Check Engine Light

by Havokftw

Summary

Software engineer Lee Jihoon gets a flat the on a deserted highway, and he doesn't know how to change it.

As luck would have it, gang leader Choi Seungcheol is passing by, and stops to lend a hand.

They get....friendly.

Soon, Jihoon finds himself in the centre of a long running gang dispute.

Loosely inspired by Seungcheol on a motorbike in Boom Boom MV. Very loosely inspired.

Notes
So I really liked the Boom-Boom MV. ESPECIALLY THE BIKER PART! Seriously, Biker Seungcheol...wow. Just. Thank you Pledis.
Jihoon can’t change a car tyre.

And before you say anything, shut the fuck up.

Who said just because he was a guy he should know how to? Bullshit. It’s not some unspoken rule amongst men that you should know how to change a flat tyre just because you’ve been driving for 5 years.
Just last week he learned how to check the oil in the engine after his car grinded to a halt in the middle of the highway. Thankfully, he had his phone with him at the time and could call Roadside Recovery for assistance. They towed his car to the nearest mechanic and apparently, the oil in the engine is NOT the petrol? What? The oil is like a completely separate compartment and needs to be topped up regularly to keep the engine running. Or at least that was what his mechanic, Bob, had said, after laughing his head off at Jihoon’s confusion.

He knows how to top up the windscreen washer fluid, because his dad showed him—once, he probably couldn’t do it again because, honestly, he hadn’t really been paying attention but he knows you pour some blue tinted fluid in a container that is vaguely in the direction of the hood.

Just last week he got pulled over for speeding and when the officer waved a ticket in his face and told him “You need to get your break light fixed too by the way—but it’s an easy job you should be able to just change the bulb.”

Jihoon accepted the ticket, smiled genially then proceeded to flip the guy off as he drove off because this was a car and not a fucking lampshade and since when do cars have bulbs that need changing? Clearly the officer had no idea what he was talking about.

This car has been nothing but a fucking nightmare since he got it. If it’s not randomly throwing up weird ass hieroglyphic symbols at him it’s telling him to do things. Like: *EMISSIONS CONTROL* and *SERVICE CAR* and *CHECK OIL LEVEL* and he manages to roll his eyes and ignore it every time but then, one day—there he is, driving peacefully along the road, minding his own business when a *CHECK BREAK PADS* signal flashes up on the dash and he practically swerves his car off the road in panic.

*Check break pads? Are my breaks not working? Better find out!*

So he jams his foot on the breaks and whaddya-know, the breaks are working fine. Too fine actually because the car skids to a halt immediately and the car behind him must swerve around him to avoid a collision. He could hear the other driver swearing and shouting at him but it’s not his fucking fault because his car is telling him to do shit and it’s confusing.

“You need a new timing belt,” His mechanic once told him. And Jihoon has promptly replied with, “Your face needs a new timing belt,” because he wasn’t going to have another one of those discussions that involved a lot of probing questions on his part including; *What’s a timing belt? Why do I need one? And Will the car be ok without it?* Those conversations made him feel small and stupid and usually resulted in him forking out a shed load of cash to get something—he couldn’t even see broke—fixed.

He’s not calling Bob the mechanic again.

Not this time and not over this flat tyre.

Not because he has a strange sense of pride or anything, it’s mainly because his phone is completely out of charge.

He’s been parked along the side of the highway for over 30 mins just looking at the floppy wheel with a distasteful expression on his face, like staring at it hard enough will suddenly inflate air into it or something.

There hasn’t been another car along in a while and he almost regrets waving that nice old lady, who pulled up to help him away. He’d lied and told her he was just about to roll up his sleeves and get stuck in, but in reality: he rolled up his sleeves, propped himself up on the hood and got a nice tan on
his arms instead.

He promises himself that he’ll admit to needing help when the next car drives by. Pride be damned.

He hopes somebody will come soon because the sun is setting and he’s in the middle of nowhere and he’s pretty sure he just heard coyotes howling in the distance.

The roar of an engine catches Jihoon’s attention and he covers his brow with a hand to look out on the horizon.

A mirage appears in the distance, plumes of dust rising around it as it slopes over the top of the road towards him. It’s too small to be a vehicle and, luckily, too fast to be a coyote.

He squints and determines that it must be a ……motorcycle.

*Just fucking great.*

In all honesty, Jihoon would have *preferred* the coyotes.

Bikers have a notoriously bad reputation in the area: the usual gang warfare, attacks and retribution playing back and forth between rival factions means you couldn’t walk around freely at night, you have to avoid drinking in certain bars, and Jihoon can’t afford to sell his apartment because of a slump in the market value.

If you're in the wrong place at the wrong time you're as good as dead.

Jihoon’s shoulders droop as the bike slows down on approach. He turns his head slowly, blinking against the sunlight reflecting off the visor on the bikers helmet. The biker pulls up along the side of the road and the noise of the engine dies down as he sets a foot on the ground to steady his bike.

He starts to say ‘hello—please don’t kill me’, but at the sight of him, this big guy dressed entirely in black leather, straddling this gorgeous sleek black and yellow machine, Jihoon’s breath stutters in his chest.

With a start, Jihoon realises that the man is checking him out. He can tell by the way light reflects off his helmet that his head is tilting, moving down the length of Jihoon’s body, then slowly rising over his legs and torso.

Jihoon’s skin itches and he fights back the urge to squirm. He thinks he’s probably calculating how deep a grave to dig for Jihoon’s soon to be corpse.

“Do you need some help?” The guy asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

Jihoon is a little surprised at not being threatened and replies unthinkingly, “No” and *dammit*, why is he like this? But the expression on his face must say it all because the biker just chuckles and shakes his head.

“What?” The man probes, his voice is low and slightly gravelly, but soft somehow.

“No,” he contradicts himself, and now he *really* is just being difficult. He doesn’t mean to be a squabbling child, but it just isn’t *fair*.

“You’ve got a flat tyre,” The biker says needlessly.

He toes down the kickstand to stabilise the bike and pulls the key out of the ignition. Unwillingly, Jihoon’s eyes go to his thighs and he watches the black leather stretch over the generous proportions
as the man lifts a leg over his bike to stand straight.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed! I was just standing here on the side of the road enjoying the view!” Jihoon spits sardonically, and again, why is he like this? The guy is definitely going to punch him in the face any minute now.

The biker choke out a laugh that echoes inside his helmet, but he’s obviously the friendly sort because he doesn’t whip out a length of chain and choke Jihoon with it like he expects.

“Have you got a spare?” He asks.

Jihoon’s eyebrows pinch in irritation “A spare car?....Yeah, it’s in my pocket, let me just fish it out, oh that’s right, I’m not made of money!”

“A spare tyre!” He counters.

“Oh. Uhhh….I think there is one in the trunk?” Jihoon mumbles. He’s pretty sure he saw one under the lining of his trunk once.

The biker moves around to the back of his car slowly, then turns to Jihoon and says “Jack?”

“Uhmm. Excuse me? My Name is Jihoon.” Jihoon clarifies, then he startles as the biker clutches his stomach and bends over laughing.

“Wow…hi Jihoon, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Seungcheol. And by jack… I mean a piece of equipment that you use to lever the car up,” He says pointedly, waving his hands in a vaguely jerky motion as he says it.

Jihoon flushes with humiliation “I KNEW THAT!” he hisses, and he totally didn’t. He considers sticking his tongue out, but he resists the temptation.

“Okay-okay, I’m sorry…pop the trunk for me wud ya.” Seungcheol says, patting the back of the car twice.

Jihoon pouts, but does what he’s told because it’s getting darker now and he really needs to get off the road before the coyotes conspire against him and he would like to get home and wallow in self-pity in front of the television, before going to bed.

Watching Seungcheol bend over to inspect the contents of his trunk is a thoroughly enjoyable sight however. Jihoon loses himself as he appreciates splendidly firm, ass, thighs and muscles as Seungcheol eases the trunk up and fumbles around with the cover.

“You do have a jack. In fact, you have all the tools you need back here to change the tyre yourself. Did you realise that?” Seungcheol says, pulling out a bulky contraption and a wrench from the trunk of Jihoon’s car.

“Oh yeah? Is there a mechanic in there too perhaps? Because if there isn’t….then I’m afraid you’re wrong and I do not have all the tools I need,” Jihoon replies, using his customary brand of sarcasm to try and cover up how flustered he is all of a sudden.

Seungcheol chooses to ignore his snarky comeback. He turns to Jihoon, tilting his head speculative and knowing.

“So you don’t know how to change a tyre then, is that it?” He sighs. "That’s alright. Lots of people don’t, but I'm gonna teach you cause it’s a useful skill to have. put the car in first gear please.”
Then the guy places his gloved palms on either side of his helmet and pulls it off.

Jihoon gasps because—fuck, it’s like something out of Baywatch with how super slow he does it. He lifts a gloved hand to ruffle his jet-black hair as he frees it from the confines of his helmet.

The lucky bastard doesn’t even have helmet hair or anything. Jihoon bites his lip because Seungcheol’s a doe eyed, full lipped, long lashed, dark headed hunk. All broad shoulders and biceps from what Jihoon can see and he swallows visibly as Seungcheol gives him a cocky grin, so clear and bold, the clarity of it is achingly sharp.

He’s got piercings in his ears: two of them, a crucifix and a stud and despite the religious associations, they don’t make him look innocent at all. Just pure sin and seduction. He pulls his gloves off next and Jihoon would really like to have one of those fold up chairs he can whip out, set up and sit down to watch him in action. He bites on one gloved finger-tip, pulling his hand back and the glove off, then repeats the movement on the other hand.

