he pulled her chair out or when he took a seat in front of her… It was probably for the best. Even that little taste of her had roused his blood again, but not enough to steal all his sense. A small prayer over breakfast felt a little tainted by the thoughts running through his head of how easy it’d be to clear the table and have her instead…

“The crepes taste better than they look,” Saeyoung assured the girl as she studied the offerings.

She almost looked a little sad as her gaze shifted across the spread.

“Do you not like it?”

“No! It’s not that,” Miyeon assured, trying to prepare a bite with shaky hands.

He studied her thoughtfully for a moment before taking a bit off his own plate and offering it to her at the end of a fork.
The bitter sweetness was replaced with a surprised blush.

“Should I feed you? I can use my mouth if you’d prefer.”

Gingerly she accepted the bite, before offering one to him in return. As silly as it was, it made him ridiculously happy. This was the sickeningly sweet sort of “couple” stuff that he hated seeing other people do. With her now though, it was almost a game. He could tell that something was still off about her, but every bite seemed to relax her out of whatever gloom had struck.

“You’re very affectionate this morning.”

“You don’t know how hard it’s been to hold all of this in,” he replied before nursing his coffee. She offered a smile, but they both knew the only person holding him back had been himself. In his denial, he’d hurt her badly.

A quiet settled over the rest of breakfast as the two of them finished the meal and tidied up. Miyeon freshened up while he packed things back into the car. Once everything was packed away, he returned to help her change the bandages on her feet and carry her personal bag out. He nearly froze in his tracks. She was wearing a pink sweater that showed her long neck and little shoulders. As he reached down to grab the handle, he noticed that the bruises were gone. His adoring gaze seemed to make her a little self-conscious, which Saeyoung eased by taking her hand as they walked out.

Soon they were settled in and he started the engine before swiftly pulling away from the cabin. It was around 6 in the morning.

Somewhere out there, his brother was waiting for him to rescue him and bring him home…

Saeyoung smiled realizing he could say such a thing now. Just a few hours away, the rest of the RFA were waking up and getting ready to start the party.

His fingers tightened in his lover’s… He had a family and soon they’d all be together.

Miyeon settled in, letting her head rest on his shoulder while he drove. Saeyoung seemed content but focused. He let her pick the music, and now and then she’d catch him softly singing along with her. It was so strange to see him so relaxed, but it was a relief. With care, the girl asked questions and was pleasantly surprised when Saeyoung opened up about where all he’d been. Although he spared her the little details, there was enough for her to piece some of it together. He’d gotten his degree in America but had worked for the agency the entire time. He’d spent time in Russia, China, tropical islands, and all over… Although it was all for work, and as a result, there hadn’t been much time for
sightseeing or a chance for him to really immerse himself in the cultures. It was clear that this bothered him, although he was clear that at the time it couldn’t have been helped.

His handler was mentioned with equal parts annoyance and affection. There was no denying the oddity of the relationship; Vanderwood didn’t seem to be a wholly terrible person. If anything, he came across to her like a curmudgeonly uncle. It was hard to believe he was any real threat to the red head aside from out of fear for himself. Even then, Saeyoung acknowledged that his handler had let him get away with a lot. He was very willing to accept that he took liberties with that too in his subtle way of rebelling.

There was no denying his genius, but that hid so much of the hard work that went into cultivating it… The dysfunction of his childhood had put him behind nearly a decade behind everyone else around him. Considering how tender the subject of Rika was, he only sparsely explained the depth of that relationship. Along with the sisters at the church, Rika had taught him how to read and write. With her help, Saeyoung hadn’t just closed that distance, he’d had gone beyond what most normal students would even attempt. It was nothing for a person to learn one other language, but he knew over a dozen. Many of them were coding languages, but he spoke a common tongue of every country he’d been to. If he did need to disappear, it wouldn’t be hard for him at all. Even now he was learning Arabic for fun.

She knew enough Mandarin to get herself in trouble and enough English to help tourists.

While his degree was in computer science, Saeyoung had also taught himself a lot about auto mechanics and robotics. Engineering came easily to him with his ability in math. It made the tragedy of his life more painful. Really, he wouldn’t have had any issue getting recruited to any of the space agencies that he loved if his life had taken a different path.

The conversation hadn’t been entirely about him.

Saeyoung had made a concerted effort to get her to share more about herself, but Miyeon did her best to redirect back onto him. It was easier to marvel at how amazing he was than to admit how much of an underachiever she was by comparison… Really, she wasn’t used to anyone caring enough to ask. To that effect, she admitted as much and was sparse on details of her own past no matter how hard he pressed. She didn’t want to think of gloomy things. If he knew how empty her life was, he’d get gloomy too…

It stung when he asked about when he should introduce himself to her family. She smiled good-naturedly while he agonized about it and joked about the things he’d do. It felt wrong to rob him of that joy when he was clearly trying to distract himself from worrying about Saeran. Although that didn’t stop him as he then more seriously pondered how to re-introduce her to Saeran… He was already planning on how to help his brother heal, which lead to him telling her a bit about the little brother he used to know.

It wasn’t hard for Miyeon to feel as though the two of them had a lot in common. Even if he was just a few minutes younger than Saeyoung, the way his brother spoke of him made him seem so much
younger. He was someone to be protected… An innocent, but gloomy boy who wanted freedom, but whose smile could be so very bright. Someone who needed only simple things to be happy… Simple things like ice cream and sunshine. He was locked away in despair and tormented more than Saeyoung, despite his best efforts to draw attention away from his weaker twin. He would trade places with him until the point came where their mother could tell them apart.

Even though they shared a face, one was taller, and one was thinner…

The way Saeyoung expressed relief that his twin had grown up strong and able to move freely was bittersweet. That very same strength had held her down and caused her so much pain. He seemed to recognize that, and his voice ebbed before he tried to make excuses that ultimately lead to quiet.

Miyeon merely squeezed his hand and assured him that it wasn’t his fault…

Mint Eye and his mother had twisted Saeran into the man that’d hurt her.

Unlike her, Saeyoung could save his brother.

Now and then he’d hold her hand back, when it wasn’t on the clutch to change gears.

It was late afternoon when the scent of the air changed and Saeyoung’s manner lightened as catbot’s GPS mentioned the change of roadway. A restlessness stirred in Miyeon that wasn’t helped by the hacker pulling into a gas station to refill and then fiddle with a few switches. Was there danger? Her feelings only intensified as he reached over her to hit a latch before hitting a lever on his own side. Before she could ask, the roof of the car began to peel back, letting warm sunshine and fresh air in. It was so bright and the aroma on the breeze made her so anxious!

As she watched in wonder, his hands gently began to smooth back her hair, pulling the stray strands from around her shoulders back and tying them with a deep, scarlet bow.

“There we go,” he stated, seemingly pleased with himself. “Hold on!”

Miyeon’s fingers felt the softness of the ribbon but let out a squeak of surprise as they peeled out of the gas station. Speed sent the wind rushing past her, making the strands of her dark hair lift with the breeze. The ground seemed to drop as they curved around winding roads. They were flying!

“Look!” Saeyoung urged.

She opened her fingers enough to peek out… Just above the treeline there was nothing but blue, but it wasn’t the sky! Beautiful sparkling tropical blue. As they came around a curve, the sky seemed rest on a bed of crystal just over her shoulder. It was getting closer with each curve. She couldn’t take her eyes away.
“It’s the ocean!” the girl repeated softly and excitedly.

Every twist down brought them closer until they were right over the coast. She could see the waves forming and could imagine the salty spray making its way up the cliffside. It was so close! As the car came to a stop, it took every ounce of self-control she had to not leap from the seat. They stopped at a small overlook. For several moments she able to admire the sight before her sense of reason came back as she realized Saeyoung had stepped out of the car. Slowly he made it around the back before coming to rest on her side of the vehicle. They both looked out at the sea for a moment before her wonder eased at seeing his serious expression. He glanced down at her before putting in an earbud with a microphone.

*Initializing infiltration attempt... I* – a female robotic voice passively announced.

*Mic check... Complete.*

“Mic on,” the hacker’s voice ordered.

His voice was level and calm, but she could tell he was tense.

*Mic on. Please record after the beep.*

“Ah-ah. Is everyone alright? This is agent Seven-Zero-Seven! I’m still alive. Surprising, huh?”

There was a moment, but even Miyeon could see the lines of text rapidly moving across his screen.

“Seeing as the server’s going crazy, I guess you guys can hear my voice. Listen carefully, because this isn’t a joke – this is a warning. As I’m sure you’ve all heard, the person that “Mary Vanderwood the 3rd” has in custody isn’t me. To confirm, this is agency code 707-Extreme – the same who worked with client G-Race 64.3 months ago. Oh – and the boss’s hair is a wig.”

The text was going by so fast she couldn’t even make a word of it out.

“Now that you know it’s me… Vanderwood – if you harm a hair on the body of that captive – I will release all of the information about the agency that I’ve gathered over these past few days including those particularly juicy details that I took last night and release them to the media. That includes the names and personal contacts of you agents as well as the powerful people up top. And you guys on the server right now? Make sure Vanderwood knows this: Keep that boy safe. I’ll be there soon.”

*Mic off.*
The screen changed back to a more normal background before Saeyoung hit a few buttons, and seemingly putting the laptop into another program. He closed the cover and set it behind Miyeon.

“Well… That’s over for now. Don’t worry, I wasn’t in long enough to get traced.”

“Saeyoung.”

“Everything is going to be okay. That reminds me!”

He offered a gentle smile as he opened the car door and reached over her to turn the radio on.

“We should be able to pick up the RFA party signal from here,” he soothed, helping her out before turning his attention to the sea.

For a moment, they sat with their backs against the car watching the waves below them and the vibrant blue that seemed to go on forever. There was lovely music playing. She recognized the selection and the vibrance of the violin as the young woman she and Zen had chosen to be on the line up. The woman had such a lively way with melodies. If the girl recalled, the performer was an up and coming talent named Siobhan. It felt like so long ago since that day. That attempt at a kiss was a memory buried under the many she’d shared with Saeyoung over just the past few hours...

“I’m sorry that we weren’t able to make it.”

“It’s okay. I’ve never been much for crowds. I probably would’ve hidden in a corner somewhere,” the girl laughed.

Saeyoung gently rested a hand on her waist before taking one of her hands into his own.

“You know… I daydreamed about the first time we’d meet at the party at lot. I kept imagining all the things I could say or little tricks I could play on you, so you’d never forget that moment. I was going to try to sneak a peek at your dress so we could be a cute matching couple. Maybe scare Zen off with Longcat so you wouldn’t fall for him first. Then I’d ask you to dance so everyone could see what a cute couple we were, then ask you out... But like I said, nothing works out the way I want it to.”

“I don’t think you ever officially asked me out,” she teased.

“Running away together isn’t a date?”

She shook her head.

“But we’ve had dinner together a few times. We went camping. We’ve slept together – like in the
same bed – not the other thing,” he finished, looking a little sheepish.

“And I get to see the ocean for the very first time… With the guy I like.”

He feigned surprise. “You-you like me?”

Miyeon covered her mouth as if it were something she hadn’t meant to slip.

“It’s okay – I like you too,” he crooned, wrapping his arms around her.

“You know… It’s not too late to make some of that dream come true.”

Miyeon raised her chin to the radio; his eyes softened with an understanding.

He kissed her knuckles again before leading her into a slow dance and felt as he began to sway. She stepped on his toes at first, but he continued with care before he gave her a playful little spin and dip. A surprised laugh escaped as she reflexively clung to him. As Miyeon caught her breath, he pulled her in close again. Gradually her steps grew steadier and in time with his. The both chuckled at the silliness of dancing on the roadside to the radio.

“Catbot – capture the last 30 seconds,” Saeyoung called out.

“Affirmeow!”

Miyeon felt her cheeks grow hot as they finished their dance. Within a moment, Saeyoung had a full video file of the two of them doing a little waltz with the sea behind them…

“Look at how cute those two are together!” he announced, pretending to be a guest, before going off onto an imitation of Zen being jealous before his allergies kicked in and Jaehee fussing … All while holding his phone to where she could see the clip before he changed his phone’s background one still from the clip of the two of them together.

In it, they both looked so carefree. The sun danced off their skin and shimmered across the topaz sea. Their smiles were so broad and pure… One would think they were just a happy young couple on a honeymoon. It was beautiful, and for once, Miyeon could see loveliness in herself, but the realization of just how ephemeral it could all be began to drag her back down.

…Happy with her in the sun. If he didn’t survive… That’s how he wanted to be remembered.

Her throat tightened with dread as the familiar agony of loss robbed her of any speech or laughter. She clung to him, hiding her face against his chest as he shared the clip to the RFA chat with a
message to the effect of how they’d get to dance at the party for real next year. He was being so cheerful, but it was becoming clear that he hadn’t been talking about the future with any real detail.

The music stopped and after a moment Jumin’s voice broke through loud and clear to give a speech. Miyeon couldn’t focus on a word he said as she desperately focused on the sound of the hacker’s heart beating. That was... Until the chest supporting her rose with a breath and a sigh from Saeyoung.