Jihoon’s throat suddenly dries as Seungcheol begins unzipping his jacket. He tries not to let his eyes linger on the handsomely formed arms or on the noticeable size of Seungcheol’s biceps as he rolls his shoulders back and shrugs off his jacket. The leather glides across his sturdy frame as the jacket slides off smoothly and the black t-shirt he’s wearing underneath, stretches dangerously broad over his chest.

He places his helmet on the roof of the car and tosses the jacket and gloves next to it. Jihoon doesn’t realize he’s staring until Seungcheol raises his eyebrows and says, “Helloooo,"

“Uhh….hi?”

“I said….come here,” Seungcheol waves him over. At those words, Jihoon seems to wake from a trance and gives him a long, assessing stare.

“Why?” he asks, with a frown.

Seungcheol lets out a long suffering sigh, “Cause I’m going to show you how to change this tyre, so you know how…. in case it happens again."

He places his selected tools on the ground next to the flat tyre and cracks his knuckles. For a minute Jihoon thinks the guy’s about to lower himself under the car and maybe bench press it or something. He probably could to!

Jihoon’s features scrunch up, then he shakes his head, trying to blink himself out of his lustful haze for long enough to figure this out. “Trust me, this is never going to happen again. I’m going to buy a new car with indestructible tyres and I’m going to get a mobile phone that never loses charge.” he dismisses.

Seungcheol just grins at him, lips and eyes crinkling with mirth as he stands haughtily for a moment, watching Jihoon intently.

Jihoon pouts, verging on petulant but he’s nodding, slow and resigned and moving over to watch the demonstration.

“You have a puncture, sometimes a puncture repair kit will do just fine and you can roll this baby to a garage and get your tyre changed” Seungcheol explains, probing the deflated wheel with a thumb.

Jihoon snorts indelicately, “So, why can’t we just do that?” he queries.
“We could do that. Do you happen to have a puncture repair kit?” Seungcheol drawls, smirk creeping its way up onto his sinners lips.

Jihoon sighs dramatically as he crosses his arms, “No” he admits, voice low and clipped.

“Okay then, so you’re going to have to change it. But first we have to elevate the car to get the wheel off. Grab that jack,” he instructs.

Great, he’s one of those ‘I’ll show you but I won’t do it for you’ type of teachers. Fuck him. Jihoon wants to roll his eyes and glower, but tries for an impassive look that he suspects looks more bored or constipated.

“You need to attach the jack to the correct jacking points, if you don’t know where that is, usually your vehicle handbook will list them. But if you don’t have that handy, I find fitting the jack closest to the wheel is best. Attaching the jack to the wrong place might mean the vehicle collapsing when you’re in the middle of changing the tyre. Then you need to attach this,” he gestures to an oddly shaped metal frame “It’s a wheel chock. Attach it to one of the other wheels when you are working so that your car doesn’t roll forward and crush you.” he warns.

“You need to push down on the lever here to hoist the car up and take weight off the wheel,” He gestures for Jihoon to apply effort to the lever and Jihoon tries, but he practically has to stand on the thing to get it to budge and even then, he’s not heavy enough to shift it.

So he tries jumping on it instead and it jerks suddenly and he loses his footing, slipping off.

He’s certain he’s about to faceplant into the tarmac but an arm slips around his waist and supports his weight easily. Seungcheol’s shaking inhale the only counterpoint to the steady hands that pull him back and upright again. “Okay?”

Suddenly, Jihoon is so frustrated he can’t even see straight.

“It’s not budging!” he snaps, feeling small and fragile under Seungcheol’s wolfish gaze, even as the man offers him a gentle smile that nearly steals his breath away.

“You’re doing fine. You just need to put more weight on it, like this,” He says, standing straight and pushing his leg down on the lever in a sure motion.

The jack extends until it just starts to lift the vehicle on its springs.

“Next you’re going to need to unscrew these lug-nuts. And you’re going to use this. It’s a wheel wrench, and this end here is a locking wheel nut adapter,” Seungcheol informs him, handing over a weird looking heavy tool.

Jihoon sighs and examines the tool, catching his lip between his teeth.

“Here, look….like this,” Seungcheol instructs, and one hand catches Jihoon's fingers with some backward twist that allows him to pull Jihoon forward in one fluid motion, guiding his hand to the first bolt, clipping the tool in place. “Now—twist.”

Jihoon heaves and strains but the bolt is too damn stiff.

Jihoon sucks in a sharp breath when he feels the heat and pressure of a body pressing firmly against his back. Seungcheol is now leaning over him; chest to back, crotch to ass; as he takes hold of the sloped handle of the wrench and pushes it down, making it look so effortless.
Jihoon can feel the tremor in his hands where Seungcheol’s fingers overlap with his, he can feel hot breath puffing against his neck and if he’s not mistaken, a thick cock nestled in the cleft of his ass, but when he throws a glance over his shoulder, Seungcheol is smiling all lopsided and innocent at him.

“You have to put some elbow grease in it Jihoon. These screws are really …stiff.” he explains, detaching the wrench and clipping it on to the next lug-nut.

“Try again. By yourself this time.” Seungcheol says in a low voice that roots under Jihoon’s skin.

Jihoon takes a firm hold of the wrench and pushes down with added effort, it’s still rigid, but soon gives way and loosens gradually.

It’s only after a long moment that Jihoon sees past his nerves to the fact that Seungcheol has grasped his hips, thumbs slowly circling over the curve of his hip-bones.

Jihoon’s lip trembles just a touch, and he tries not to focus on the gentleness of it too hard.

He isn’t stupid enough to be lured in by a soft caress and a lingering gaze—or, at least, he’s not stupid enough to show it. Instead he focuses on loosening the rest of the nuts in a similar manner.

When he finishes and Seungcheol pulls off again, the corners of his mouth are curled up into a devious smile.

“Now, grab your spare,” Seungcheol orders, sauntering over to the trunk of the car and lifting the surface cover. He leans in and pulls out the spare from where it’s nestled in the trunk and props it up, inspecting it.

Jihoon moves forward to pick up the spare wheel but Seungcheol takes hold of his shoulders, pivots him and presses him back against his chest with such a sudden intensity that it makes the tiny hairs on the back of Jihoon’s neck stand on end.

Seungcheol strokes his hands down Jihoon’s shoulders, over his arms and sides until they rest chastely on his hips, clasping firmly enough to keep him from moving away.

Jihoon tilts his head to look at Seungcheol over his shoulder and he immediately feels caged by his darkening gaze. He makes an embarrassing sound, ruffling the back of his hair to cover the thrill of nerves shivering up his spine. He quickly drops his eyes as Seungcheol’s rumbling chuckle sends a shudder through him, making him blush fiercely.

“Before you switch your tyre,” Seungcheol continues, speaking smooth and low “You need make sure the spare tyre has enough tread and is properly inflated.” he explains, running a palm down the curve of the rubber.

He halts his movement, then takes hold of Jihoon’s hand, warm calloused palm overlapping Jihoon’s soft, small fingers. He places Jihoon’s hand on the tyre but doesn’t remove his, just guides their hands along the thread of the rubber slowly.

Seungcheol is almost whispering when he says “See….nice and firm. That’s what you’re looking for. Can you feel how firm it is?” he rasps, pushing his hips lightly against Jihoon’s ass.

Jihoon makes a whining sound in his throat “Yeah…..I can… feel it.” he gasps low and breathless.

“Don’t lift it, it’s too heavy for you. Bounce it on the tarmac and roll it where you want it to go.” He explains in a low voice, barely above a murmur.
Jihoon blinks forward and tries to ignore the arousal thrumming in his chest, in his limbs, in his whole damned body.

“Bounce and roll. Got it.” Jihoon repeats, his voice matching Seungcheol’s in that low pitch.

He can't help the way desire stirs in his gut, so he focuses on wheeling the tyre to the empty axel and crouching down to examine it.


Jihoon’s legs shake at this stooped angle, and it's a job to lift the wheel up without tipping over but then Seungcheol’s hands are slipping around his hips again, whole and careful, steadying him as he lifts the wheel in place.

Switching the spare is basically the removal method in reverse. Seungcheol instructs him to loosely refit the top lug-nut first, then tighten the remaining bolts by hand. He crouches behind Jihoon the whole time, never breaking contact entirely, a steady heat and weight on Jihoon’s back, guiding his hand and caging him in.

“Good boy,” Seungcheol coos, patting Jihoon gently on the back when he's finished.

It sounds so fucking condescending that Jihoon whips his head up to glare at him but Seungcheol’s smile blooms so full and sincere, it is agony to endure.

Jihoon figures it a testament to how aroused he is that he doesn’t even protest at the objectionably patronizing hair ruffle he gets for his success.

Then Seungcheol instructs Jihoon to lower the jack carefully until the wheel just touches the ground, and shows him how to use the wheel wrench-thingy-ma-bob to tighten the lug-nuts fully. Jihoon manages to finish tightening the last bolt himself, uncomfortably aware of Seungcheol’s eyes on him, or—more appropriately, on his ass as he does it. He tries in vain to pretend it doesn't make his dick twitch.

Seungcheol pats the dust off his Kevlar clad knees as he deposits the damaged wheel in the boot well. He collects his helmet and jacket and moves back over to his bike.

“Just so you know, your spare wheel is actually a skinny spare ” he explains and Jihoon open his mouth to ask ‘what the fuck’? But Seungcheol immediately raises a hand to silence him.

“That means it’s a temporary-use tyre. You will need to replace it with a normal tyre as soon as possible. Don’t drive over 50mph, and try to get to a dealer or mechanic to get a new one fitted ASAP.” Seungcheol explains with a comforting, friendly smile.

Jihoon flushes heavily under that smile “Thanks, uhm, Seungcheol.” he murmurs, hands tugging dumbly on his shirt sleeve, trying to remove any hints of arousal from his voice and body.

“You're welcome, and it's just Cheol if you like,” Seungcheol offers, with a sly curve to his lips that sends a jolt straight to Jihoon's cock.

“Oh, ok. Thanks Cheol. I appreciate your help.” Jihoon adds, biting his bottom lip.

“Here, let me give you my card,” Seungcheol says, maintaining the same curious but playful expression as he reaches in to his jacket pocket and pulls out a business card.

Hold on—what the fuck?
Bikers have business cards now?

What are they even advertising? *Hey mister! Are you looking to get somebody killed? Do you need a body dumped? A drug mule or are you simply in the market to have your neighbours terrorized? Then you need to call Seungcheol on 999-111 for a friendly, fast and efficient death!*

Jihoon inspects the card suspiciously, screwing up his face and blinking at it when he reads the job description printed in bold: **MECHANIC.**

*Figures.*

“*You’re a mechanic?*” Jihoon asks, too surprised to hide it. He’s a little irritated at how slow he is on the uptake. *Of course,* the guy is a mechanic.

Seungcheol stares blankly at him. “*Yeah….why? What did you think I was?*”

Oh…I dunno:

*A psychopath*

*A hit-man*

*A gun-totting biker*

*A black leather wearing wet dream.*

“*Uhh…. a pizza delivery guy?*” Jihoon offers

Seungcheol arches an eyebrow, and even though he doesn't say it, Jihoon can hear the implied *‘Oh really?’* loud and clear.

He darts his tongue out to trail along his lower lip and smirks at Jihoon. “So…if you want. You can bring this baby over and I’ll set you up with a new tyre and a new spare and uh, “ he pauses, gaze flickering away “I can tighten your nuts for you too,” he says, barely supressing an eyebrow wiggle.

“I uhm…” Jihoon begins to answer, unsure of what he is about to say.

Seungcheol hoists one leg over his bike and kicks the engine into life. “*Unless of course you already have a mechanic.* In which case, feel free to ignore my suggestion and stay faithful to him. I'm sure he's a great guy and can satisfy you. And your car. But if he *doesn't,* and you're in the market for a new boyf-mechanic, *you could always....*”

Seungcheol trails off, then coughs to clear his throat, “*Do you...uh, have a mechanic?*” he asks, quirking his brow.

Jihoon shakes his head at that and smiles almost ruefully. “*I don’t think I have one,*” he lies. Cause he does have a mechanic. **Bob.** Absolutely useless and wholly unattractive.

Seungcheol’s eyes dance then, silently and gaily chastising Jihoon for feigning ignorance. His mouth gives up on the grin he’s wearing and curves wide, popping dimples into his cheeks. “Great. Then, you should come over and let me take care of you—rrr car” he says.

Jihoon’s eyebrows shoot up into his hairline, but he recovers quickly. He’s about to throw out a parting quip, maybe some bullshit about that being the worst line in history but then Seungcheol
winks at him and he has to focus on not letting his knees buckle. He clears his throat, blinks hard and takes a deep breath. “Okay”

When Jihoon pulls into his parking space in front of his apartment block, he takes a minute to inspect the business card Seungcheol gave him. He contemplates scrunching it up in his hand and tossing it out the window, but doesn’t. He slips it into his wallet instead.

It was about time he found himself a new mechanic anyway.
Your Friendly Neighbourhood Mech-CON-ic

Chapter Summary

Jihoon needs some more help apparently.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jihoon drives on his skinny tyre for one week. And before you say anything, shut the fuck up.

Yeah, he knows he’s meant to get it replaced as soon as possible. Seungcheol had warned him and a quick Google search when he got home revealed that it was genuinely good advice. He has Seungcheol’s card in his wallet, he has his number and the address of the garage but, honestly, he’s a tad nervous about just showing up and demanding Seungcheol take care of him. He’s also had a few wet dreams (read 8, one for every night + one daydream at his desk at work) about getting bent over that motorcycle and thoroughly pounded. He doesn’t know what the inside of a garage typically looks like, but in his dreams there are a lot of chains, lots of straining and heaving and sweating and lots of sleek expensive cars to get fucked on.

So that’s why he goes back to Bob after painfully sticking to a speed limit of under 50mph for a week. Big Bob and his ridiculously captivating wacky waving inflatable arm flailing tube man. It’s the reason he bought his car from Bob in the first place. He was out, taking a stroll one day and came across Big Bob’s Brilliant Bargain Motor Madness selling cars and super low-low prices! He laughed at the ridiculous tongue tying title and then swiftly fell into a hypnotic trance watching the Wacky waving inflatable arm flailing tube man at the front of the store. Before he knew it, he was walking into the store, handing over his credit card, shaking Bib Bob’s big sweaty hand and driving out of Big Bob’s Blah blah blah with a shiny new car and a big smile on his face. That there, was good advertising.

Besides, Big Bob was a hardworking family man. He had a big wife and three big children to feed. It was good to give him return custom Jihoon told himself. Because Big Bob was a local, honest, kind, manipulative, lying, thieving SACK OF SHIT!

“How MUCH?” Jihoon yells in disbelief.

“400 dollars!” Bob says, hands crossed defensively.

“To replace a fucking tyre?”

Bob bristles at his tone “To replace four tyres plus labour.” He corrects.

Jihoon gives his head a quick tilt, thinking “I was told I only needed to replace my spare and the… skinny tyre.”

“True. If you had have come here right after you had the spare fitted….but you chose to drive on it for a week and now the thread depth on the other tyres has worn away to compensate for the skinny tyre. So I have to replace them all” Bob clarifies, patently unsympathetic.

Jihoon shoots him an unimpressed look and stomps his food on the ground. “NO….you know
what... **fuck you Bob,** I thought we were... car friends you and I thought we had something special! You're pulling the hood over my eyes because you don’t think I know anything about cars!”

“You... *don’t* know anything about cars” Bob says, a smug grin twisting on his face.

“Maybe not... but I know there are other mechanics out there, with competitive prices and they probably don’t smell like BO!” Jihoon snaps crudely, hand coming up to point for emphasis. “Fuck—you and fuck—that—inflatable—wavy—air—man!” he spits, his index finger pokes Bob with every word. He snatches the keys out of Bob’s hands and dashes to his car.

“You'll be back! They all come back to Big Bob’s Brilliant Bargain Motor Madness!” Bob shouts out after him.

“Fuck you!” Jihoon screams out of the car window as he speeds away.

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He uses his lunch hour to drive the car, really fucking slowly, to the address printed on the back of the business card Seungcheol gave him. Thankfully, it’s not too far from work and he’ll probably make it back in time before his boss notices him missing.

It’s more of a warehouse than a Garage from the outside; no advertising as far as Jihoon could see. Nothing that says ‘Sexy Seungcheols Super Saver Sleek Motor shop’ or anything. But he entered the zipcode into his GPS and it brought him here and when was his GPS ever wrong? All the time actually, now that he thinks about it. Stupid fucking machine.

**FLASHBACK**

GPS: RECALCULATING

“Huh?”

GPS: RECALCULATING

“Why? I haven’t moved!

GPS: RECALCULATING

“Shut up!”

GPS: RECALCULATING

“SHUT UP!”

GPS: MAKE A U-TURN WHEN POSSIBLE

“WHY!”

GPS: TAKE THE NEXT RIGHT

“I'M ON A FUCKING BRIDGE!”

**END OF FLASHBACK**
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He ventures in anyway, if this isn’t the right place maybe there will be somebody here who knows
where Seungcheol’s garage is. He parks his car outside the large warehouse and walks up the slope towards the entrance where he can hear a lot of noise and sparks floating out of. It must be the right place because there are several car parts strewn around the room.

Surveying his surroundings, the garage is… pretty impressive, actually. Jihoon’s never been in to cars or engines… can you tell? But the setup they’ve got going here wouldn’t look out of place in a fast and furious movie or a chop shop in GTA. Alongside the run of the mill car maintenance equipment mounted on nearly every available surface, there are a few computer terminals monitoring, something that looks like CCTV. In the centre of the workspace, there are three very expensive, very fast looking motors with mechanics leaning over them.

One of the mechanics dressed in a navy jumpsuit, comes strolling up to him. The name printed on the corner of his breast pocket reads ‘JUNHUI’. He looks Jihoon up and down. “Hi….can I help you?”

“Hi… uhm yes…. Is… Seungcheol here?” Jihoon asks tentatively.

“The boss is out the back taking care of… business” Jun looks at him curiously now, not-so-subtly trying to catch a glimpse of the lanyard around his neck to work out who Jihoon is. “And you are?” he asks, because Jihoon’s ID card is obscured and there’s something strange about his tone, guarded and defensive.

“I’m Jihoon…….. Seungcheol said I could bring my car around for him to…. have a look at” He explains, showing Jun the card and leaving out the unnecessary details like ‘Tighten my nuts’ cause that’s a detail Jun doesn’t need to know about.

His attention is caught by the back door of the office being thrown open. There’s a noticeable shift in the posture of the mechanics. They stand straighter, hold themselves tighter. Jihoon flicks his eyes back to the open door, uneasy. He’s gripping his key so hard he’s pretty sure the fob is embedded on his palm now.

Jihoon scans Seungcheol as soon as he steps into view. He’s not dressed head to toe in black leather today, that should be disappointing except it isn’t. The navy jumpsuit he’s wearing is hugging the fucking life out of his ass. Jihoon can’t stop himself from noticing this detail because the cut of that suit would be hideously unappealing on almost any other man in the world, but it looks devastating on this one.