“We’re very proud of them... The RFA will always lead the way in facing uncomfortable truths.”

“H-he said my name...” Saeyoung uttered softly, his hand squeezing hers.

Looking up, she could see the sad smile on his face before he tried to brighten up. “Sorry! I just... I know you worked really hard on the party...”

Liar...

“Let’s return to the RFA as soon as we finish this... And with the truth, the RFA will be reborn.”

The girl nestled against him.

“...And at the next party, we’ll be together and Saeran... He’ll be there too. He’s still alive; I can feel it. Once we find him and save him – I promise it’ll be the last time our family will be in danger like this.”

He couldn’t promise that... Especially if his father was really the scary person who lead V to hiding him away in an intelligence agency. Where could they possibly be safe from someone that affluent? There was no hiding the gloom in her expression.

A soft, pained sound escaped him before his arms tightened around her. “Remember how I told you that I wasn’t sure which part of me was in love with you?”

The girl raised her chin to meet his gaze.

“They say that everyone three faces that they show to the world... For me those were 707, Luciel, and... well Saeyoung. 707 was my happiest self that you fell for in chat; although that isn’t the real me... Then there was Luciel. He was born of a false hope given to a desperate child by V, a name given to remind me not to become a fallen angel... And Saeyoung... It’s the name I was given at birth and that I wore during the darkest times in my life. It was the name my mother would scream at me – one that made me tremble to hear it called... The name my brother would call out to me. For a name whose meaning is “Great Hero”, it seemed to only bring me sorrow...”
“…I’m sorry.”

“No – please. I want you to keep calling me Saeyoung.” He lifted her chin to gaze deeply into her eyes. “My heart… has been yours for a long time now. As unhappy as those times were, I was my truest self with that name. That’s why I want you to have it. It’s a promise that I will always be honest to you, and when you call my name it’ll be reborn as a name that brings me joy. Miyeon - with you, I can be a truly happy “Saeyoung”. I’ll prove it to you.”

His lips pressed to hers tenderly, as the tears welled up in her eyes.

“Then promise me that you won’t die for me, Saeyoung,” she murmured as their lips parted. “Promise me we’ll get home and make lots of happy memories together.”

A pained expression crossed his face before the red head pulled her back into his arms, gently stroking her hair.

“…My Miyeon…” he soothed, nestling against her.

“Promise me, Saeyoung.”

“…I’ll live for you as long as I can, my hope – my brightness. I promise.”
Chapter 27:

Knock… knock…

Vanderwood nearly jumped out of his skin and scurried for his gun before readying himself. Being half naked from taking a nap, he wasn’t exactly primed for battle. There was no backup. For now it was just him was with 707’s twin brother who was handcuffed to the radiator in the bathroom. After 707’s hacking into the chat, only the boss knew where he was – Vanderwood thought… Considering his own mistake and the nature of the people he worked for, that might’ve been a mistake.

He focused on the door as the lock was easily picked leaving only a series of chains, with a pale hand being held up in a show of peace.

“I’m not here to collect,” the familiar voice soothed warmly. “I just have a few questions for Mary Vanderwood the 3rd about a certain bit of lost property.”

Weapon in hand, Vanderwood drew closer to confirm the identity of his unexpected visitor.

Ophelia was a weird dude, but not in the way Seven was… By all accounts, the young man was polite, efficient, and unassuming behind a pleasing face. That was the problem though. He blended in too nicely. Like death itself, Ophelia could be anywhere, was equally unexpected, and could be just as gentle or brutal as needed to get the job done.

The handsome face smiled at him gently.

“Rest assured, I plan on leaving you and that boy alive when I go. I just have a few questions for an old friend then I’ll be on my way.”

If there was a contract on Vanderwood too, he wouldn’t have even heard his voice. Or maybe it was a ploy…

“You got 5 minutes,” the agent answered, lowering the chains and keeping his sights on Ophelia.

As the young man entered and stepped deeper into the safehouse, his amber eyes traveled along the length of agent’s form… Particularly focusing on the bite marks on his shoulder. There was a knowing grin on the other man’s lips that seemed to infer something more inappropriate going on than what had already. The blush it gave Vanderwood was uncomfortable, but enough to make the sinister form before him chuckle. It gave him the creeps…

“I’m surprised you’re so fit for someone whose been sitting with that kid playing maid the past few years. Also still using 707’s sportscar? It’s a wonder you haven’t been found already.”

The agent shifted uncomfortably under his skin but didn’t lower his gun as he refastened the locks.
“Hey, it’s so overt it’s covert – okay? Look, did you just come here to lecture me?”

“No. I’m certain your superiors will do that in the way they’re accustomed,” his tone took on a distinct note of distaste. “It’s a shame. If you cleaned yourself up a little, with your skill set, you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Not sure how to take that coming from you.”

The handsome young man acknowledged with another smile before shaking his head with its dark wavy hair. “It’s a fair assessment of your value… Killing you would be a waste, and as I said, that’s not why I’m here so you can relax a little.”

Vanderwood lowered his weapon a little but kept his eye on the hitman as he gave a cursory look around. It was clear he wasn’t enjoying the smell of stale cigarette smoke, but it had been a particularly stressful couple of days. The agent followed the hitman as he made a quick tour of the house before stopping in front of the bathroom with a raised brow.

“The bathroom, Marion… Really?”

“What? It’s efficient and he was struggling.”

The other agent shook his head before opening the door. Saeran was handcuffed to the radiator and his mouth covered with duct tape. He’d gone from thrashing to the uncomfortable sort of stillness that often came with scheming and someone that had a plan. If he really was Seven’s identical twin, that likely meant he was a genius too. Unlike the other redhead, who at most could be a bit defiant, this one was certainly more likely to be physically violent. Vanderwood still had scratches, bruises, and bite marks. It’d been a long time since he’d had to restrain someone like that…

Ophelia stepped over the boy’s legs before kneeling. To Vanderwood’s surprise the boy’s eyes widened before the usual scowl returned. The hitman’s soft pale hands lifted the young man’s chin in a way that was so very gentle, despite the clear resistance to it. Vanderwood couldn’t help but feel vulnerable and want to cover up his half naked body… The best he could do was cross his arms over his bare chest. It’d been just a short nap after all that driving, but he’d be getting back on the road soon. Especially if this guy had found them… That was - once he figured out where to run to. The boss hadn’t given him any orders since he last confirmed his location, which wasn’t a good sign. Maybe he was mad about Seven revealing the whole wig thing.

Vanderwood reached into his pocket for a cigarette and lit up while watching Ophelia study the boy. As he let out the first big puff, the hitman’s amber eyes leveled at him with disgust before returning to the growling twin.

“…So you’re Saeran,” Ophelia murmured, still holding the hacker’s chin up. “You do all of that bitter little girl’s work for her, and she’s not even looking for you right now. Did you know that?”

Saeran was glaring daggers at him.

“Do you think it’s because she has faith in you or is it because she already has what she wants… It’s a pity she uses you so poorly. Yet there’s someone out there who wants you so very badly that he’s willing to get himself and an innocent girl killed just to get you back.”

There was no response.

“I do a little hacking myself,” the wavy-haired man noted as though it were a hobby he dabbled in. “I saw the bruises you put on that girl…”
Watching quietly, Vanderwood took another puff of his cigarette before both bodies erupted with activity. The wiry boy in the leather jacket wriggled desperately, as the hitman straddled his legs and pinned him up against the tile wall.

“Hey!”

“I heard plans you had for her... “Happy family” was it? Maybe I should remind you what it’s like to be truly powerless, Saeran Choi…”

Seven’s brother’s legs kicked futilely as the other man subdued him, deadly calm. His hands were pulled to the right by their cuffs and how they were chained, while his face was being cupped to force him to look the assailant in the eye. The hacker’s green eyes were wide with fear and rage as he moved to try to get any leverage to no avail as the hitman kissed the duct tape over his lips. The positioning of their bodies was almost erotic, it felt so very wrong. He had to step in!

“Hey!” Vanderwood cried out again reaching for the man’s shoulder to pull him off his captive. “Dude, cut it out!”

He didn’t budge… For such a sleekly built guy, Ophelia was deceptively strong!

The hitman leaned in, whispered something in Saeran’s ear almost as if it were a secret between lovers. Then as if nothing happened at all, the assassin stood up and straightened his tie.

Green eyes focused on the hitman as though he were in shock… To be fair Vanderwood wasn’t sure what just happened either.

“What the hell?! Seven said-” the agent’s voice faltered.

Ophelia was already walking out of the bathroom and plopping onto the couch to straighten himself like a cat that had mussed its fur after harassing a mouse.

“You know what happens if Seven sees he was hurt right?”

The hitman leveled a glare at him that sent a chill through him. An unsteady silence followed until the young man bade him to sit. Shaken and with his cigarette dangling from his lip, Vanderwood obeyed, feeling the leather stick to the thin layer of sweat on his back.

“I didn’t hurt him. I just needed to make a point in a language he understands.”

“What does that mean?”

Ophelia lightly touched his fingers to his lips before taking a gun out from his breast pocket, which he began to clean. “…What sort of person is 707-Extreme?”

The agent’s throat tightened. He’d messed up… He’d really messed up. They were all going to be eliminated with not even a scrap left. May as well go out like a man.

“I’m not answering until you tell me what the fuck just happened.”

“… Did you really look at the security footage from the apartment on his computer?”

“I did.”

“So, the girl that you neglected to mention in your reports… You saw what Luciel’s brother did to her on his feed before he wiped it?”
“…Yeah, but I mean… He got there before anything really bad happened.”

“Did he really though? If it weren’t for that boy there wouldn’t be a contract out on the both of you.”

Vanderwood quieted.

“His interference with that RFA that you kept quiet about… And then that girl who you also neglected to mention. I need to know, Vanderwood. Is that girl the reason his productivity dropped and why he ran away?”

The agent swallowed hard. Technically, it was Seven’s obsession with her that lead him to leave. She couldn’t be blamed for him being an idiot. He’d warned Seven about how they were bombs… It wasn’t a matter of if – but when they blew up. Everyone and everything they loved would be taken with them. He warned him, he tried to-…

Ophelia continued cleaning his gun. “Answer my question, Marion.”

“It’s not her fault. He just got fixated on her and-“

“That’s a yes…” the hitman finished for him, clicking a pin back into place.

“Well… Yeah, but-“

“Now tell me…What sort of person is Seven? Really.”

“He used to be really diligent and obedient,” the agent grumbled almost defending the kid. Nervously he rubbed the back of his head, further mussing up his long hair. “You already know he’s a genius – one of the best.”

“So… He can be hardworking when he’s motivated. Do you think Seven would hurt that girl like his brother did? Would you say he’s reactive or short tempered?”

“Seven? No… He isn’t that kind of guy. He’s usually pretty calm and level headed until now.”

“Does he drink or do drugs?”

“No… His mom was a drunk; he hates the stuff. I mean that’s part of why he even joined the Agency.”

“Does he have a lot of romantic partners?”

“No. He’s never had anyone like that before. He works most of the time- or at least used to. Now he just stays in the house making a mess, tinkering with his cars, or playing with toys and video games like a damn kid. I did my best to warn him… You know we’re like bombs. I tried to tell him that getting involved meant that other people would get hurt.”

“So, she’s the first girl he’s ever shown interest in…”

“Look, dude… Please don’t get that girl any more involved. She has nothing to do with any of this.”

There was silence except for the rhythmic clicking of the hitman putting his gun back in order.

Vanderwood bit his lip.

“I am feeling a bit generous. Let’s be perfectly honest with each other, as men. If things go the way the people signing my check want, there isn’t going to be an “Agency”. The order is to burn the
whole operation to the ground and salt the Earth to make a point about making a certain interest group very unhappy. That includes you, Seven, his twin, those hackers at “the farm”, the operatives abroad, any potential leaks, the “boss”, and sadly that girl… Right now, I have a contract to be carried out for the recapture and extermination for the both of you to the tune of 15 some odd 9 zeros worth of won with additional earnings based upon each head I take from your little “Agency”.

“Seriously!?”

“Seriously,” Ophelia answered, mimicking Vanderwood’s voice. “Maybe I’m getting a bit sentimental, but there’s a code of honor among men like us. And I happen to owe that hacker of yours a favor. I would say now is a good time to cash it in on his behalf. Wouldn’t you?”

“Like… How?”

“I can be the fairy godfather, you can be puss n boots, and together we can help the prince and princess have their happy ending. You get a new life – Seven gets his.”

“… By killing a bunch of people.”

“‘Killing a bunch’ isn’t my style, but I can’t deny that a few well-placed bullets can solve a lot of problems. Thing is, you’re too soft to do what needs to be done here. You’ve always hesitated to pull the trigger, Marion. That’s why you got stuck babysitting that scrawny fifteen-year-old years ago. You’re not a murderer, you’re a body guard at best. I mean that boy’s dad still hasn’t figured out where he is because of you, right?”

He wasn’t wrong.

“What are you wanting me to do? Just like, turn my back on the Agency and reach out to Seven? He doesn’t trust me now.”

“It’s basic economics. You have what he wants, and he has services you need. I don’t see the problem there.”

“So, you’re saying I should let him catch me and “talk it out?””