And he’s not smiling like before either, he’s got a scowl on his face as he prowls around the confines of the room. He’s clearly worked up over something. He opens his mouth to speak to another mechanic standing near the entrance of the office but then catches sight of Jihoon and wow, Seungcheol’s sudden change in demeanour is totally going to give Jihoon whiplash. Plus, his brain might fry under the sheer heat of Seungcheol’s gaze.

“Boss, somebody is here to see you” Jun explains, looking slightly more uncertain. “He’s got your business card” he glances at Seungcheol for validation.

“Well…. hello again Jellybean” Seungcheol all but purrs, smirk creeping onto his ridiculously handsome face. And the way he says it, Jellybean, it isn’t lecherous or mocking, it’s something soft and caramelized, like Jihoon is someone to be cherished.

Jihoon can vaguely hear the other mechanics turn to face him, a multitude of eyes being trained at him in the span of a few seconds.

There are a few things Jihoon can do at this point in time:
• He can play it cool, roll his eyes and pretend like that was the worst nickname he has ever been given. That would be a lie of course, because Santa’s Little Helper was the worst nickname he was ever given.

• He could run away, straight out of the garage and back to Big Bob’s Brilliant Bargain Motor Madness and grovel at Bob’s feet at beg for his tyres to get fixed at 400 dollars.

• He could kick Seungcheol in the nuts, roll under one of the cars and hide until Seungcheol lures him out with a slice of pizza threaded on a string.

• He could blush like a girl, squirm and pout because some hot mechanic just called him Jellybean and it’s doing strange things to his body temperature.

What to do, what to do….oh look his body is deciding for him and it’s OPTION 4! Oh for fuck’s sake! He’s got a bashful smile on his face, aimed straight at Seungcheol without even knowing it.

Seungcheol lets out a low whistle, coming to a stop before Jihoon. “So you finally decided to take me up on my offer...” he says, giving Jihoon a slow once-over. “Took you long enough.” he adds, eyelids lowering over a hot hooded look.

Jihoon tries not to squeak, he swallows thickly and grips his key fob tightly, twisting it around his fingers in a bout of nerves. “I was busy with work and….stuff and… well you did offer and….I don’t know any other mechanics (lies) and I’m tired of driving under 50mph” he murmurs and his voice sounds hoarse to his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, Jihoon catches Jun shifting uncomfortably.

“Get back to work” Seungcheol calls out, jerking his chin towards Jun, dark eyes never once leaving Jihoon’s. “We’ve got a lot to do before we close shop tonight.”

Jun ducks away quickly and Jihoon feel slightly more comfortable with less eyes focused on him. “So.....do you want to reach in your pocket and give me the key.....or..do you need me to help you with that too?” Seungcheol suggests, silky and dangerous.

Jihoon knows his flush of embarrassment is glaringly apparent, and he squirms in place even as Seungcheol tilts his head and gives him a soft, fond look. He grimaces, about to rethink this whole plan before he decides to screw it and throw caution to the wind. It’s not like Jihoon has many options at the moment, he needs his car for work.

He slips his hand into his pocket and turns over the key. Their contact lingers for a moment as their hands slide together. Seungcheol’s fingertips graze the cool, delicate skin of Jihoon’s wrist before he encloses his fingers over key and tosses it to one of his other mechanics.

“Change the tyres, fit a spare.” he orders curtly, and a tall man with glasses nearly falls over himself to do as he’s told, running out of the garage to attend to Jihoon’s car. Seungcheol watches him run out and crosses his arms, leaning back against a ramp to fully take Jihoon in with the distraction of the car gone. “So....that’s going to take a while...would you like to-“

“I need to get back to work“ Jihoon interrupts quickly.

“Ok....I can give you a ride there?” Seungcheol offers, a strange quirk to his mouth.

Jihoon snorts out of old habit before he can help himself “Thanks but...It’s not far actually. Walking distance and I could use the fresh air.”

Seungcheol’s brows furrow, he almost looks disappointed, then says as much “That’s disappointing...I would have liked to give you a ride...get to know you a little better.”
“Why? Is it necessary to get my car fixed?” Jihoon says, eyes sharp for Seungcheol’s reaction. He tries to hide a smile as the furrow between Seungcheol’s brow deepens further. “I didn’t think so…..I’ll come back after work to pick it up……thanks for the offer though” he says over his shoulder as he walks out.

Seungcheol watches him go with a small smile playing at his lips, and then sighs and walks back into the office.

…………………………

When Jihoon returns to the garage after work, it’s almost dark. A few of the mechanics are still lingering about but don’t give him as much notice as they did earlier. His car is parked inside the bunker and the other cars that were parked before are gone, probably returned to their owners Jihoon’s considers.

Seungcheol’s waiting, just inside the entrance of the warehouse. He’s leaning indolently against the wall, arms folded across his chest, one foot bent and propped up on the wall behind him. He’s giving the car part in his hand a calculating look. Jihoon doesn’t want to disturb him just yet, he will have to eventually, to settle the bill and retrieve his keys but for now he moves towards his car and examines the wheels from a distance.

“So, what do you think?”

Jihoon turns his head just a bit, and Seungcheol is at his elbow. He’s wiping the motor grease off his hands with an equally greasy rag and Jihoon shoots down the perverted thought that worms into his head about how motor oil would make a great substitute for lubricant.

“It’s…amazing” Jihoon allows, glancing at him. “It’s like…a brand-new car.”

“You can’t tell the difference, can you?” Seungcheol prods, grinning.

“Nope” Jihoon admits, a little sheepish “Cars are not exactly…my forte.” He explains.

“I kinda figured that out.” Seungcheol says, his grin not losing an inch of confidence.

Jihoon looks up at him, and smiles very slightly, and says “So, how much do I owe you?”

"It’s on the house." Seungcheol says, with a carefully calibrated smile of his own.

Jihoon can feel his brow furrow. "Why?” he asks, still wrapped up in the sight of Seungcheol’s hands wringing the oily rag.

Seungcheol smiles jauntily. "It’s good to get repeat customer service." Jihoon shakes his head and reaches into his pocket to fish his wallet, until Seungcheol puts one hand under his chin and looks him hard in the eye, "I said, it’s on the house."

"But…why?” Jihoon croaks again. "I was quoted 400 dollars by another mechanic….doesn’t this put you out of pocket. Don’t you have a business to run?” Jihoon asks.

Seungcheol sighs and tosses the greasy rag on the bench closest to them and then threads his fingers through his hair, slicking it back. His lips twist before he says “Now that I’m your mechanic, you’ll be bringing all your car troubles to me, I’m sure I’ll get paid back in the long run.”

“Really? You seem pretty confident about that…what if I just go to another mechanic next time?” Jihoon says, without rancor.
Seungcheol clicks his tongue disapprovingly “I suppose you could do that….would be a shame though….I can really look after you—rr car.” There’s a thread of arousal in Seungcheol’s tone, and Jihoon thinks of how he crowded him on the highway, pressing up against him as he taught him how to replace his flat tyre. The memory makes him tremble.

“You should get one of those wacky waving inflatable arm flailing tube man.” Jihoon says absentmindedly, frowning as soon as the suggestion leaves his mouth.

Seungcheol looks at him for a moment, head tilted slightly to the side, like a curious dog. “Sorry, what?”

“You know…. wacky waving inflatable arm flailing tube man..that sit out the front of stores for advertising and flap their inflatable arms about…attracting patrons.” Jihoon explains, then does a little demonstration with hand-wavy motions.

Amused, Seungcheol leans in closer and his eyes crease in the corners as he beams at Jihoon. “Do that again.” he smiles, a quick and startling flash of dimples.

Jihoon blushes and is about to ask Seungcheol to erase that demonstration from his memory but it’s lucky timing that has Jun approach them then, clearing his throat in nervousness. “Boss….we’re heading out…to uhm…rendezvous with the…..dealer of those…car parts we need.” He informs.

He’s looking at Seungcheol, of course. Jihoon can tell he’s still trying to figure out who he is and why he’s here, but he’s giving him a wide berth because of his proximity and apparent familiarity with Seungcheol.

There’s a flash of something – concern? On Seungcheol’s face but he merely shakes his head “Yeah, yeah alright. Keep me informed” Seungcheol says, waving him off. Once Jun exits the warehouse, it’s just the two of them, standing near each other in a not-too-busy garage.

He turns back to Seungcheol to find him prowling towards him. Jihoon finds himself stepping back in reflex, Seungcheol crowding him in. His arms come up on either side of Jihoon’s face, bodily caging him against the car. This close, Jihoon can see the deep brown of his irises, smell traces of lingering motor oil. He swallows hard, forcing himself to continue meeting Seungcheol’s eyes even whilst his heart is hammering fit to burst in his chest.

Seungcheol slides his tongue over his bottom lip, gets it obscenely wet, then says “I couldn’t help but notice your engine light was flashing on your car dash” and Jihoon can feel the puffs of his breath on his skin. Alarm bells are going off in his head.

Jihoon chews on his lip, worrying at it with his tongue. Seungcheol’s gaze is instantly drawn to his mouth, and his eyes flash. “Yeah?” Jihoon scoffs, playing it off “….so?”

Seungcheol huffs a quiet laugh. “So!…..So that’s not good Jellybean.” he says in gentle rebuke, palms rasping across the side of the car as he spreads his hands to lean in closer “What are you planning on doing about it?”

Jihoon shrugs his shoulders “Ignoring it…..like I ignore all those crazy symbols that flash up. I can’t very well keep taking the car to a mechanic to get it checked out….it flashes up symbols nearly every week” he defends, coughing to cover up his awkwardness.