“Not too soon. But eventually. The main problem is negotiating the trade and keeping the act up enough for the Agency to not catch on too quick. You guys can get a head start and when the other agents catch on – I can make your escape considerably easier.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“We’re having this conversation,” Ophelia answered as if it were as simple of a choice as whether one wanted milk or sugar in their coffee.

“No way it’s that easy. What are you really getting out of this?”

“I told you, it’s a favor.”

“To Seven.”

“Are you not happy being a beneficiary of my goodwill?” Ophelia asked.

“No! I’m not ungrateful or anything. It just… It feels too good to be true, which means that it probably is.”

The wavy-haired man stood with a sigh before tossing Vanderwood a small device.
“What’s this? A bug?”

“Whatever you decide, I’ve reworked it to have a direct line in to me. No “boss” – No Agency,” the hitman stated. “When you meet Seven, I can track where you are and hear what you say. May I recommend those mountains? It’ll make it much easier for me and will give you guys a bit of cover.”

“…What if I decide not to go along with this?” Vanderwood asked, while the hit man stopped by the door.

“Then I promise to make your and Seven’s deaths a quick easy shot to the brain before those thugs skin, violate, and vivisect you alive in a red room to make example of the both of you.”

“And what about that girl?”

“…Just worry about yourself. You have three days. I suggest you keep the chase up, because if I’m here now, it won’t take long for other freelancers to figure it out. Oh... And not a word to anyone about this little arrangement.”

Before the agent could pry further, the door was shut leaving him with the weight of the bug in his hand so very heavy with its implications.
Chapter 28:

Miyeon had gotten so used to the wind blowing through her hair, that it was a bit of a surprise when they pulled into beach resort late in the afternoon. She didn’t question his motives considering as it was clear he was reaching the limit of his stamina for the day. After checking in, moving in a few bags, and giving catbot instructions, he dramatically flopped onto the bed closest to the wall. The girl chuckled, at first thinking he was being cute, before he took off his glasses and a small groan escaped him as he tried to stretch his shoulders. Shortly after, he undid the first few buttons of his flannel shirt to keep it from binding up at his neck.

He really was that tired...

Quietly, the girl sat on the same bed as him, resting her back to the head board, before she patted her thigh.

The dark circles under his eyes only served to highlight his confusion.

“If you’re sore, I can pet you a little,” she offered, giving her leg another beckoning pat.

Saeyoung mulled it over, looking almost worried before she felt the bed sink as he padded over to her. After a last look, quietly asking if it was okay, he carefully laid his head on her lap. With slow motions, the girl smoothed over his hair and scratched his scalp with just the tips of her nails before working down along his shoulders. There was no denying the shudder of pleasure that rippled through him. It didn’t take long before he was completely loose, with his arm draped heavily over her legs.

The happiness in her heart in that moment…

He trusted her.

He really, truly trusted her.

A twinge of self-consciousness occurred to her but faded at just how content he looked. For just a little he seemed to doze off before nestling into her with a deep sigh. The way he went limp as she lightly scratched between his shoulders spoke volumes, so the girl continued, breaking now and then to the back of his neck.
“You remind me a little of Sebastian,” she noted softly.

“…Sebastian?”

“He was my cat growing up.”

The hacker gazed at her curiously.

“He loved having his shoulders and ears rubbed. He used to fall asleep in my arms and purr so loud—”

Saeyoung propped himself up a little, to where his body was half over hers. There was an unspoken thought in his eyes that made the woman in her eager but afraid at the same time. The tension in her body shot up as the heat from him drew so very close.

“…That sounds really good. I think we should try that,” he observed in a low whisper, his breath hot at her neck.

She felt as though she might die…

As Miyeon froze, he laid his head against her chest. It was hard not to blush as the weight of his head came to rest at her breast. Her heart raced with the prospect of him doing much more… He was so tangled up in her now, with his hand against her bare waist from where her sweater had raised up some in the movement. Thankfully, Saeyoung seemed content for that degree of contact between their bare skin. The tender skin of her belly was so very sensitive to the textures of his fingertips.

“Your arm isn’t hurting is it?” he asked having used a pillow to help take the pressure off.

She hummed an affirmation.

This seemed to please him enough for him to settle in.

It was strange how different holding him like this made her feel. He felt so very vulnerable… All the same, it made her want to keep soothing him. Now and then she’d tickle him while stroking his face or hair judging by the little ways he’d move or breathe. His ears seemed particularly sensitive. They both dozed until the red of the room told of how sunset drew closer.

Eventually Saeyoung shifted himself up a bit more to where they lay side by side. Miyeon was content to keep napping with him, until she felt the weight on the bed change. He studied her for a great, propping himself up with one arm while his free hand held hers. There was no need for her to ask what was on his mind, as he could read her as well as she could him by now…

“I thought we could rest here for a little and take a walk on the shore before we got moving again. We can’t make sand castles or do the other stuff people do, but… It felt wrong to bring you all this way for you to see the ocean without letting you at least put a toe in.”

Miyeon reached out to stroke his face, which he accepted with a nuzzle and kiss against her palm. His lips were so very soft warm…

“That can wait a little. You’re still tired, right?”

“Yeah… Before we leave though, I promise.”
His long fingers stretched hers out along his own before interlacing them.

She chuckled. “That tickles!”

A weary, but mischievous smile crossed his lips.

Before she could react, her body was convulsing, and a squeal erupted from her as the hacker saw the opening and went for it. Her body balled up into a laughing, pleading mess as he continued tickling her sides. As he paused to tease her and snap a picture, she went on the offensive, getting a surprised gurgle from him and yelp, before the two of them practically ended up in the floor in his failed attempt to escape. He’d broken her fall but was breathlessly laughing and pleading for mercy until Miyeon found herself straddling his belly and pinning his hands up to where he couldn’t use his phone.

The girl froze once she realized the compromising position by the way his hips shifted under her. His eyes were wide before he eased himself up to where they sat breast to breast… She was on his lap! As if she’d sprung a trap, his arms wrapped around her waist and their lips met. There was a bashful chuckle between them before another kiss followed. This continued until the laughter stopped and was replaced with the quiet ministrations of lovers.

It was amazing…!

Each meeting of the lips seemed to only intensify the sensations. His touch was cautious with little glances from under his red lashes conveying a want for permission before pushing her farther. She met each with a kiss and affirmation by matching his motions. It was such a delightful craving that Miyeon hadn’t felt… The flavor of him, the scent of him! Just how wonderful the firm body between her thighs was. For someone so slender, he was quite strong. The way he gripped and helped support her hips made her quiver to the point she couldn’t contain herself. Something in her ached to be closer and yet felt so exposed… Even with the tights under her skirt, there was no denying the source of the growing pressure just below the most tender parts of her. The coarse texture of his jeans was so very unpleasant… Her concern was then for him.

No doubt the restraint was hurting him. Should she loosen it? Was it proper to? Would he want to do more? She wasn’t ready for more, but another part of her was so very eager. The burning tightness in her screamed to go ahead so there could be something to relieve the pressure… But… It wasn’t a good time! It really wasn’t —Oh god…!

It was all she could to cling to him until she felt his lips against the nape of her neck. Reflexively Miyeon felt her head tip back, beckoning for more of that sensation. She couldn’t speak! But he seemed to read this message well enough… There was a gratifying pain as his teeth grazed her skin. A small cry escaped her, as her spine went rigid with pleasure. Saeyoung’s hot breath soon cooled the spot before the heat of his tongue lovingly lapped at his handiwork. Then a gentle bite… Her hips rolled, making him let out a throaty breath before another tender bite followed just a little higher. It wasn’t enough to leave a mark, but it didn’t take much for the sensation to echo through her.

That part of him was pressing so insistently against her now…

As she looked down, torn in how to proceed, Saeyoung met her with another kiss. Then the pressure across her chest suddenly released…! The hacker’s hands slipped up further under her sweater and came to rest along the sensitive skin of her ribs. It felt good but… It felt wrong — rather it was going too fast! She wasn’t ready! The girl’s hands moved to his forearms.

To her relief, he stopped – immediately. She expected there to be anger or confusion, but
he looked more concerned.

“S-sorry…” she murmured, catching her breath. “I just-“.

His eyes softened before arms wrapped around her in a loving embrace.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to explain,” Saeyoung assured her before loosening his hold and giving her a glance over to make sure she was okay.

A gentle nuzzle followed, before Miyeon realized how uncomfortable he must be with the part of her that was meant to join with him pressing against him like this. In a way, she felt responsible to relieve the tension although the girl wasn’t entirely sure how she wanted to do so. It would be easy enough to simply get off him, but the seductress in her wasn’t entirely satisfied. Miyeon could feel his pulse through the cloth, which meant it must’ve been absolute torture for him. She wasn’t fulfilled either. For days she’d been so close to him… The kissing was nice, but there was no denying that she’d not been able to really “relieve” herself in that way. Neither had he.

There were so many questions she wanted to ask. Things they really ought to have talked to about before this moment. There hadn’t really been time, and now wasn’t really a good time to start. Ultimately only two questions really mattered in her mind.

The first was easy enough to answer. He had stopped when she asked. She could trust him.

The second was just how far was she ready to go? She wasn’t ready to part with her chastity just yet… But that didn’t mean she was opposed to feeling more. If they were really in such danger, she didn’t want to go without experiencing those sensations…

“Saeyoung…” She could feel his head turn and nestle against her as a sign of having his attention. “I don’t want to stop… I just don’t think I’m ready to do – that – yet… But I want to do more!”

He leaned back to study her for a moment, letting his back rest against one of the bed’s they’d tumbled between while she winced in pleasure as the most invasive part of him shifted. It was hard to not notice the way her skirt lifted… The girl nervously tucked her hair behind her ear before feeling Saeyoung’s legs, wrapped in blue jeans, slip out from under her. She wanted to object until he unsteadily raised himself just enough to sit on the bed, the full extent of his “situation” very clear and at eye level.

She watched as he then moved his glasses from their precarious spot tangled in rumpled sheets on the edge of the bed to the nightstand. He then patted the space beside him, which Miyeon tried to get to, only to find her knees felt so very weak… Thankfully he helped her up.

A moment of quite followed where Miyeon was sure she’d said something wrong until he began to remove his shirt. Her heart felt as though it were going to pop out of her chest. There was no denying how bashful he seemed to look as he peeled the cloth away from him… But her eyes couldn’t help but take in just how very developed his body was. It was one thing to feel it, but something else to see. His muscles glided so smoothly under his skin, each defined. There were no tattoos, but there were scars along the otherwise pale flesh. She felt so giddy, until the realization of where his scars originated from occurred to her.

Quietly he folded his shirt and offered a coy side glance to her.

“I hated the martial arts and physical training the agency made me go through…
But seeing your face just now made it all worthwhile.”

Miyeon looked away, red as a cherry as he chuckled at her.

“I-I wasn’t st-a”

“You were,” he teased. “But that’s okay. I want you to look. You know, my heart isn’t the only thing that’s yours…”

The girl bit her lip, as a shudder of excitement reverberated through her. His manner seemed to change, becoming a little more assertive.

“Since I can’t just hack into your brain. Let’s do a little experiment to see just how much “more” subject Miyeon can take,” he purred, leaning a little closer to her.

“…L-like a game?” she asked feeling the intensity of him stealing her breath as her body quite naturally yielded as he eased her onto her back with the mere power of suggestion behind his golden eyes.

A wicked little smile crossed his lips. “Like a game.”

“Have you done anything like this before?” the girl asked, looking away as he stretched out alongside her. “With anyone else…?”

His sensuous tone ebbed to one that was sweet as honey and sincere. “You’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to do things like this with, Miyeon.” He guided her hand to his breast, pressing her hand hard into him so she could feel the cruxafix underneath. “I have my limits too.”

That was reassuring…

“…No one else?”

Tenderly he buried his face against her neck and pressed his knee between hers. Her back arched at the sensation, allowing him to slip an arm up under her, to where he could pull her snuggly against him. That was enough to draw a jerk and small mewl from her. Then his lips pressed just below her ear.

“…You are - my one and only darling…” he crooned, curling her fingers over his freehand guiding the both to her exposed belly. It was very clear what his intentions were… He wanted her to move his hands to where he could touch. “Now, show me… How should I love you?”

She fidgeted and gripped his hand… It was so tempting to not hold back, but she didn’t want to seem too eager. There was a strange fear that he’d reject her if she seemed too enthusiastic.

“It’s just… Embarrassing…”

“You don’t need to feel embarrassed… I’ve already seen your search history, remember? You can be as greedy as you like,” his tone was quite devious. Miyeon’s legs tightened around his thigh as he pinned her wrists above her head with just enough pressure to excite her… It wasn’t forceful or harsh… A shuddering breath escaped her, at the thought of him doing such lewd things to her.

“You’re so cute.”

The intensity of the kiss that followed made her want to melt! His tongue was like a flicker
of flame teasing her… And the way he stretched her body made that part of him grind against her…!

“I can be that sort of man if you want. Should I tie you up and mess with you as much as I like?”

Yes! But… no…- her body and mind were dueling for control.