Seungcheol hums, uncommitted. "If you don’t know what the warning signs on the dash mean…” he trails off, right hand coming up to brush a stray strand of hair off Jihoon’s face, trailing to trace the shell of his ear. “I can give you a demonstration” he offers, eyes hooded, expression shielded by the dark.
“Uhm…okay” Jihoon says, the word sliding out on a quavering breath. He runs a hand nervously through his hair, and Seungcheol narrows his gaze at him at the action. Seungcheol stops himself then, and takes up Jihoon's hand, tugging his towards the door. "Let me show you what they mean."

Seungcheol opens the car door, leans in and pokes at a panel underneath the dash, hooking up some strange looking device to the wires he pulls out from under there. He fiddles with the small computer terminal in his hands and the car dash beeps, calling up a series of signals which promptly disappear when he taps on a button. “This is a Laser Vehicle ECU Code reader. Every car has a series of fault codes that create signals to indicate what might be wrong. When we’re diagnosing what’s wrong we hook this up and the computer will list the fault codes. Then the mechanic can narrow down what’s wrong with the car” he explains.

“This isn’t necessary...” Jihoon begins to say. “I’m familiar with how fault code analysis works, thank you. Although I’m not used to using such a low-tech piece of equipment.”

Seungcheol leans back, surveying him, one hand propped up against the door of the car. There’s a ghost of a smirk on his face. “Oh yeah? Low-tech eh? What are you familiar with using then?”

“Not car related equipment I mean, I’ve done source code analysis for my job to detect faults in security code for real computers” Jihoon countered. “I’m a software engineer” he clarifies.

“Really? Wow… And tell me Jihoon…..when you’re ‘engineering’ software or running source code analysis and a fault comes up on the system…what do you do?” Seungcheol asks.

“I correct it obviously!” Jihoon says defensively. “But it’s usually somebody else’s work that’s gone faulty…not mine.” he confesses in a rush. “So I usually rewrite the code so it never faults again.”

Seungcheol stares at him. “Wow….so you don’t just….ignore it and keep going?” he asks.

“Of course not…that would be stupi—oh” Jihoon pauses, realising his contradiction, then flushes.

“I didn’t think so,” Seungcheol teases, but he smiles at Jihoon then, and there’s something suspiciously warm about it instead of sardonic. “So, I think you need a little lesson in hazard warning signs.” He suggests.

Seungcheol climbs into the drivers seat that’s elevated to the highest point to allow Jihoon to see out of the windscreen. "Wow, it’s pretty cramped in here…going to have to lower the seat a little..or a lot!” he jests.

Jihoon looks more than a little affronted. “Well I need to be able to see out of the windscreen and they make the seats drop really low down…it’s a design fault!” he defends but Seungcheol only grins in response, riling him up further.

Seungcheol fiddles with the buttons on the side of the drivers seat and lowers the seat a good fraction, giving him ample room to extend his legs into the foot well. He slouches in the chair and looks disgustingly happy with himself before pressing a button on the small computer and the car dash beeps again. “See this symbol here?” he says extending a finger to the dash and tapping on it.

Jihoon steps closer, cranes his neck to get a look at the dash but then suddenly Seungcheol takes hold of his wrist and in a single motion, he hauls Jihoon onto his lap, his hands settling on either side of Jihoon’s hips.

Jihoon blinks, startled. He’s facing the windscreen, back to Seungcheol’s chest and it’s weird, wrong and so fucking hot how easily he slots against the other man. Seungcheol’s hands burn a branding line of heat as he runs them down his arms, leaving them pressed into the dip of his hipbones as he
shifts Jihoon on his lap.

It’s weird because Jihoon feels like a kid, pretending to drive sitting on an adults lap. It’s wrong because Seungcheol is not that much older than him and Jihoon’s a grown man now for fucks sake so it’s severely humiliating. Jihoon would absolutely protest, except that now he’s pressed up against the warm, strong line of Seungcheol’s body, and that feels hot! His emotions are so conflicted, but he doesn’t make a move to get up.

“This symbol here…” Seungcheol repeats, unfazed by their proximity “What do you think it means?” he asks.

Breathing out slowly in an attempt to calm his nerves, he worries at his lip. Jihoon can’t see any symbol, he can’t register anything, except the feel of Seungcheol’s warm palms cupping his waist, Seungcheol murmuring softly in his ear, while Jihoon fights to control his breath, and he burns and fuck arousal for being the first instinct in his desperate mind. He hazards a guess anyway “Engine fault?”

“Nope…..this is a traction control warning light, it flashes when the wheels lose grip, usually in rain or snow. Drive slow and careful when this shows up.” Seungcheol explains, winding an arm around Jihoon’s waist and pulling him flush against his chest.

In the dim glow of the overhead car light, Jihoon can make out the finely muscled forearm. Unconscious of his actions, his hand drifts down to touch it, before he catches himself on and lets his hand rest on it lightly instead. Seungcheol’s hand slips away from his waist to trail down Jihoon’s leg, fingertips tracing a delicate line along the inner seam of his thighs as Jihoon parts his legs shamelessly. Jihoon can almost feel the rough pads of his fingers on his sensitive skin through the material of his jeans. And honestly, Jihoon couldn’t remember his name right now if somebody asked him.

Seungcheol removes his hand briefly to press a button on the computer and another symbol twinkles on the instrument panel “What about this one?” Seungcheol asks, as he skims the back of his knuckles over Jihoon’s stomach through his shirt. Jihoon swallows hard, fingers digging into his thigh.

He examines the tiny symbol that looks a lot like the Magical lamp from Aladdin? “Uhm…is it…a magical lamp…with a Genie inside….if I rub the car I get three wishes?” he hazards. He’s fully aware that Seungcheol is watching him throughout all this. Looking at his reflection in the rear-view
mirror, Jihoon catches a glimpse of his expression, soft and almost fond, before it snaps back to its veneer of cockiness and vague inscrutability.

Seungcheol chuckles behind him. “It’s an oil pressure warning light.” he corrects. “It means there has been a drop in oil pressure, and not enough oil is circling and lubricating the engine. If you ignore it—It could result in total engine failure Jellybean. That’s very bad. If that pops up, you need to stop the car immediately and turn off the engine, check the oil level and top up if necessary. If it remains illuminated….that’s when you call me.” He explains, grazing the tips of his fingers over the tops of Jihoon’s thighs. He smiles slyly when he hears Jihoon’s sharp intake of breath.

“O—okay.” Jihoon stutters with a nod. Seungcheol taps another key on his computer and a symbol of an exclamation mark inside a circle, inside a split circle appears.

It looks as if to stay ‘STOP’ and Jihoon is instantly reminded of MC HAMMER. Jihoon takes a deep breath, and can’t help but shoot a quick glance at Seungcheol in the rear-view mirror.

“Well?” Seungcheol questions with a jerk of his brow, noticing Jihoon’s gaze.

“Uhm…Stop, hammer time?” he gambles.

He can feel the reverberation of Seungcheol’s laughter travel through his chest as he sniggers. “Oh god Jellybean.” he breathes, voice quiet, almost wondering. “No….no-no-no.” he titters. “This is the break warning light. It can mean several things. Maybe you’ve left the handbrake on, but if you’re confident that you haven’t, it might mean that your car is low on break fluid. Equally, the sensor might be faulty but it’s important that you don’t ignore it. Stop and investigate”

Jihoon nods slightly, mind processing Seungcheol’s words at a snail’s pace. He wraps his fingers around the steering wheel, trying to lessen the shaking of his hands as he studies the flashing signal on the dashboard thoughtfully. “Or….I could just call you..right?” he ventures, feeling a little braver and wiggling his ass as enticingly as he can.

Seungcheol hisses from behind him “Yess—you can call me.” he rasps, a pleased note in his voice. He taps on the computer again. “And this one?”
Jihoon studies it for a minute. He’s pretty sure the symbol means there is a battery fault, but he’s feeling a little more relaxed, a little more playful and decides to play on Seungcheol’s attention a while longer. “It looks like a robot winking at me.” he says, not even bothering to keep the smile out of his voice.

There’s a fond sigh from behind him followed by a snicker. Seungcheol doesn’t bother to look over his shoulder to analyse it for himself, and just shakes his head minutely. “Jellybean…I’d almost say you were guessing these wrong deliberatedly.” he teases gently, giving Jihoon’s waist a squeeze.

Taking the moment to collect himself as he thinks, Jihoon replies “No……I’m really bad with cars….it was your idea to teach me….maybe you should give up on me if you think it’s hopeless.”

“No chance, you are far too much fun.” Seungcheol whispers. There’s desire in that tone, lust and want curled up in the vowels of his words. He taps on the computer again.

A small symbol of what looks like a thermometer jumps up “It’s a thermometer.” Jihoon guesses correctly, although for the life of him he wouldn’t know what it meant with respect to the car.

“It IS a thermometer…..but what does it mean?” Seungcheol asks.

Jihoon contorts his mouth into a ridiculous pout. “It’s getting hot in here?” he guesses in a sing-song.
(So take of all your clothes?) His eyes meet Seungcheol’s in the mirror, and he knows they’re thinking of the same thing.

Seungcheol brings his hands between Jihoon’s thighs, nudges them open a little further “It certainly is.” he purrs, gaze heavy with promise. Jihoon can feel how hard he is now, can feel his erection pressing against the curve of his ass, can see his eyes hooded, smile wicked as he rolls his hips forward. Jihoon exhales shakily, reaching for the steering wheel again to steady himself, fully aware that Seungcheol is following his every movement. He wants to grind his hips down, his body screams for him to do it. But it’s a stupid move, since he doesn’t know Seungcheol that well and for all he knows that could very well be a wrench tucked in the front of the mans pants. But the instinct curls hot in his belly nonetheless.

Jihoon takes in an unsteady breath. "Cheol" he whimpers, like he’s in agony.

Seungcheol reaches out to cover Jihoon’s hand on the steering wheel with his own. "Shhhh..relax" he says, even though he rolls his hips forward once more.

Just then, one of the mechanics, a tall guy with orange hair comes running out of the office towards them. “Boss….we have a problem!” he pants, and the electric-charged moment they were having is broken.

“Not now, can’t you see I’m in the middle of something?” Seungcheol growls, waving a hand dismissively then grunting in loss as Jihoon scrambles out of his lap.

“Sorry boss.” the poor guy sounds traumatised beyond belief “…but….uhm…that shipment of….motor parts…has gone missing.”

Seungcheol sighs dramatically. “Fine….I’ll be over in a second” he grunts, gesturing for the tall mechanic to go back into the office. That done, he presses a button on the computer and the dashboard resets to normal. Clearing his throat, Seungcheol turns slightly to face him. “Sorry, I have business to take care off.” he explains, rising out of the drivers seat.

“That’s okay…thanks for the lesson.” Jihoon thanks him, as casually as he can manage.

Seungcheol angles his body back towards Jihoon, one hand coming up to rest against the roof of the car, caging him in with his body. “Jellybean….this lesson isn’t over. You be sure to remember what you learnt today….I’m going to test you on it this Friday, when you bring your car in to get that engine fault fixed.”

“Friday? Who says I have time to bring it on Friday..I have a life you know!” he huffs, and Seungcheol quirks a brow in amusement. Unable to meet his eyes, Jihoon turns away to look blankly out of the warehouse. Hooking a finger under his chin, Seungcheol forces his gaze back to him.

“You’ll bring it in on Friday Jellybean or I’ll have to come find you.” Seungcheol warns, hand dropping to rest low on his neck, an anchor and a threat.

Jihoon’s breath hitches at the point of contact, he doesn’t realize that his eyes have gone wide in fear until Seungcheol’s gruff expression melts into sympathy, and he sounds noticeably less abrasive when he says, "Hey Jellybean…It’s fine if you don’t want to come back….I’m was just teasing you.” and Jihoon feels the cold weight of his car key being pressed into his hand.

Stepping back, Seungcheol’s profile is sharply silhouetted by the low lighting of the garage. “I just thought I could teach you some stuff, that’s all.” he says. There's something in Seungcheol’s eyes then, something soft and dark and sad.
Jihoon considers and discards a thousand different replies, before finally his throat loosens enough to let him say: “Okay, I’ll come back on Friday then.”

There’s a glint in Seungcheol’s eye, his mercurial grief shifts into lust like sand. “Good boy” Straightening, he slaps the door emphatically. “Now off you go and if you have any problems…..call me.”

Jihoon licks his parched lips, eyes intent on Seungcheol “Thanks. But I won’t be able to remember any of those symbols on Friday.” he mutters, mostly under his breath.

“Hmm…Good….then we can start the lesson from scratch.” Seungcheol calls out from behind him. Jihoon flusters so intensely, he raises a thumbs-up in response to avoid speaking as he jumps in his car and pulls the door closed.

Chapter End Notes

1) I don't like family guy but I do enjoy that wacky waving inflatable arm tube man skit ^_^
2) Seungcheol as a biker.....i'm sill in heat over this!
3) Although...he's less of a biker in this chapter the biker bits are coming soon.
4) I hope everyone is learning a lot about cars! I sure am learning a lot by researching this! XD
Hope you enjoy the update! :)}
I want to ride my bicycle.

Chapter Summary

BICYCLE, BICYCLE, I WANT TO RIDE MY BIKE.
Seriously. This song, in my head, all day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jihoon books the Friday off work and takes his car back to Seungcheol’s garage.

And before you say anything, shut the fuck up.

Yeah he could just leave the car with him like last time, head back to work while it’s getting fixed and call for it after. But he’s accrued so many holiday hours and they don’t roll over into the next year and he really should make use of them. Ok!

It’s not like he woke up that morning, skipped his usual carb loaded breakfast so he wouldn’t look bloated and had a nice long bath in scented oils, until his skin went pruney, just so he could smell nice! He’s not making an effort to look good, don’t be fucking ridiculous! He’s not wearing the tightest, most flattering pair of dark wash jeans he owns, not the pair that accentuate his pert little butt. Nothing like that. This is how he always prepares for the day ahead.

He’s not chewing his lips on the drive over there to make them pink and invitingly plump. He’s not practicing his eyelash flutter in the rear-view mirror when he’s stuck in traffic.

Okay, so maybe he is doing all those things but like I said, shut the fuck up!

He parks his car at the side of warehouse like last time, checks his reflection in the rear-view mirror before bouncing out. He walks around the side of the building and stops in his tracks.

Seungcheol’s black and yellow motorcycle is parked up on the side. It’s a behemoth of horsepower, glinting invitingly in the sun as it rests at a gentle angle on its kickstands. He thinks about how cool it would be to have a motorbike, to ride one and feel the wind through his helmet hair.

He glances around quickly and through some strange surge of bravery, finds himself climbing atop the bike and settling in the leather padded seat. He revises the opinion of how cool it would be because his feet barely scrape the ground and he laughs off the lurch of hideous self-pity in his stomach because he knows for a fact that if the bike wasn’t propped up on its stabilisers he would be lying on the ground crushed under its weight.

It doesn’t stop him from enjoying this experience though. Just sitting on the bike, holding on the handle bars and bouncing experimentally on it, trying to imitate the jerks and curves of the real road from the safety of its stationary position. He even compliments his pretend journey with fake motorbike noises for added effect: “Vroom-vroom!” and “Wssssshhh” and “Eekkkkcc” as he bounces on the seat, happily.

When he’s had his fun, he sighs contently and giggles in satisfaction, then looks up and of course—of course Seungcheol has to be standing there.
Oh—god—why?

Jihoon fists the handlebars painfully and opens his mouth to explain himself, and then utterly fails to do so, because Seungcheol has those perfectly fitted black pants on again, and ones he wore as easily as breathing. And he’s got that leather jacket on too, the one that makes him look devastatingly delicious. His jacket is unzipped and hanging loosely and the contrast of that absolute black against the crisp white of his shirt underneath is mouth-watering.

Seungcheol is looking at him expectantly, with a little quirk at the corner of his mouth and Jihoon’s ears burn in embarrassment.

To Jihoon’s great misfortune, the ground doesn’t seem like it wants to open up and swallow him whole, so he sits on the bike, determinedly fixing his eyes on the ground and trying to ignore the prickle of Seungcheol’s interest as he observes him having pretend bike rides.

“I’m sorry.” He says in a small voice, after a moment of humiliating silence. He’s obviously broken some biker code or something. He’s not familiar with biker code or biker law, but bikes are probably an extension of their owners and by riding Seungcheol’s bike he’s just ridden Seungcheol and, yes that’s very hot, but it’s probably a slap in the face of biker Cult and biker traditions!

Seungcheol’s eyebrows go up in surprise. “What are you apologising for Jellybean?” he asks precisely, his tone oddly dangerous despite the gleam in his eyes.

“Um,” Jihoon manages to say, because Seungcheol’s smile is sort of hot and extremely predatory all at once, and it’s probably not normal to get hard over a guy smiling at you, what is that, even? He’s going to have to practice smiling in the mirror later when he gets home to replicate that smile cause its fucking paralyzing. “Sorry…..for riding your bike.” Jihoon says quietly, averting his gaze.

“But you haven’t ridden it….you’re just pretending to ride it….pretending to vroom vroom ride it.” Seungcheol teases, eyes twinkling with mirth.

Jihoon frowns because he’s still on the bike, he would like to get off but he’s sorta frozen in place and afraid to move in case he falls of and inadvertently topples the bike over and he thinks he’s broken enough biker codes of conduct today as it is. Seungcheol chuckles and stalks forward and Jihoon feels warmth settle in his gut at the predatory glint in Seungcheol’s eyes as he moves slowly around the back of the bike. Then Jihoon feels a weight settle behind him, two hands resting on his waist and a warm breath against his nape.

“You like my motorbike Jellybean?” Seungcheol purrs dark and dangerous.

“Nn-no.” Jihoon whimpers.

“You DON’T like my bike?” He asks, sounding almost affronted.

Jihoon’s throat tightens a little. “Yes, I –like it.” he admits, aiming for casual but missing by a mile with the wobble in his voice.

“Good.” Seungcheol hums, and Jihoon can hear him grin. “I like, that you like it.” he says, words rumbling against the sensitive skin under Jihoon’s ear. He leans in closer and doesn’t try to hide the fact that he’s sniffing Jihoon’s hair. “You smell nice Jellybean.”

Well, I better cause I didn’t just spend an hour rolling around in a bath for you not to notice!

Jihoon blushes and offers an anxious half-shrug, a little uncomfortable with the intensity of Seungcheol’s regard.
“Do you want to go for a ride?” Seungcheol breathes against Jihoon’s neck.

*Oh god, please tell me that’s a euphemism.*

Jihoon licks his lips once, and took a calming breath. “Okay….” he agrees with a small nod and a smile, hoping it adequately conceals his anxiety.

It’s really not a euphemism, because Seungcheol jumps off then, lends him a hand to climb off as well and heads back into the warehouse, re-emerging with two helmets. “Give me your car’s keys, and the boys can work on your car while we are away.” He says, holding out his hand for Jihoon’s keys, then slipping the helmet over Jihoon’s head.

The helmet is too big by far and Jihoon’s never been self-conscious about the size of his head, but he’s pretty sure he looks like one of those car dash bobble heads with this helmet on. He adjusts it on his head and flips open the visor and jumps back because there is a brick wall standing right in front of him in the form of Seungcheol’s chest. “Okay Jellybean?” Seungcheol asks, slightly amused.

Jihoon nods in favour of a verbal reply and the helmet bobs back and forth ridiculously.