Her voice was meek as she resisted just a little, pressing her chest against his as she wriggled, “I want to touch you…”

He eased his grip and brought her hand back down to his lips, kissing each knuckle before nuzzling against her fingers. Miyeon stroked his face before gathering the courage to caress his neck and then down to his chest… Lovingly, he kissed her cheek, then lower down her neck as her fingers traced to his belly. The muscles tensed at her touch. His skin was warm and smooth. Feeling a little bolder, Miyeon grazed his neck with her teeth. He rolled into her hard, as the heat of his breath flowed along her breast, although her sweater dulled the sensation… For several moments, they seemed to match the other’s motions with slow strokes along the other’s sides. There was a beautiful rhythm to it all. She’d rise into him just as he’d lower against her… Yet Miyeon couldn’t fully enjoy it.

She wanted to feel Saeyoung…

A soft frustrated whine escaped her throat, before she propped herself up a little. The hacker eased back to let her up, but his eyes widened as she began to lift her sweater. He quickly looked away quickly, the mask of experienced over dropping to reveal the real man beneath. The heat that had been building in her felt a little relieved as the air met the bare skin of her back. To her surprise, he didn’t help her pull the garment free, rather he lay back and kept his gaze averted.

…He needed… Wanted her permission.

The girl carefully stripped down to just her panties, making a very clear visual demonstration of what he could touch. It occurred to her that today was not the day to wear the strawberry patterned ones…

As she lay back down, he kept his eyes on her face, daring not to look lower. Miyeon cuddled up against him, savoring the feel of his skin against her own with no barriers between them. There was no denying how much better it felt.

“Miyeon…”

She smiled innocently before guiding his hand to her skin.

“Anything the light touches - you can touch.”

He gradually relaxed, letting his fingers trace along her bare shoulder before the broad of his hand traveled along the uninterrupted trail of her spine.

“Anything?” he asked.

“…And maybe some things it doesn’t…” she answered nervously. “…Just not under the cloth.”

His hand trailed down until she felt the heat of it along her backside. How desperately she wanted him to just rip it off! Was it too late to change the rule? No… This was what she was comfortable with. If she wasn’t, all she had to do was ask him to stop, and he would.
Saeyoung was already experimenting on just how sincere she was with a leisurely caress of her thigh and rump. He then began to squeeze with gradually increasing intensity before letting his fingers trace teasing little vines along her thigh.

“…So, I can do this?”

She nodded again, biting her lip.

As he brought his attentions back upwards, he grazed the mound of her desire so very lightly as Miyeon rolled to her back. He grew a little bolder drawing wide curls along her bare belly and inner most thighs, then slipped under her arms, along her ribs, and then with a languorous motion, Saeyoung cupped her breast. She gradually relaxed as he massaged the mound, letting her hands drop to his waist so he could fully gaze upon her.

He was being so very gentle…

Miyeon buckled a little as he slowly rolled the hardening pink bud between his finger and thumb. He was being considerate in how he went about it, but it was the first time anyone had ever touched her like that… It was on the cusp of pain, but decidedly more pleasurable at just how intensely she felt it. A small yelp escaped her as the heat of his mouth followed. Her nails dug into his back as Saeyoung began to nurse at her breast. Such sweet torture that cross necklace brought her as it danced along her skin! Her body curled into a ball as he continued, pausing now and then to caress the delicate bit with his tongue before continuing to the other side. When she could finally bring herself to look down… He looked so content. Miyeon’s fingers stroked his hair until his lips parted, letting the cool air tease her. Her entire body was more sensitive as he embraced her to indulge another deep kiss.

She practically writhed as their bodies interwound, with his hands boldly exploring every inch of her bare body. Her back arched and a small mewl escaped her as his fingers pressed against the most tender part of her through the cloth as he gripped her bottom. Miyeon kissed his chest and dug her nails into his back as his coarse fingers ran along the back of her thighs. Then the heat of his hands ran the full length down to her knees he soothed her with loving kisses. These tender ministrations broke as a gasp escaped her…

Outside the cloth…!

His fingers pressed against the cusp of her womanhood. If she felt feverish before...Each caress grew bolder and raised her temperature. It wasn’t like Miyeon had never touched herself in such a way, but it was so very different having someone else do it. It made her feel so very dizzy and lightheaded. Her legs seemed to part on their own to let him have more access. The fabric was so rough against that part of her as it grew more sensitive. His motions changed in agonizing ecstasy for a moment until he seemed to work out that consistency with a gradual increase in pace was key.

Miyeon couldn’t restrain herself as the motions continued, with his body gradually moving in rhythm to stimulate the rest of her, while he lowered his mouth back to her breast. She covered her mouth with embarrassment while her free hand rested against his chest. This only seemed to make him chuckle affectionately as he studied her blushing, tightening body.

“When you’re that cute, it makes me want to tease you more…”

The girl didn’t reply outside of a hungry kiss, which he indulged. This wasn’t enough… Desperately, she reached down, pulling the fabric aside.

Miyeon felt relief as the hacker’s fingers glided along her exposed skin…
Saeyoung’s motions eased immediately once he realized that he’d broke one of the rules. At least until he realized how happened. There was a quiet need for her consent, which she gave by nestling deeply against him while her hips raised, grinding his hand against the dewy petals of her blossoming womanhood.

Her touch guided him at first… Saeyoung was a quick study. With care between motions, his fingers explored her with much more care now that there was no barrier. He rested his nose to hers, seemingly burning the feel of her skin, her breathing, and her pulse into his memory.

That wasn’t enough…

Miyeon’s hands unfettered the main cause of her frustration. The yellow and black checkered pattern of his boxers practically leapt out from their denim prison. His liberation was punctuated by the throaty breath that escaped him. This was soon was followed by an audible wince of pleasure as she gingerly touched the cloth over the protrusion. As her hand glided along the silky fabric towards the tip, Miyeon became very aware of how much of “him” there really was. There wasn’t enough time for her to fully appreciate the mix of curiosity and intimidation, as the stroke of a lone finger along the entrance of her sex was enough to make her pause.

The rest body tightened as the pressure between her thighs broke, making her raise off the bed and gasp. It burned and stung, but it also felt wonderful! Her thighs quivered at the mere turn of a wrist. It felt like she was going to have an accident as his fingers curled within her, massaging her from within while his palm rubbed her from outside.

Was this what it would feel like?

It felt like a game that she was losing now… Miyeon did her best to stay in the competition by repaying his attentions to eager part of him that pressed so firmly against her.

If he wanted to… He could do – that-… She just couldn’t get the words out to say as much… Really, she shouldn’t let him. Miyeon was certain that it wasn’t a “safe” time by any means – not that any time was really. In the moment, her desire for sensation had overwritten her sense of reason. She still had shame enough to know if he kept doing this, something embarrassing was going to happen.

“Please…” she begged, breathlessly, clinging to him in a desperate attempt to hide. “Sae-“

His lips pressed to hers, muffling her with a deep kiss. Miyeon surrendered. Her resistance shattered and her every nerve ignited, making her muscles jolt. This was the point when, on her own, she would’ve stopped… But he continued just a little past that, until she utterly senseless, gasping for air.

Saeyoung only eased to admire the thin layer of sweat that’d built up on her, before pulling her into his arms. The girl gathered her breath for a moment, as he lovingly doted on her.

It wasn’t fair for her to be the only one…

The hacker wasn’t forcing or asking her to relieve him at all, but it felt wrong to not return the affection. Plus, she couldn’t feel fully satisfied without contributing.

Miyeon unsteadily propped herself up, having found a second wind. She had a rough idea of what needed to happen. There was an unspoken question on his lips until she tucked her hair behind her ear and boldly pulled the elastic of his waistband down to fully reveal what made them
fundamentally different. How delightful it was to watch how his belly tightened at the sensation…

“Mi-“

He scarcely got her name out before the girl took the length into her hand and resolved herself… It wasn’t hard if she just thought about what that part of him was naturally meant for. She’d seen what people did. It couldn’t be that hard – well he was that hard – but… Functionally, it was simple enough.

His scent was so intense… It wasn’t a perfumed aroma, but it was undeniably erotic. Like any new food, it was probably best not to think about those details… Or how slick he’d gotten with his own fluids. That was what she told herself as Miyeon ran her tongue from base to tip before taking the full head of it into her mouth.

Glancing up, she was surprised to see that he was covering his eyes and his mouth was twisted as though he were in pain. It didn’t take much to confirm that this wasn’t the case. Really, curiosity guided her early motions, watching his reactions and testing things she’d seen… The texture of his sex was like silk over sun warmed river stone. His skin slipped with each motion, yet the flesh under was utterly inflexible. Below the length, the sources of his future children, were much more yielding but more coarse to the touch… But pliant… Soon, Miyeon came to understand that it would take her entire body to accomplish the task, which she found felt better too. Using her hands to help support and stimulate him, the rest of her focused on mimicking the motions of actual consummation.

She felt rather proud of the results.

He was surprisingly submissive like this. She’d feel as he gently stroked her face or helped pull her hair back, but otherwise, he was her toy. Now and then his hips would tighten, but she could tell he was holding back to avoid being too forceful. There was no denying that it wasn’t a tidy ordeal to keep everything slick… But the way his body moved and the little sounds that escaped him brought her so much joy, it was worth it. How arousing to feel his pulse on her tongue and the feel of him growing even harder under her touch… It was empowering.

Really… She could really hurt him if she wanted to.

“Miyeon… I’m…”

The girl disregarded his warning and continued with even more vigor, despite his pleas… Soon, the intensity of his pulse quickened, and the salt of his skin became a bit more bitter with each throb. The realization dawned on her what had happened and was then confirmed by the way his chest heaved. He’d been trying to warn her.

It wasn’t too unpleasant of a flavor…

Quietly, she continued, swallowing to avoid making a mess. He quivered as she lapped at the length, which was receding, all while it was clear the sensation was too much for him. There was only one thought she had while wiping her mouth and seeing him so vulnerable.

Victory…!
As Zen’s finger pulled the tab of the beer can, he couldn’t help but notice that his young friend was only one shot since they’d arrived at his apartment and already half out of it. It was probably the most pathetic afterparty he’d been to… One grown man, one young man – no ladies. There was such an odd atmosphere. Really, they ought to have been happy, the RFA party was a great success, but there was so much more. Taking a drink of the cold draft, Zen sat back in his couch and did his best to listen to Yoosung. As he was older and a member of the RFA, it was almost his responsibility to listen. Jumin would just brush it aside, and Jaehee didn’t have time for it. Really, he was the only other “guy” Yoosung could talk about these things with. The blonde was celebrating a successful party, missing his mother after she’d returned home, drowning memories of Rika, trying to escape the stress the hacker and subsequent revelations had brought, and the worst was the realization that Sev-no Saeyoung- was now REALLY with Miyeon…

The actor did his best to redirect the young man to some of the better parts of the party. One thing that stood out was that Miyeon had sent a friend on her behalf. She was an average height, athletically built girl with medium blonde hair with a beautiful smile who did a great job but kept herself busy… She could’ve easily been a model, but from what she gathered from Jaehee she was a college student. There was that polish to her and a great sense of style to her dress. He hadn’t gotten to speak to her much though as she made herself scare to anyone but Jaehee. Zen recognized the flustered manner that she excused with under the guise of having other matters to attend to as someone who liked what they saw. It was rather cute, although she did her best to mask it with professional overtones. He hadn’t gotten to ask her more about herself and Miyeon, but his own obligations kept their interactions limited. She and Yoosung might’ve been cute together, but the boy was still lamenting his status as a single man.

Zen couldn’t deny he was too.

There were plenty of people at the party, male and female who flirted with him, but that didn’t mean much. He wasn’t interested in merely sex for the sake of physical pleasure. When he was younger, he had confused those things… There was a definite line between physical and true intimacy. One was a transient thing, the other was the sort of thing that could build or destroy empires. His entire life he’d had people wanting a “piece” of him. At his core, he ached for a soulmate. Someone who could look beyond the beauty he’d been cursed with and see all of him… His heart, his talents… Miyeon was the first in so very long he’d felt could’ve had that bond with. She had never fawned over him and the two could hold conversations like equals; her heart seemed so very open. The girl was a bud just on the cusp of opening herself – he’d hoped his moonlight would’ve been enough to get her to blossom. She was just so very pure and inexperienced… At her age, that was rare and so unlike what he was used to. That was as much of a blessing as it was a curse.

He thought he understood why Miyeon had restrained herself from the kiss before. Now it made sense, although there was a time when Zen was sure she was on the fence between the hacker and the actor. With a little more time, he was certain he could’ve won her over. If only he’d been more perceptive or more in tune with her, she’d be safe with him instead. They could’ve shared their first kiss at the party, but no. She was out on the run like a fugitive. As a prince, he’d failed her.

It wasn’t that he was jealous of Seven… From the bottom of his heart, he wanted the hacker and her to be happy. It’s just that he couldn’t wholeheartedly approve of the pairing. Seven’s actions seemed to have spoke to him having some misgivings about it himself. The hacker had never struck him as a bad guy necessarily, but he was weird and very aware of that fact. He seemed to pride himself on that strangeness. He was reliable and a genius, but that wouldn’t make him a good boyfriend. There were practical considerations. The guy wasn’t doing work that was legal and had been clear about trying to dissuade Miyeon from getting too involved with him while equally flirting with her in chat. His playfulness was cut abruptly short though. Zen couldn’t recall ever seeing the
guy be so outright cold to anyone as he had been only days ago. That only seemed to intensify after he’d gone to protect her at the apartment. Something bad had gone down though as the obvious friendliness between those two seemed to have frozen over. During that time, he could recall how the girl’s voice sounded. She did her best to hide it with a smile, but Zen could something had gone down. She swore that he hadn’t been abusing her or anything, but people in those situations were never honest about it…

He wanted to trust her and trust in the Seven that he knew, but intense feelings like liking and loving someone did weird things to people. There’d been so much worry he had… It was affecting his skin.

It wasn’t like she was unattractive or bad natured and Seven would’ve been turned off from her. So, his rejecting her affections based on that didn’t seem likely especially considering that they seemed to be so close now. Really Miyeon was very cute and so very sweet… Everything about her, even the softness of her frame, was seemingly built to be a source of warmth and comfort. The girl wasn’t a seductress. Miyeon so easy to talk to and could make anyone feel comfortable with her. Anyone could share anything with her and she wouldn’t judge. She’d accept anyone purely, wholly, and see their point of view with equal kindness. Miyeon was the sort of girl you married because and looked forward to coming home to. Someone who would give warm hugs and who was honest. Miyeon was someone Zen felt he could trust with his heart. She was so very easy to love…

It made no sense why anyone would be harsh and push her away… Honestly, it pissed him off thinking of how Seven may have treated her while dealing with his own crap. Even when he’d had issues with girls fighting amongst themselves in the past, Zen’d had been honest, drawn the boundaries, and treated them with respect. Then again, he was a mature person. Seven bore all the signs of a boy whose body had grown up before the rest of him unlike Yoosung who was a young man, knew he was young, and made no attempt to hide it. Which in hindsight, that might’ve been why those two got along so well…

Then when the Seven started being honest – it felt so sudden. The dude had been dealing with so much, but that didn’t excuse what he’d probably put Miyeon through. The two of them had never been particularly close. The Seven he knew was nice enough, liked to play pranks, was a bit incomprehensible, but there had always been something “off” about him. He still didn’t know everything, but the little the hacker had shared in the chat a few days ago seemed to explain some of it. The things he said about V though… Zen wasn’t sure how to even process that, although Yoosung was on the couch four beers deep now agreeing with what a horrible person Jihyun was.

When V saved him from a motorcycle accident, he never asked for anything. The picture Seven was trying to paint just didn’t add up. Even though he hated to admit it, Jumin could be a good judge of character, and he was V’s best friend. The image of V that Seven laid out was so very different from the person they all knew, although V didn’t even defend himself. He’d only apologized and resigned his post from the RFA before the party.

The poor guy had been through so much. Zen couldn’t blame him for just not having the energy to fight. He wanted to have hope everything would be fine, but there was a foreboding that he couldn’t shake… He’d not slept well for days because everything going on, and then there was just how weird his dreams were. Sometimes his dreams came true, but it was hard to know which ones to trust right now…

So many of them had the girl in compromising positions with someone other than himself… He knew how men were – but Seven wasn’t just a man. He was a seriously repressed guy who was clearly developmentally stunted and had no idea how to regulate his emotions – let alone treat a girl. The guy had never even been with a woman and probably never like that. A guy like that
could rush into things and do so much damage to an innocent, pure hearted girl.

Really, he couldn’t help but worry about Miyeon. He liked her – he liked her A LOT. Zen wasn’t jealous… The actor just wanted her to be happy and safe. There was a bitterness lingering from the beer in his gut though. She should’ve been there with them. It was Seven’s fault. He’d never forgive that guy if something happened to her. Then again… He didn’t want anything to happen to either of them. He didn’t dare think of how someone would need to comfort her if Seven weren’t to return; she’d be so broken hearted. Zen couldn’t bear to think of seeing her experiencing such pain. It was bad enough with V. But for a girl he could see himself having a relationship with, it was different. She wasn’t his, but…

Maybe if he said how he felt she’d see reason and have Seven drop her off somewhere safe. If that guy cared about her so much, he’d want her safe, right? Zen could then ride out on his motorcycle, however far, and bring her back safe. He just had to lay his cards on the table and stop being so subtle. Maybe she didn’t realize how sincere his intentions towards her were.

But that was wrong, that was like stealing someone else’s girlfriend. But Seven and her weren’t together right? Things couldn’t have gone that far right?

He was on his third can before Zen succumbed to the impulse.

…He wanted to hear her voice; he needed to know Miyeon was okay.

As Yoosung chugged down another can between sniffles, he excused himself to make the call.

Only a few days ago, it’d been so easy to press the buttons. Now? It was like being a kid again… Looking in the mirror, he drew strength from his natural gifts. Was he not an actor? There were so many performances that had the words he wanted peppered in them. It was just combining them and using the right emotion. He had to stay calm but speak from the heart. Silently he recited the words he wanted to say, making adjustments before shaking his head.

No… He needed to just act natural. Miyeon deserved his real feelings, not someone else’s words.

He dialed the number.

It was agonizing as it rang.

Usually she’d answered by now. Maybe she and Seven were doing “those” things.

No… Miyeon wasn’t that kind of girl.

But Seven-

The line picked up!

“Hey, princess! Is everything okay?”

“Hey, Zen. Everything is great. How’d the party go?”

His heart leapt with joy. She was okay! She sounded happy…

“Great. It would’ve been better with you there – and Seven,” he added. “So… How are things going there? I mean… Did you guys find out anything? Are you coming back
“… I can’t say, but everything is going to be okay,” she assured.

“Is Seven around?”

“He’s right here, did you need to ta-“

“No, I just…” his courage began to drop. As Zen tried to find a polite way to ask whether or not he even still had a chance, there was a loud bang on the door.

“Is everything okay there?”

“Yeah! Yoosung just had a little bit much to drink at the party, and-“

The door opened with the blonde tumbling in with it. Before Zen could help him up, the boy clung to him, half crying half laughing. It was pitiful. He tried to cover the phone to save any dignity either one of them had.

“Hey… Cut that out!”

“Arrya on the phone?”

For someone shorter and weaker than him, Yoosung was surprisingly difficult to wrangle when he was like this. Was the shrimp always this clingy?

“C’mon, pull yourself toge-“


“Dude, I don’t like your hands all over me! What’s wrong with you?” Zen did his best to maneuver the both of them back to where he had more room to move to keep Yoosung from making even more of an ass of himself. “Let go!”

“Zeeeen… Whooo are you talkin’ tooo?”

“My princess! Why? What are you going to do?” the actor snapped.

The student’s violet eyes widened before a glint of jealousy tinged them “Liiaaaaar… Se-Saeyoung has the princess.”

He then reached for the phone again.

“Are you just pretending to be drunk right now!? That won’t work, dude!”

Why hadn’t he thought of that? Drunken confessions were so easy to fake and easily written off. But it was crazy enough to work. Maybe the kid was smarter than he seemed.

His irritation was softened by the sound of laughter on the other end of the phone, even as he used his dancing skills to try to dodge the student’s attempts to get the phone. Her voice really was a comfort…

“You two seem to be having a good time,” Miyeon joked.

“It would’ve been better if we all could be together.”
“Gimme the phone--- SELFIE FREAK GIMME THE PHO*hic*NE!”

When did Yoosung get so quick! He was going to be so pissed if he twisted an ankle falling over him.

“How the hell did you get here so fast?!”

“Hey! Bein’ handsome izznt everythin’! Gimme~!”

“This is MY phone! Get off me!”

It took grabbing his arm and twisting it back for a second to subdue him.

“Sorry… He’s driving me crazy. I should’ve just taken him home, but he’s had a hard time with everything going on. I didn’t realize he was such a lightweight or I wouldn’t have given him that shot.”

“…I’m not married! I don’t have anyone to marry,” Yoosung began to whine piteously.

Was that a confession or an attempt at getting pity? It wasn’t very cool either way. Really what he was doing wasn’t much better. If she was happy, it’d be pretty low of him to try to get in between her and Seven… Maybe the alcohol was getting to him too much. He had to man up. He wasn’t that sort of guy.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have called… I just called to hear your voice.”

It hurts that you’re not here with me and that you’re with Seven. God only knows what sort of danger he’s gotten you into, I’m worried about you…

But he couldn’t say that…

Seven wasn’t a bad guy, right? He’d do right by her wouldn’t he?

“I had a weird dream that… Well it’s… Just… Be safe, okay? Call me anytime you need. I’ll be waiting… Just tell me one thing before I let you go. Miyeon, you’re happy, right?”

An unsteady silence followed.

“Zen.”

“If he really makes you happy, I’m glad. It’s just…” The actor felt something in him give. “I could’ve made you happy too.”

“Make me happyyyyy…” Yoosung grumbled, seemingly coming back to life.

Zen’s anguish ebbed to anger as he forced a nearby bottle into the young man’s hands and pushed him towards the couch. “Yeah, you. You! You just drink this! … God…”

He wasn’t sure what was more pathetic. Yoosung being a drunken mess, or him on the verge of tears over a girl. This was so uncool of him, but he couldn’t help it. For just a little while, it seemed they were getting on so well… He held his hand over the receiver for a minute, making sure the blonde was nursing the booze before he composed himself.

“Zen… Are you okay?”
“I’m fine I just… Need to put him to bed. Stay safe. I’ll be waiting for you to call.”

Before he could say anything else, the actor disconnected the line. His long legs gave out the second he was near a seat.

It was going to be another long, restless night alone… Well, mostly alone… His weary, ruby eyes focused on the young man drinking himself into a stupor on his couch. Zen resigned himself to stay optimistic. His complexion depended on it.

Saeyoung wasn’t quite sure what he was looking as he studied his reflection in the poor lighting of the bathroom mirror. There weren’t any new marks or traces of what’d just occurred on his body. The only thing lingering was the memory… Well that and the traces of Miyeon’s scent on his skin.

The Catholic in him was perhaps looking for faults or proof of the sin he’d just committed… Yet his cross was un tarnished.

Saeyoung was by nature a sinner.

He’d sinned many times in his life…

He knew how it felt to sin, and what had happened between he and Miyeon wasn’t like that at all.

What he’d just experienced wasn’t dirty or wrong…

It was beautiful and pure.

…If anything, what just occurred was the closest Saeyoung had come to worship in a long time.

In those precious moments after… The hacker had a sense of clarity unlike any he’d ever experienced before. He understood what had to be done, why, and how. Greater truths about his circumstances and it’s role in the future seemed to just “click” into place. Among those revelations was that, Miyeon was proof that there was a benevolent God. She was his living, breathing testament that he hadn’t been forsaken… He just hadn’t understood the algorithm that was his life up until that point.

She’d told him that before, but he’d been too busy wrestling with his identity to really accept that truth. Now? He understood…

As Saeyoung finished freshening up and rejoined the girl, he could see the glow of her phone against her cheek… It was getting dark enough to need to turn on a light, but there was something comforting about being mostly naked in the dark with her. Rather than interrupt her call, he quietly lay beside her letting his head rest on her shoulder.

He recognized Zen’s voice and maybe Yoosung’s, but not before the line went dead and
Miyeon sat the phone on the nightstand. The trace of concern on her face made him wrap his arms around her to reassure her. For a few minutes they lay cuddled up, quietly drawing strength from the other.

“…I love you.”

“I love you too,” he replied, nestling against her skin and giving into the desire for contact.

Her chest fell with a deep sigh as he stroked her hair. It was precious how she hid in his arms…

“Saeyoung…?”

He acknowledged her with a tender kiss to her forehead.

“Are you happy…?”

“I am. Very happy.”

Her head nodded against his chest, but he could feel something was off. Maybe the skin to skin contact gave them greater psychic reception.

“Hey… Is everything okay?” he pressed, lifting her chin.

Did he do that badly?

The honey in Miyeon’s eyes was so much paler in the moonlight.

“…I’m fine - really.”

Tenderly he kissed her before letting his nose rest to hers as he shook his head.

“…That obvious?” she replied.

“Your brow gets this little crease when you’re upset, and your voice frequency changes.”

“Does it?”

He hummed an affirmation.

“Saeyoung… Just how much do you know about me?”

“We’re going to be here a long time if you me to tell you everything,” he chuckled. “Including what I just discovered from our “experiment” earlier… So, you may want to clarify.”

The girl smiled before rolling to where her back faced him. His body naturally adjusted, embracing her from behind. There was no objection as his hand rested below her breast, rather her fingers curled, holding his hand tightly.

“…I know you’ve never seen the ocean until today. Which is interesting considering the fact you can get to a beach with a few hours drive in any direction… I could probably make assumptions as to why, but I don’t have enough data to really be 100% certain.”
“My family didn’t really do vacations growing up…”

“Ah.” That was one bit of data he didn’t have.

“It’s not that we didn’t have money or anything like that. My parents just worked – a lot…”

That made sense… The house she lived in wasn’t super rich, but it was nice enough and had been paid off from what he could tell.