Seungcheol jumps on the motor and kicks the accelerator to life before turning to Jihoon and tilting his head expectantly. It takes Jihoon a moment of staring at the motorcycle to figure out that he’s going to have to ride behind Seungcheol on this thing.

_Nice_ he thinks fleetingly, but also:

*This might be awkward if I get a boner,* his mind unhelpfully supplies.

It’s so, so dangerous, because he already wants to climb Seungcheol like a tree all the time, and now he has a first class view of Seungcheol’s ass as he sits in front of him, straddling the motor, while he revs the engine.

Jihoon shakes his head to clear his thoughts, he just needs to stay relaxed and not overthink anything. Seungcheol must sense his reluctance and he taps the padded seat behind him. “Jump on Jellybean, don’t worry…..I’ll be gentle.” He croons, and the flagrant innuendo is not helpful with not overthinking, not one bit.

But it feels right, somehow, when he finally steps onto the motorcycle behind Seungcheol. He wiggles in place to get more comfortable and his hands hover awkwardly in front of him. Is he meant to hold on to Seungcheol? The Bike? Seungcheol’s ass? He knows which option he would prefer but that’s probably breaking another biker custom. A mumble from up ahead draws his attention and he whips his head up.

“Did you say something?” Jihoon says, still a little dazed.

“Buckle up.” Seungcheol says, obviously repeating.

“But, there are no belts.” Jihoon whispers, a little confused. Seungcheol chuckles and tilts his head a little.

“Hold on to me.” He clarifies.

Jihoon nods, and clutches lightly at Seungcheol’s shoulders. Jihoon feels a little awkward, holding on with the tips of his fingers, but once Seungcheol kicks the bike into action, Jihoon scrambles to wrap his hands around his waist for security.
It’s exhilarating, the speed at which Seungcheol swims through city traffic. He’s so at ease with his control of the bike it really must be an extension of himself. They ride out of the city traffic onto longer stretches of road and after a while, they veer off the road onto a dusty trail where the road is bumpier but clear of cars and foot traffic. Seungcheol slows down as they turn the corner into a canyon. “You ready for a lesson Jellybean?” he shouts over his shoulder.

Jihoon bobbles his helmet in agreement.

They park up so that Seungcheol can point out the various important pieces along the body of the bike and Jihoon runs his fingers over them in quiet wonder. Seungcheol is very patient with Jihoon as he instils him with knowledge.

“What’s that?” Jihoon asks.

“That’s the hand clutch.”

“And that?”

“The spark advance.”

“And what about this?”

“The ignition circuit breaker.”

“And this spirally thing here?”

“That’s the spark advance again.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“It’s okay”

“And this?”

“That’s the engine.”

“Ohhhhhhh.”

“I knoooowww.”

As show and tell progresses, Jihoon seems to relax a little, tense muscles loosening and shifting just so, that he is entirely unable to prevent the shiver that wracks his body as a distinctly chilly breeze sweeps through the canyon.

“Jellybean….are you cold?” Seungcheol asks. Jihoon is uncertain whether he is being patronized, but Seungcheol just says, “Here, let me--” and Jihoon can hear the rustle of his jacket.

“Really?” Jihoon says sceptically, letting out a disbelieving laugh, chivalry is so dead but Seungcheol is intent on practicing it, it seems. “I’m fine.” Jihoon replies curtly, waving his hand, but Seungcheol is having none of it obviously, because he slips his jacket off and moves to place it around Jihoon’s shoulder.
“If I say I’m not cold I mean it.” Jihoon snaps, stepping back and straightening to his full height, which is unfortunately still a head shorter than Seungcheol. “I’m not a girl, okay!” he says incredulously, as if Seungcheol is suggesting he wear a pink frilly dress and prance around in it.

“You’re stubborn, I like that.” Seungcheol says, all silky toned, too close and looming. “You’re still going to get my jacket.”

Jihoon lifts his chin with righteous anger “You can’t make me wear it. I’ll fight you.” he threatens unsuccessfully, unable to keep the petulant tone entirely out of his voice.

Seungcheol sighs, sounding less exasperated and more fond as he looks on completely bemused by Jihoon’s outrage. He continues to hold out the jacket for Jihoon to take, giving him a smile that was all teeth and sly persuasion. Jihoon’s never wanted to punch something so hard before. Of course, Jihoon’s traitorous body decides this is the perfect time to start shivering again.

“You just shivered again Jellybean.” Seungcheol says with a considerable amount of relish. “Admit you’re cold and take my jacket.”

Jihoon is extremely annoyed to feel his face heat a little at that “No, I’m not!” he enunciates, all of his outrage back even though, Yes, he is cold and yes he would very much like Seungcheol’s jacket. Seungcheol knows it too, and the self-satisfied quirk to his lips is simultaneously stupidly attractive and intensely aggravating.

As he’s busy simmering in rage, he watches helplessly as Seungcheol wraps the jacket around his shoulders and then, for fuck’s sake, feeds his arms through the arm holes. Jihoon is about to roll up his sleeves and fight him, any minute now, just hold on, he’s getting to it, it’s coming, fight of the century, hold on to your asses…………damn this jacket is warm.

“How’s that Jellybean? Warmer?” Seungcheol asks, his voice a gravelly husk.

Jihoon swallows at the odd light in Seungcheol’s eyes then, shrugs loosely.

Seungcheol leans forwards and adjusts the jacket around Jihoon’s slighter frame, fixing the collar and pulling him closer still and then spends a small age just smoothing the material down Jihoon’s arms and chest, like the jacket will shrink to fit him if he coerces the fabric.

“It suits you.” Seungcheol compliments, straightening out of his tilted lean toward Jihoon and jerking his hand from its resting spot atop Jihoon’s chest. He smiles, and it’s so startlingly sweet Jihoon thinks it must be false.

Jihoon steps back, his own cheeks oddly flushed, doubtless from their enforced proximity. He flusters and gives Seungcheol a polite smile in return, something artificial but pretty enough, but when he looks up at Seungcheol again and finds only sincerity in his face, his smile transmutes into something a little more real, more graceless and giddy and true.

Jihoon tries to resist the temptation of burying his nose into the collar and sniffing the jacket, which, okay, probably Jihoon’s biker-fixation is a full-blown fetish, but whatever, it’s harmless and it’s not like Seungcheol is discouraging it. When Seungcheol leans over the bike to adjust something, very quickly Jihoon takes his opportunity to nose the material. Seungcheol’s jacket smells like, well, Seungcheol obviously: leather, aftershave, a hint of motor-oil, pure fucking manliness and sex. It’s — tempting, and nice, and something else that just makes Jihoon feel warm inside.

“Oh wait!” Seungcheol announces suddenly, reaching over and sliding a hand into the jackets inner concealed pocket “I just need to put the safety on…..”
Jihoon drops his gaze to see Seungcheol’s hand is, sliding into the jacket, he can feel the weight shift on one side as he pulls something out of the jacket seam and it’s a **FUCKING GUN!**

Jihoon feels his eyes go wide, because that’s a gun in Seungcheol’s hand and it’s not a water pistol or a pellet gun it’s a real fucking gun and Jihoon open his mouth to say something coherent but all that comes out is: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA” Probably the universal reaction for being faced with a dangerous weapon. Jihoon starts squealing his head off in utter fear and it hits him: he’s in the middle of a canyon, nobody knows he’s here, he’s with a biker he hardly knows, wearing a leather jacket that has a gun concealed in it. Yeah, this is an understandable reaction.

“**Woah—woah—woah!**” Seungcheol says, pulling back to look at Jihoon with wide eyes. “Relax… I…..I..was just putting the safety on sugarplum,” he informs him, looking honestly perplexed instead of defensive.

“Uhh uhh..gun..gun…gunnn. Oh my god” Jihoon says, feeling dazed. He swallows past the lump of terror in his throat. “Are you going to make me dig my own grave that shoot me in it!”

“Holy shit!” Seungcheol says, watching the proceedings with an equal amount of disbelief and amusement. “I’m not going to hurt you.” He gasps waving his hands.

“Oh my god,” Jihoon says again, but more weakly as he slides down to kneel on the hard ground. Jihoon is about to beg for his life, something along the lines of:

*Please….please don’t kill me…I’m sorry. I’ll never pretend to ride your bike again!*

But Seungcheol looks — wow, Jihoon thinks he looks honestly mortified, and he’s tucking the gun into the back of his jeans and inching closer to Jihoon, like he thinks Jihoon is going to bolt at any second. “I’m sorry Jihoon.” Seungcheol says, his voice low, hands held out in a placating gesture. “I wasn’t planning on hurting you Jellybean, I wouldn’t do that! I carry it around all the time I just forgot to put the safety on earlier and I didn’t want you to reach in to my jacket and injure yourself by accident.”

He’s close now, looming over Jihoon and Jihoon has to look up to meet his eyes. Jihoon breathes deeply for a moment, his eyes on Seungcheol’s openly apologetic and uncomfortable expression, tamping down the hysteria that rages at the back of his skull. “You’re…. not going to shoot me and ….dump my body in the canyon?” Jihoon finishes, feeling as if he’s run out of breath all at once.

Seungcheol’s gaze was considering, before it crumples into sorrow and self-loathing. “*Oh my god— No,*” he says, nearly a moan, and he leans down to curl his hand around Jihoon’s elbow. “I’m sorry Jihoonie..I wasn’t trying to scare you.”

Jihoon looked him in the eye, feeling a little shaky but also deeply, irrationally sure, that Seungcheol meant him no harm. Somehow Jihoon finds himself hoisted up on his feet, and then Seungcheol is wrapping his arms around him, pulling him close, terribly, carefully gentle. He guides Jihoon’s face into his shoulder, and whispers, “Relax. You’re okay. I’m sorry.” As he rubs distracting circles into Jihoon’s back.