“I’m guessing you were home alone a lot?”

“Yeah…”

“You had a brother, right? Were you two close?”

She didn’t answer.

He kissed her shoulder. “I guess he stayed busy and moved out early too, huh? That must’ve been lonely, especially if your parents worked late. Is that why you don’t want to eat alone?”

“Maybe… Although for a while, it was nice having the house to myself. Mom didn’t get along with Dad, so when she was home, it was awful… They must’ve loved each other at some point because my brother and I were born, but something changed. It was much quieter after she left.”

“Did they get divorced?”

She nodded, before her voice wavered. “It was for the best.”

He gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“When you’re little, you think it’s normal for people to treat each other like that… I knew I hated the hurtful things they’d say and how loud they were, but I didn’t really realize how bad it was until I made friends and would go stay with them. Then I’d see their parents and see that not everyone was like that. Then I’d go home knowing it was wrong, and there was nothing I could do. It’s just how things were. Growing up, I never really dated anyone because to me – that’s what love was. I watched my friends get into relationships and watch those disintegrate. I’d try to help, but there’s only so much that you can do. Relationships just seemed doomed to fail. It scared me. Even right now, I’m scared… But for different reasons. I’ve never really felt this way about anyone. I’ve lost people important to me before, and I don’t know if I could take losing someone again. Honestly, Saeyoung, it really upsets me when you say you’ll die for me as if that’s supposed to be something that will make me happy to hear. There’s nothing romantic about losing someone important to you…”

Saeyoung nestled against her. “I’m going to do my best to stay by your side, I promise.”

The girl took a few moments to reaffirm the nature of their bond before taking a seat on the edge of the bed. Eventually she took a brush from one of her bags and began the process of working the tangled bits out. Still reveling in the intimacy they’d shared; the hacker soon took over the task for her with some encouragement to sit on his lap. He knew some styles, and after a few moments, had worked hers into something suitable for a walk on the beach.

There was no denying how that seemed to brighten her mood up. Miyeon’s face lit up in
the moonlight as soon as they hit the sand. Hand in hand, he helped steady her as they ventured across the shifting sands. There were other people out on the coast line. Saeyoung kept an eye out for anyone suspicious, but that worry wasn’t enough to rob his joy. Really, there was something so magical in seeing someone experience something for the first time. He’d seen beaches… He’d been to exotic tropical islands – and he’d played Tetris on them. But seeing Miyeon chase after crabs and running away from incoming waves was nice. There was some care needed because of the wounds on her feet. Her shoes had to stay on for the most part, but she did get her “toe” in the sand. After the initial burst of energy, she calmed enough to hold his hand while they walked with the wind and surf roaring.

There was so much more light pollution here than there had been in the mountains. The moon was so bright that it wasn’t helping matters, but he could still make out constellations. He’d point out the ones he could make out, although now and then he’d pull out the astronomy app that she’d downloaded nearly a week ago.

Eventually, their outing lead to the boardwalk which was lined with street food vendors. It was the unhealthiest but satisfying sort of food. If he wanted to live a long life, this was the enemy. Right now, it was amazing. The other people meant it was essential to hold her especially tight. For just a little while, he felt normal enough to joke around. It was hard not to tease Miyeon for the things she ordered, but Saeyoung committed every item to memory so he’d know what she liked… Really her tastes weren’t weird, he just liked seeing that little flash of annoyance or embarrassment on her face.

If they made it through this, he had every intention of taking her on a proper vacation and spoiling her.

The last stop before the walk back to the hotel was for ice cream. It had been her idea, although it was a bittersweet thing for him. She seemed to pick up on this readily. He recognized the little crease in her brow.

“When we were little, and Saeran was strong enough to walk, there was this little market we’d go to… I’d always have a bit of money set aside so we could get ice cream together.”

Did he even remember that?

Miyeon rested her head against his shoulder, which helped ease the loneliness some, but it was a very different longing. Glancing over at her now and then, it was hard not to make newer, happier memories… Her lips turned such a beautiful deep pink from the cold. The color wasn’t unlike the one that appeared when she was fully aroused. Saeyoung did his best to not dwell on such things… It would be far too easy to give into the want for more… Then nothing would get done. Not to mention it felt wrong to associate something so pure with something so sensual.

“…I’m surprised you didn’t get the matcha.”

The girl had already made short work of “Jaws” bar. Where the head had been, was now just a strawberry stump, with the blue outer shell remaining only the lowest portion. He knew she could have gotten it that far down if she wanted…

“I don’t get to eat a shark at the beach every day.”

That was a fair point.

It was a slow stroll back to the hotel as they both were aware of what likely awaited them.
Whether later that day, tomorrow, or the day after… This would be the first and last time they could have to be a normal couple and to stretch their legs.

After checking out a bit early, the both of them were back in the car. Vanderwood appeared to be on the move again. Which was well enough. It didn’t matter how long or how far they had to go. He was going to get his brother back. His family wouldn’t be complete until Saeran was safe at home.
Chapter 29

It was the middle of the night when Miyeon and Saeyoung had set out from the seaside resort. The roads were dark and mostly empty, which was just as well. While it made them stand out, it also made it very easy to see whether they were being followed. He hadn’t mentioned what’d happened between them just a few hours prior. Knowing what to make of that silence was very hard, although it seemed more of a positive thing. There was no denying that he seemed more focused and relaxed than ever before. He smiled and laughed more naturally now.

She’d gotten used to the nomadic lifestyle they’d been leading for days now. The deviation came just a little after sunrise. Saeyoung parked the car in a relatively empty parking lot and stopped the car. At first, Miyeon thought something was wrong as he began to unbuckle the seat belt. Did he want to do “those” sorts of things in his car…? He flashed her a smile but there was no mistaking that there was something serious on his mind.

“Let’s trade seats.”

“…Saeyoung – I don’t know how to drive,” she reminded him.

“I know,” he replied, opening his car door. “We’re going to fix that.”

Miyeon was a little apprehensive, but conceded, as his motives for her knowing such a thing occurred to her. This wasn’t just a fun little outing – this was a skill that she may need to use once they found Saeran or God forbid if thing went horribly wrong and she had to get him to a hospital… He stood with the door open as she eased into the driver seat for a second time. It didn’t help that he teased her for being so short, before showing her how to move the seat forward so her feet could reach the pedals. It wasn’t the first time he’d gone over the basic controls, but this time, he explained as simply as he could.

She was quite anxious as he took the passenger seat beside her. His calm “agent” voice guided her through the motions of starting the engine and they made a few trips around the parking lot. It was remarkably exhilarating for how slow they were going.

It took a little for her to get used to easing on the break. While he joked with her about it, Miyeon couldn’t help but feel a little bit of pain at the thought of damage she might’ve been doing to the vehicle. Gradually the girl built her confidence up enough with enough practice that he encouraged her to drive around the block. After reaching the point the GPS mentioned, Miyeon was ready to return the keys to him. Yet, he had her continue.
“I don’t have a license or a permit… What if we get pulled over?”

“We won’t be; it’s fine,” he soothed. “You’re doing really good!”

The girl gave him a worried little frown.

“You’re doing good! Definitely better than Jumin – there’s a reason why he has chauffeurs.”

“Is he really that bad?”

Was it possible for someone that “elite” to have a flaw?

“… If I’m a “cat abuser” – then he’s DEFINITELY a “car abuser”.”

After two hours, her fears and apprehensions had ebbed some to a general numbness. He’d said that her hyper awareness was a good thing, but her nerves disagreed. She seemed to be doing well enough for him to pull out his laptop to work on something… Pulling onto the national roads was an experience that she did well enough to get praise from over the top of his screen. Eventually he let her take a break as the GPS guided them to another cabin. While this one was nicer, it still hadn’t been used in a long time. Only after picking a stake out point and using drones to ensure the close was clear, did he have her drive up and park.

Saeyoung stood with his hands in his pockets waiting for her at the back of the car by the time she gathered the courage to step out to face him. Her legs felt so tense. How could he do that all day? She scarcely made it back to him before he pulled her into a warm, loving embrace.

“You were so cute! My babe and babe together~!”

“Don’t tell me you just made me go through hours of stress just because you thought it’d be cute…” she murmured while hiding her face against his shoulder.

“Watching a cute babe drive my babe is sort of a fantasy of mine! But- no…” There was a serious reason. But-Not gonna lie I had catbot record some of that for later.”

“…I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

He stole a little kiss before excusing himself to make a quick safety check of their temporary base of operations… If all went well, this was to be their rendezvous point if things went awry, and where they would bring Saeran back to temporarily. It seemed sturdy enough from the outside. The hacker gave the clear as he walked back out to bring his gear in. As Miyeon walked beside him with the lighter items, he spoke.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the things you’ve said to me. For a long time, I saw you as this princess that needed my protection – in my heart you still are – but I made the error of thinking I was all you needed to be safe. I’m not going to make that mistake again... You’re right that I’m not helping our chances by keeping you in the dark. I need to be able to rely on you. Not just through this, but for our life after…”

Miyeon felt giddy at that but feigned a gasp. “Oh my God. Saeyoung! D-did you finally realize I’m a person?”

A breathless, sheepish chuckle escaped him just before she gave him a gentle bonk on the head with one of the smaller items in her arms.
“Ow… I know! I know it was stupid… I was being stupid.”

The girl gave him another. It wasn’t hard enough to hurt, especially through his thick hair – more like an aggressive pat. But that was really all he needed to be chastened. He knew he’d messed up.

Saeyoung smiled in a boyish way as he held her hands between them before the gravity of the situation darkened his tone. “There’s not nearly enough time for me to show you everything before we make contact… But today, we’re going to work on a few essentials. If something happens to me, I want to make sure you can escape and get to help. I pray that you won’t have to use these skills, but I’d feel much better knowing you have a fighting chance.”

“…Like what?”

“Driving was lesson one. I think you’ve done well on that. Lesson two starts now.”

Miyeon then realized that there was a reason he’d been hiding his hands. It occurred to her too late that the motions at her wrist weren’t just to be affectionate as suddenly they were pulled tight. He’d zip tied her hands together! As the hacker stepped away from her, Miyeon quite naturally followed before realizing he had no intention of helping.

He only stepped back farther, tucked his hands into his hoodie, and studied her with a serious look. He wasn’t playing. Was she supposed to figure it out on her own?

For a moment she tried to wriggle her hands free. The plastic dug painfully into her the more she struggled. Saeyoung didn’t seem to be enjoying the sight as his brow furrowed with concern, but he restrained himself from stepping in.

He really wasn’t going to let her out…

Nothing was working! Eventually she looked around to see if there was anything that she could use to pry her wrists loose or anything that would stretch the hard plastic. Maybe if her legs were more flexible, she could use her leg to get enough force but… She tried a few options before Saeyoung finally stepped in. She was frustrated to the point of wanting to try to figure it out on her own, but this wasn’t time for vanity.

“It’s not a bad thing to look around to see what your resources are,” he noted, taking her wrists into his hand, giving her a reassuring squeeze. “You came to me first… Which isn’t the wrong thing. If there’s help – help is best. And it’s not a bad thing to test to see how loose they are to see if you can just slip out. But these are too tight for that. Believe it or not – that’s a good thing.”

Miyeon was a little confused as he took out another zip tie.

He explained the mechanism and how sometimes one could keep the teeth from engaging and sealing the tie properly. It was intuitive, but not something she’d ever thought of in much detail. Saeyoung then began to bind his own hands, showing her with a hairclip that looked very much like one that Yoosung would use to jam the tie. He then tucked that back into his pocket before, to her surprise, fully binding his wrists.

“Thing is, most people who want to hurt you aren’t going to let you get a hairclip to put in there while they’re tying you up. So that leaves two ways. One… I’ll give you once we’re done with this. The other, I’m going to show you.”
He grabbed the loose end of the tie with his teeth and began to tighten it further.

“You want it as tight as you can stand…” he explained, holding his wrists out to demonstrate that it was tight enough to dig in quite a bit. “The plastic in these is brittle, so really all you need is enough force. If you tighten them up – that puts a lot of stress right where you need it.”

He pressed his hands against his belly. “You just need to get a little more force to get it to snap. So… You just… Gotta chicken wing a little.”

Saeyoung drew a deep breath, raised his arms up over his head, and brought his wrists hard down to his belly. There was thump and pop as the zip tie broke. The hacker then showed his wrists with their deep pink bands where the tie had been.

“It’ll leave marks, but those are nothing compared to what could happen if you can’t escape. Now… You try.”

Miyeon steadied herself, finding a spot to aim on her belly before pulling the tie even tighter. It took two tries for her to do it, but it felt so good to have her wrists free. She raised them to take a look, only to feel some relief as Saeyoung rubbed the feeling back into them.

“Good. Very good. Now… The second way.”

He took out a bit of what appeared to be shoe laces.

“This is 550 paracord. And like me – it’s really useful to have around.” It was a bad joke but made her smile. “I always have some with me,” he noted drawing her attention down to his boots. “After I show you – we’ll change your laces out too. With this, you can make traps, weapons, fishing lures, shelter, use it as an escape rope – really you can do just about anything with this stuff. But if you get captured, you can also use these to cut through one of these ties too. It’s a little quieter and easier to hide than the other way.”

To that end, he handed her a bit of paracord before having Miyeon put another zip tie on him.

“Why do you have many of these?” she asked, feigning a bit of nervousness.

“They’re useful – especially for keeping wires organized. Plus, I figured we could have a little fun with them later… Although the sort of things you’d like takes rope-” Miyeon froze. He continued seemingly unbothered, smiling as if he was recounting a grocery list, “The boards I asked said to use cotton because of how soft it is – especially for starting out. But they also said silk ribbon can be nice provided it’s not tied too tightly. There wasn’t any in the purple that you like, so I got red – if that’s okay.”

That boyish smile of his didn’t waver, until he saw just how flustered it made her. Then that little sadistic grin emerged.

She gave particularly tight tug to bind him, which only made him laugh.

The girl took a seat on a stump crossing her arms and legs before giving him a glare.

“Ou… That’s giving me chills.”

She pretended to not be flustered and instead focused on lacing her shoes with the paracord while he worked to unlace one of his shoes with his bound hands. It was worth watching him hop about, resting his back to his car while trying to get enough leverage to loosen the strings.
Eventually she’d finished lacing her shoes back up with the paracord before rejoining him, just as he got to the important part. They sat on the leafy ground with their backs to his car as Saeyoung worked to turn the cord into an improvised saw. It took a little longer than snapping it off, as the main principle appeared to be friction melting the tie.

He looked quite pleased with himself when it was done though and heaved a sigh of relief while rubbing his wrists. Soon after he stretched out with his arms over his head, popping his back, before reclining against the smooth body of the vehicle. It was obvious that he needed a minute after that flurry of activity. Miyeon rested her head against his shoulder, letting her gaze drift up beyond the treeline.

Saeyoung allowed an arm to slip down over her shoulder. Neither spoke, and for just a moment, they lay watching the clouds.

“Earlier – you were just joking, right?” Miyeon broke, her voice faltering.

The gold of his eyes focused on her before he leaned in, lifting her to where they could be eye to eye. It was too much…!

Miyeon hugged her legs and did her best to hide her face.

“Really?” he asked, almost a little exasperated.

A soft breath escaped him as he pulled her onto his lap and held her close. He was a lot stronger than he looked… Resisting was pointless, if only because it wasn’t unwanted. For a few moments, they sat like that, with him simply stroking her hair and rocking.

“What am I going to do with you?” he asked softly.

Miyeon wrapped her arms around his neck and held her head over his shoulder so she wouldn’t have to look at him. He merely rubbed her back with long, slow motions.

“Are you really that embarrassed?”

She didn’t respond.

“I’ve been honest with you about the sort of person I am, Miyeon. Hackers really are like cockroaches. I’ve spent a lot of my life in filth, digging it up, watching it, using it to blackmail people… I’ve seen a lot of terrible things… Things so much worse than the internet search history of a lonely virgin with an active imagination,” his voice was low, and so close to her ear.

That wasn’t helping.

“Really I’m the one who should be ashamed. It was dirty what I did to find out a lot of what I knew about you. But I’ve known since the first day you joined the chat what sort of erotic content you read… watched… And how much and how often.”

Her hands dug into him.

“…Am I teasing you too much?” he soothed, continuing to pet her back.

They both knew the answer to that…

“Should I show you the things I’m into so we’re even?”

That was enough to get her to lean back and look him in the eye a little shocked that he’d
volunteer it. Then again, he was a guy – looking at stuff like that was just something guys did. It was expected. It wasn’t a big deal. For girls, it was different... Or at least, it felt different when people knew.

He took out his phone as she settled into his lap, a feverish feeling overcoming her.

“...You’re not really...”

“I am-“ he soothed, quickly opening an app. “It might be a little too extreme… I hope you’ll still like me after I show you...”

“Wai-“

…Click…

Miyeon froze, seeing her blushing, pleading face in the next to a mischievously smiling red head in the picture. It was a candid shot – that wasn’t at all flattering in her mind. But he seemed to just adore it.

“Ah-... So cute.”

“Saeyoung Choi!”

She grappled for his phone, but he held it over his head out of her reach.

“Delete that!”

There was a ding as a message sent.

“Oops! You made my finger slip... What am I going to do-?” he sighed. “Now everyone in the chat is going to see my shame! Wait...! I’m not ashamed-”

The girl sunk in defeat.

“I hate you...”

He laughed a little.

“I love you,” he soothed emphasizing his feelings with a loving squeeze. “…And I am being serious right now.”

That got her attention.

Saeyoung sat his phone beside them on the leafy ground and wrapped his arms fully around her. “Anything that lets me experience more of you is highly stimulating to me – no matter wholesome or depraved... The way you look – the way you sound – the way you feel...” His fingers grazed her cheek but moved along as he spoke. “I adore how bright your eyes are, even when you’re frustrated to the point of tears. I love the shades of pink your cheeks turn when I say embarrassing things like this, and how that blush travels to your breast...“

He continued to caress her, which made her want to relax, but her body began to feel so very tight. His scent grew stronger in a way that made her feel very dizzy...

“I adore your lips... How soft and eager they are when I kiss them... And just how red they are when we do lewd things...” His face hovered close to hers, teasing her.
Miyeon shifted uncomfortably on his lap, being very aware of how sensitive her body had gotten. Was it from where he’d been petting her? Or was it just the frequency of his voice? Her breath was so shallow.

“What do you want to do?”

Quietly she bit her lip to restrain herself.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked softly.

“…No,” she confessed. “But… There’s more important things for us to do… Right?”

He seemed to understand and agree. With care, he hoisted her up after he stood and patted the leaves off her.

“Just rest and I’ll set up some target practice.”

That got her attention.

Miyeon rested on the porch as he set a few empty bottles of Dr.Pepper around at varying heights, with the stump she’d sulked on having three lined up. Half of him disappeared into his car before emerging a moment later, with something the girl recognized immediately. She tensed as he sat beside her on the cabin’s porch, placing the ammo between them. He checked the safety and for any unfired rounds.

After going over how to safely disassemble, clean, and piece the weapon back together, he asked her to repeat. His brow knit seeing that she managed to do so more quickly than himself.

“Very good…”

Saeyoung then took her out into the forest where he’d sat up the improvised target course. His explanation of how-to fire was simple enough, although Miyeon could recall her father being much more detailed, especially regarding kickback. Once he finished, there was the loud crack as he discharged a round into one of the cans.

It was enough to make her wince…

“…Do you have earplugs?” she asked as he gingerly placed the gun in her hands.

“No. But in a dangero-“

The young woman’s body fell into the familiar stance quite naturally as she fired three rounds in quick succession. There were three successful pings as the cans leapt from their spot. Each shot sent a sonic wave through her, making her muscles brace to withstand the recoil.

“Woah!”

Saeyoung glanced at her, back at the barren stump, then to the gun. There was a mixture of concern and suspicion on his face. The gold in his eyes burned with an unspoken question about exactly what sort of firearms prodigy was standing before him.

“…Policeman’s daughter… His ONLY daughter…”

An understanding seemed to hit the agent then. Miyeon used the remaining rounds in the
cartridge to clear as many of the cans as she could. She missed one he’d placed a little farther out. It’d been a hit had it been a human though… Her father had taught her to aim for the torso, although aiming for the head was more likely to be fatal.

As far as fire arms went, this one wasn’t bad. The kickback didn’t feel as intense as she remembered on her father’s gun. Then again, it’d been awhile since her father had taken her out to practice. Knowing Saeyoung though, it had likely been modified. Really how smooth it operated was hard not to admire it as she reloaded.

“… I thought Yoosung was trying to get me back.”

“He told you about the arcade?”

“Yeah…”

“I used to play games like that with my big brother all the time. Thing is a lot of those games don’t factor in air resistance, bullet drop, or recoil…”

“…That’s a little scary.”

The girl frowned.

“That is – I’m a little relieved that you can defend yourself. But I guess… It’s a little sad that your father thought that was a skill you needed. You said he was a detective… Right?”

She nodded.

“I guess it’s only natural he would’ve been afraid someone might’ve had a grudge against him. I can’t say I won’t do the same thing if we have a daughter. Then again, if your dad taught you this well maybe we should let him teach ours.”

Miyeon sat the gun down and set back towards the cabin… She kept her pace brisk, but it didn’t take long for him to catch up as his stride was longer.

“Hey…”

She lowered her head and tried to go just a little faster to no avail.

“Did I say something?”

When he realized she wasn’t going to answer, he eased just a little behind, giving her a little space.

She stopped in her tracks. “I’m fine. I- I… Just need to – use the restroom…”

They both knew it was an excuse, but he accepted it for now, knowing it was best not to push the issue.

“Okay - I’ll get ready for the next thing, but before you go…” Before he could ask, Miyeon gave him a tight hug to reassure him that all was well between them before dashing into the cottage.

There was comfort in the quiet of the restroom. The girl savored the feel of cold water on her skin as she washed her face and used a cool cloth to wash away some of the sweat that’d accumulated while they’d been outside. In that short amount of time, Saeyoung had sent a few cute cat pictures to try to cheer her up. It was enough to bring a little smile to her face…
The rest of the day seemed to fly by as he covered a few more escape techniques, a few self defense moves better suited to women, and detailed his plans. It wasn’t enough for him to give her an overview… Miyeon had to know the full plan, contingencies, and alternatives. They discussed each in detail, and he questioned her until she could recite it from front to back or picked apart. The last of which, he made her do while freeing herself from being bound to a chair.

It was dark, and they were onto a second pot of coffee before he seemed satisfied. Although she understood he’d likely ask her again first thing tomorrow. It wasn’t that she was dense – it’s just that there were lots of contingencies… He let her sit at the table to continue studying from one of his old survival guides while he furiously tapped away. She wasn’t quite sure what he was working on, but the sound of his keystrokes had become so very familiar and comforting. It made her headache just a little less, but her eye lids were so heavy. Miyeon rested her head on the table for just a moment running through the whole thing again, before feeling the world slip from under her. Consciousness returned to her enough to protest, mainly by clinging to the firm chest against her.

“Sorry! I just meant to rest a little…I-”

Saeyoung eased her down on something so delightfully soft before slowly patting her back. “You worked really hard today. Besides, sleep will let your brain have time to reinforce those connections.”

As he spoke, the hacker scooted down to her feet and began to undo the bandages. The cold sting of antiseptic followed.

“…Those should be healed up soon. Thank God,” he pondered aloud.

Humming in affirmation, Miyeon dozed a little more. In that time, he’d plugged her phone up to charge, while having returned to whatever he was working on. He was two Dr. Peppers deep and sat with his long fingers tapping at the mouse. She sat up a little, finding that at some point he’d also changed her clothes into one of his t-shirts. Vaguely the girl recalled when it’d happened.

Sleepily she rubbed her eyes and closed the distance between them. Anymore, his face was so sweet when he acknowledged her. He didn’t ask, but clearly was curious what her intentions were. Like a cat, she edged his arms out of the way and curled up on his lap. Rather than complain, he sat back and held her with a deep sigh. The light changed as he closed whatever tab he was working on with his free hand, only to then turn his chair to where he could keep writing. She dozed against him a little longer until he leaned back again, this time wrapping both arms around her.

“…Are you lonely sleeping without me?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry…I’ll come to bed when I’m done,” he soothed, his voice so very sensuous and low.

“…Can I be greedy for a few minutes then…?”

A breathless, throaty chuckle escaped him.

“I’ll put you to bed properly if you want.”

Miyeon nodded, feeling a little giddy as his lips pressed tenderly against her forehead before she raised her chin so the rest could follow. Perhaps it was the exhaustion, but the kisses they shared were slower but certainly carried more intent. She had his full attention now, judging by how his hands followed the curves of her body. He seemed to forgo the usual points of interest and
focused on the smaller parts of her, building the sensations as he went.

For the second time that night, he carried her to bed. Unlike before, Saeyoung joined her. There was no teasing or provocative language as he laid her out under him, sat his glasses to the side, and removed his shirt… Initially she expected him to cuddle her, but soon it was apparent that there was a need for more. He simply lavished her with attention… He’d stripped her down to her underwear and took to adorning every inch of her bare skin with his affections. In turn, Miyeon savored the textures of him under her fingers.

He’d learned a lot from the night before, and they’d both gotten a little more confident about how to touch each other. Each playful kiss of the ribs or graze of teeth along her belly was enough to make her quiver. It felt natural to have him in her arms loving her so intently…

She still dug her nails into his back as he turned his attention to her breasts, which he liberated adeptly while burying his face against her heart. The sensation of his suckling was a pleasant pain that was intensified by the slow, rolling way he massaged them. Only after did she feel the tickling of his cross along her skin followed by his lips as he ventured lower. Reflexively her knees tightened to close, yet his waist kept her from fully blocking him…

He nestled against her knee, digging his fingers into the softness of her thigh before the gold in his eyes peeked out at her from beneath the tussled fiery mane, silently bidding for confirmation to continue. Then she didn’t object he progressed quite smoothly down along her inner thigh, peppering her pale skin with kisses and nibbles… His nails grazed the softness of her belly before gripping the elastic of her panties and pulling them below her knees. Miyeon’s body trembled at the sensation of being truly naked in front of him. Yet he proceeded, pressing his lips just under her navel while the cross on his neck dangled precariously over the mound of her lust…

His gazed lifted to her as he slipped the last strips of cloth down her ankle and set them aside. It was the graze of his knuckles along her inner thigh and the heat of his breath that drew her to prop herself up just a little.

“…Saeyoung…”

Without hesitation, he nestled between her thighs. Her back arched as his thumb plied the petals of her sex. For a moment, he merely massaged the area with his fingers before she felt his breath followed by the warmth of his tongue… It tickled and stung with pleasure as the smoothness caressed the bud of her lust. A startled cry escaped her as he continued steadily, using his fingers to slowly ply her open more. Her knees quivered against his shoulders, while Miyeon desperately restrained her hips. At first, she could only cover her face… One long, slender finger slipped deeply into her, exploring the full extent of her maidenhood. Saeyoung replaced the motions of his tongue with his dexterous thumb, while breaking to kiss her thigh.

He was watching her so intently… Looking at that part of her… It was embarrassing.

Gently he coaxed a second finger in, maneuvering his wrist in such a way that she came up off the bed with the jolt that rippled through her. A sensuous little smile crossed his lips, just before he repeated the action while his thumb massaged the firm bundle of nerves just above the entrance to her womb. As he tormented her, he planted such sweet kisses against her inner thigh. Soon she became all too aware of how her hips begun to move on their own. Saeyoung worked in time with them, although gradually his ministrations grew more rapid. There was a rhythm… But every time he curled his fingers upward within her or maneuvered his wrist to better grind against her, it made her aware of her bladder… So much so she couldn’t help but tense up, which only made that part of her grip his fingers more tightly. Slowly he eased alongside her, pulling her close into arms before continuing.
Miyeon kissed him hungrily. His long, nimble fingers were so very wonderful… The coarseness of them gave just the right amount of friction. Even so, those weren’t what the virgin in her wanted so desperately. If she just closed, her eyes though…

His motions intensified, stimulating both the inner and outer portions of her… Although he wasn’t going too deep in. It was very different than when she pleasured herself. It only worsened the urgency within her the more he massaged her from within.

“Saeyoung…!”

He nestled against her, taking one of her perky nipples back into his mouth to tease, while continuing with purposeful movements until she couldn’t help herself.

Her body convulsed as pleasure cascaded to every iota of her being, rushing out… RUSHING OUT! Miyeon covered her face, feeling as the ecstasy left her helpless to stop the release from her in bursts. Saeyoung eased his ministrations, slipping his hands away from her sex to rest at her thigh. Seemingly pleased with the results.

She wanted to die. Although she wasn’t sure if it was from ecstasy or embarrassment…

The hacker didn’t seem too bothered, rather he continued to soothe and caress her. Even as she rolled away from him to sulk and hide her face. He persisted, placing loving kisses along her neck and shoulder as he held her from behind, assuring her, despite her protests, that he was fine and there was no need to reciprocate. Between the intensity and how warm it was, it didn’t take long for her to return to sleep.

Saeyoung continued running his knuckles slowly along the young woman’s skin until he felt her totally succumb to fatigue, well-worn with a cocktail of oxytocin and dopamine delivered through the gift human intimacy. For several moments after, he lay at her side watching as she slept. It was only once he was certain that she wouldn’t wake that he returned to his work. Retrieving his glasses from the night stand, the hacker stepped lightly across the floor to the cabin’s kitchen. Using a towel, he muffled the sound of the can being opened before returning to the improvised workspace he’d made for himself.

The operation was nearly ready… But there were some personal things that he needed to reconfirm and prepare. Then it was simply a matter of catching Vanderwood… He’d gotten some good intel from traffic cameras that had indicated where the agent was going. There was no denying that his brother was with him by the pink hair and leather jacket.

It was almost over…

His eyelids felt as though there were sandpaper on both sides, grating with each blink. Sleep wasn’t going to come easily. The amount of work that still needed to be done wasn’t the only consideration. The awareness of just how close death was made him reluctant to waste even a moment of his conscious life. There was still so much he wanted to do and see… He wasn’t a stranger to such fears, but before it seemed to hold less power over him. Until very recently, his life had been meaningless. The work he did – the kindnesses and evils – all anonymous. No one would’ve missed, not even Saeran.
That wasn’t the case now though.

A throaty sigh escaped him as he held the cold can against his neck, praying silently that the CPU that was his brain would cool enough to function and focus. The temptation to return to Miyeon and make his selfish request now was there though… His gaze drifted back to Miyeon’s beautiful, bare body. The moonlight danced along her contours as a breeze sent the treetops just beyond the cabin waving. Her dark hair fell in long, glimmering strands in such stark contrast to the pale skin of a girl who hid indoors.

The fizzy cherry almond mingled with the remnants of her salt on his tongue. It certainly added something unique to the flavor. Setting the can aside, he finished the more detailed aspects of the three contingency plans that he hadn’t shared with the woman whose mere existence gave him hope. In a situation like this, there were only two higher powers he could appeal to. God and Jumin Han…

Jaehee had confirmed a great deal of what he’d already laid out, although she seemed greatly concerned about why he was asking for such things, but she understood well enough to not ask questions… Most of his funds were in cash. There were the cars… His house… And a few other assets that were to be sold and split between Miyeon and Saeran in the event of his death. He had no doubt he could count on Jumin to ensure that there would be arrangements made for protection for both Saeran and Miyeon, as had been done for the rest of the RFA.

He was so grateful to both Jaehee and the CEO to be… The older woman’s affection for the girl was a good sign that everything would be taken care. That gave him some peace of mind…

In his weary state, his mind wandered back to the concept of family… It was impossible to find anything on Saeran after a few months past their 15th birthday. Even those findings were indirect, with him featured in group pictures at the cathedral… There were portions of the Mint Eye data that were so corrupted that catbot was still trying to sort them out.

While another packet was uploaded in preparation for a leak in the event things went South, Saeyoung pulled up the data bases of the university Miyeon had been enrolled to… Now that he was listening to her – truly listening – he felt as though he was starting to piece the parts of her history that she didn’t voice together…

Most of the paperwork was scanned in PDF copies, but he didn’t have to look hard to find what he was looking for. It was the most recent filing for Miyeon Ko for a Request of Academic Leave of Absence.

That lead to the unpleasant task of gaining access to the National law enforcement records, hospital information system and the tangled nightmare that was the healthcare system with its multitude of specialties. It took some effort, but he found everything he wanted to know about Detective Ko. His work history, the cases he was working on… The most telling was his medical history, the end of which was only months prior to Miyeon joining. Saeyoung’s heart sunk. Every image… Every report…

… That sad smile…

In his anger, he’d accused her of simply giving up, as if she were some sort of weak-willed child… The reality was she was at the hospital for every appointment, stayed with her father during his care despite the odds being so low, and then mourning on her own… Planning a funeral… Handling his affairs…

There was no trace of her mother’s involvement – no uncles – no aunts – cousins.
It was her and her alone…

His eyes grew too bleary for him to continue, imagining just how much she’d endured silently while pretending everything was fine. There was no doubt she’d done that for a long time…

He wanted so desperately to apologize, but there was a very good chance she’d be upset with him for going behind her back to find out. Then again, maybe she’d be relieved that she wouldn’t have to say anything. He wasn’t sure why she couldn’t talk about it, although it was likely that she hadn’t wanted to worry him. It was also so very fresh for her… The thought of it being so painful that she couldn’t hold her composure was also likely.

Saeyoung had promised no more secrets or lies…

Whether he died or they lived the rest of their lives together happily — he intended to keep that vow.

…He would tell her that he knew when she woke up…

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--- So for those interested in more “ero”, here’s a scene I decided to cut. But I’ll share it with you guys anyway. I opted to cut it because I feel it’d take away from when they do consummate things properly. Plus there’s the fact that hunting down Saeran isn’t a time for stuff like this. It felt out of character and more like fanservice. So we’ll keep the service separate on this. XD

“…You trust me, right?”

She nodded. He then rested her back against his car before she watched him drop. The realization of what he had in mind didn’t hit her until she felt his breath along her inner thigh.

Miyeon’s hands reflexively reached down to cover herself as her panties were pulled to her knees. Saeyoung’s hair tangled in her fingers as he lovingly kissed her outer thigh, then worked inward and up…

The girl covered her mouth as he gently pushed her knee up and out… She felt so exposed…!

He wasn’t really going to… do that… was he? They’d been driving for hours and…

A muffled cry escaped her as she raised one hand back to cover her mouth due to the coolness of air being replaced by something warm and slick. Her legs buckled, putting her weight between the car, her one quivering leg, and the way Saeyoung’s shoulder held her knee. It tickled! Her body buckled at the sensation, but gradually she allowed herself to relax…
For several minutes he persisted, seemingly content to continue as long as she liked. She felt so close to finishing just as he slowed and sat back a little. This confused her at first but soon Saeyoung eased himself back up along her, pinning her to the car, while his fingers continued where his tongue had left off. It was sheer ecstasy as he held her and kissed her neck. Miyeon held onto him for support, her body naturally wanted to curl around him, which made keeping on her feet so very challenging.

His hips pressed into her hard, pinning her between the sun warmed metal, and his heat. She couldn’t help but reciprocate… It was delightful how he rose up against her touch. She felt so dizzy and eager once she realized that while he’d leaned over her to deepen their kiss, he’d unbuttoned his jeans. As he moved back, her body followed quite naturally, feeling the glide of the zipper and the coarseness of the fabric. There was the smoothness of his undergarments which quickly opened and revealed the feel of his skin.

Saeyoung glanced down, seemingly in awe of just how bold she could be before returning his attentions to her… A happy little laugh escaped her as they continued thrilling the other at a pace that matched. It was almost a game until she felt his fingers ease back, grazing her thigh before he held her hips with little nod.

The girl offered little resistance as he guided her to lay her belly against the car.

“Saeyou-…”

She could feel him press against her from behind, but not forcefully… It was enough to make her raise her chest and look back with concern. He leaned down, letting his lips press to hers reassuringly.

“…It’s okay… I’m not going to do -that-…”

She lowered herself, trusting him as he pressed her knees together with his own. Then Miyeon felt him! There was a flash of concern that soon turned to relief at feeling his sex glide between her inner thighs and her womanhood. If he was careful and his fluids stayed outside- it might be okay. It felt nice enough… His thrusts were slow at first, making his length slick enough to glide against her. Miyeon squirmed a little to balance herself and get the most out of the sensation - it very much agreeable. The way his chest shuddered against her wasn’t helping her judgement. He paused, seeking confirmation that it was okay to proceed, which she answered with an insistant pushing her bottom back against him.

A throaty breath escaped him as he began again with a little more confidence, using more force as he braced himself against the car. Between the hot metal pressing against her breasts, the sunshine on her back – punctuated with the occasional kiss or caress from Saeyoung, and the steady friction of his girth against her petals - she was in ecstacy!

The sensation was amazing!

He seemed very mindful of her concerns, but it was clear that the natural instinct and mechanics was hard to keep at bay. Their bodies seemed to understand that with just a small adjustment, they’d both feel much more satisfied… Seayoung’s hips would move back just a little farther, and she could feel the tip pressing so dangerously close. Thankfully he seemed aware enough in the moment to mitigate the motion with an adjustment of her positioning.

Like this she could move along with him. It was a feedback loop of pleasure. There was no way to express just how pleased she was knowing that slight tightening of her knees could make his breathing falter or elicit any number of sounds from him...
He freed a hand to slide under her belly and squeeze her breast and pulled her body up against him. She offered no resistance, particularly as their lips met… The angle of his motions changed, hitting firm bud of her desire as his harmless shaft grinded against the entrance of her womb. Reflexively, she reached down, feeling the slick, firm head of his gender between her legs. Her free arm then coiled around, digging into his scalp, while her other hand rubbed the tip each thrust in… Greedily she pressed him harder against her loin.

They moved together in harmony… Until, she felt the familiar heat of his tongue against her neck… Then the graze… Then the gratifying sting of his teeth sinking in. Miyeon froze like a kitten being held at the nape as he bit harder while his fingers dug into her lower belly, pushing her harder against him.

Her hips wriggled with frustration… Just a little more… She was so close…

So was he judging by how the pace suddenly picked up… It was all Miyeon could do to keep up by gripping the car. His hand slipped up along her belly, holding her by the neck. Subconsciously, this made her body tighten. The resistance… The force… That was what her body wanted. Then the tension broke…

Her knees buckled with the intensity of it, yet he held her taut…

Every part of her was on fire and every nerve was raw, yet her brain felt numb. Yet Saeyoung wasn’t done… He guided her to where the sun warmed metal supported her chest. The feel of it…

She was going to break!

Saeyoung slowly eased over her, his hips moving slower and more deliberately before she felt a familiar pulse, before feeling his seed flow down her thigh… Neither could quite move for a moment, but that was well enough. Her body ached for him to remain close, which he did. Tenderly he kissed her shoulders and back, before she felt him carefully withdraw from between her thighs.

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