…………………………..

It takes a good 20 minutes to calm Jihoon down enough to get him interested in the bike again. Well, it actually only takes 10 minutes for Jihoon to feel safe around the *evil gun* lurking in Seungcheol’s back pocket, but he doesn’t tell Seungcheol that, he just holds on to him for an extra ten minutes cause it feels nice and cause he wants to.
Ok, so he’s milking Seungcheol’s good nature and guilt a little but he could have been killed—or whatever—shut up.

Seungcheol wants to teach him everything he knows about motorcycles in one day. After Jihoon asks the same question four times, they both agree that’s not going to happen so he settles for showing Jihoon the fun stuff, how to ride.

“I’ve never ridden a motorbike before. This is my first time.” Jihoon warns him and Seungcheol has the decency to look pleasantly astonished and intrigued, and if it’s a front, he pulls it off spectacularly.

“Really?” He asks, smiling briefly, the corners of his distractingly beautiful lips turn up before he schools his features into seriousness again. “Cause you were pretend riding it like a pro back at the warehouse.” He teases. And yeah, it was a front.

Jihoon rolls his eyes and huffs an amused laugh “Shut-up!.......Don’t I need my helmet?” he asks, slightly concerned. Seungcheol had deposited their helmets on a flattish rock with the assurance that they wouldn’t need them for their lesson.

“No Jellybean, we’re going to take it nice and slow, let you get a feel for the bike.”

Jihoon looks at him dubiously “But what if I skid and fall off the bike and turn into a vegetable and you have to visit me in the hospital and hold a pillow over my head to put me out of my misery?” Jihoon asked.

Seungcheol blinks at him, looks off into the distance and then back again. “Million dollar baby?” he asked after a beat.

Jihoon nods his head. “Yeah. I watched it last night, good movie but it’s made me really nervous about my neck.” he babbles, then blushes at seeing the level of fond amusement in Seungcheol’s eyes.

“Okay, first of all, what happened to Hilary Swank was a freak accident. Second, that movie was about amateur boxing and if you fell of a bike at speed you are likely to just die instantly then live in vegetative state. Third, we’re cruising at 10mph so I think our risk of broken necks is pretty minimal.” Seungcheol explained.

When Jihoon open his mouth to protest Seungcheol puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder “I’m going to be sitting behind you the whole time, I’ll guide you.”

Jihoon smiles shyly, blushing again when he spends a moment too long staring at that perfectly formed, plump mouth before he drags his eyes upward to meet Seungcheol’s. “Okay.” He murmurs.

Seungcheol practically lifts Jihoon’s onto the bike, then straddles the space behind him, tucking Jihoon between his thighs and the handlebars. Seungcheol leans over, steadying one hand on the bar grip and allowing the other to wrap around Jihoon’s waist and seriously, he’s like a furnace. “Press the ignition, Jellybean.”

“How which one is that again?” Jihoon asks, and yeah they’ve been through this a few times but Jihoon’s a little distracted basking in the heat that seems to radiate from Seungcheol’s skin. It’s a wonder he’s learning anything at all.

“The red button Jellybean.” Seungcheol says patiently, sounding very amused. Jihoon just stewed in sexual frustration but when he presses the ignition button, the bike obediently purrs to life and the
rumble of the engine is enough to distract him—for like 10 seconds.

“Good boy.” Seungcheol coos, then he reaches forward to cover Jihoon’s hands with his on the handle grip. Jihoon’s eyes are drawn to the action and it takes everything in his dwindling self-restraint not to lean over and lick the knuckles of each finger that rest over his. Seungcheol has nice, big hands. His exposed forearms are equally tantalizing and Jihoon would prefer to hold on to them instead of the fucking bike.

“Now, squeeze the clutch and release the throttle.” Seungcheol requests.

And they’re off. The road is bumpy and uneven, but Seungcheol’s assurances of low speed and the warm press of his body all along Jihoon’s back goes a long way toward preventing any panic attacks. Seungcheol revs the engine for him, and controls the bike around corners so all Jihoon’s has to focus on is maintaining a steady speed with sporadic acceleration and minimal steering.

It’s not like he hasn’t rode a motorcycle before. He’s had plenty of rides on the small plastic motorcycle at the shopping mall near his apartment. It’s obviously for children and takes a dollar per ride and it’s ratty and coming apart, but Jihoon will never miss a chance to sit on it because he has a whole childhood worth of memories attached to it. But Jihoon’s not insane, it’s clear that, unlike that toy motorcycle, Seungcheol’s motorcycle is the real deal.

Thankfully, Seungcheol is a good teacher and he knows what he’s doing, and he’s really into it. Like, that level of enthusiasm is not something Jihoon has a lot of experience with, and in combination with one of Seungcheol's hands on his hip and the other circling his waist to steady the hand-grip, it’s no wonder Jihoon’s thighs are trembling against Seungcheol’s.

Insofar as actually learning how to ride a motorcycle is concerned, their little lesson is sort of two steps forward, one step back and a one lengthy side trip into imagining Seungcheol bending him over the bike and fucking him senseless. Clearly, this is going to be a regular thing in Jihoon’s day dreams. The fantasy leaves him heady for a moment before reality flashes back through him like ice water when Seungcheol pokes him in the side.

“You’re a fast learner Jellybean,” Seungcheol says, his voice a low, soothing rumble. “If you like, I can hook you up with a bike of your own….or maybe…a moped….so you’re little legs can actually touch the ground.” He jibes affectionately.

Jihoon bristles at the insinuation. “Hey! Not everybody is born tall and broad. Don’t make fun of my little legs!” Jihoon huffs.

“I’m not, I like your little legs.” Seungcheol says, and from anyone else, that would be such a lie, but Seungcheol just holds him closer and runs an appreciative hand over Jihoon’s thigh.

Jihoon lips twitched into a smile he knew Seungcheol couldn’t see, but could probably hear in his voice. “You’re a smug prick by the way.” And it earns him a snigger from Seungcheol and another affectionate pat on the thigh.

Although Seungcheol clearly had no plans to harm him, something was niggling at Jihoon, so after a few turns back and forth along the dirt road, he finally musters up the nerve to say, “Why do you carry a gun around?”

Seungcheol tenses behind him for a beat, applies the breaks, turns off the ignition and props the bike up on its kickstand. Jihoon thinks he’s misstepped, that he’s broken whatever this is between them by mentioning the gun. There was a pause while Seungcheol thinks it over, and then he says slowly “To take care of business.”
Jihoon lets those words bounce around his head for a moment before he wheezes in realization. “Oh my god…like when people don’t pay their mechanic bills or something?” he theorises, incorrectly. “Or when they write bad reviews about your garage on yelp? Do you go around and threaten them with your gun?” he gasps, and he thinks he means for that to sound accusatory, but it just sounds breathless and hopelessly turned on.

“You shouldn’t take it personally…a review is just a review and it’s not really a reflection of your hard work. Hell, I write reviews from time to time but it’s only ever when I’m pissed off. So most of the reviews are bad because people never think to write good reviews.” Jihoon explains, well aware that he’s babbling but unable to rein it in.

Seungcheol laughs softly before reigning in both his expression and tone “Yeah….true. But sometimes you have to teach people a lesson. So that those reviewers don’t get spread around town and critics think they can walk up to your business and….badmouth it.” Seungcheol justifies.

“Does that happen often?” Jihoon asks, looking over his shoulder quickly at Seungcheol who has an impassive look on his face.

“Not recently, I’ve built a good reputation now.” He says, voice abruptly serious, eyes intent and unblinking where Jihoon found their gazes locked. “People wouldn’t dare to leave me bad reviews. They know I’ll be knocking on their door to discuss their review in person.”

Seungcheol seems very irritated about these reviews, Jihoon thinks, and he reaches down to pat Seungcheol’s knee in consolation, but misjudges and ends up feeling up his thigh. It was distressingly well-muscled and suggested Seungcheol probably worked out a fair amount. “And…you need a gun for that?” Jihoon asks. “Can’t you just…ask them to take the review down…politely?”

“Hmm…sometimes I do that. Sometimes I send them a little complimentary gift, a little….taster…asking them to….reconsider. Sometimes it works and you never have problems with them again.” Seungcheol says. “The gun if for when they don’t cooperate.”

“Complimentary gifts? That’s a nice touch.” Jihoon muses. “Like…a car air-freshener? Or…a sample of motor oil or some new windscreen wipers?” he asks hopefully.

Then Seungcheol is leaning over him again, hands resting on the hand grip as he crowds Jihoon. He feels Seungcheol press against him, smile against his cheek before he chuckles gruffly. His laughter breaks off, and he catches his breath with his forehead resting against Jihoon’s nape. “Hmm….You’re….very precious Jihoon. You’re so small and innocent. I like it.” Seungcheol says, something a little more intimate, almost confessional in his voice.

Jihoon turns his head around and pulls a face. “Excuse me? No I’m not…..I’ll have you know…I stole a lollipop once.” he says, and nearly winces at how plaintive he sounds.

Seungcheol’s lifts an inquisitive brow, even as his eyes seemingly mock Jihoon and his nearly instantaneous blush. “You’re right. You’re a very bad boy then…I should watch out for you.” He deadpans.

Jihoon pouts and faces forward again, squirming in his seat because his backside is starting to go
numb from sitting for so long. Inadvertently, he ends up rubbing against Seungcheol’s crotch and tense once Seungcheol releases a low groan.

Seungcheol froze against him for one terrible moment and Jihoon swallows, feeling like his throat has gone dry. Seungcheol exhales unevenly, the warm of this breath ghosting across Jihoon’s ear and making him shiver a little and he rolls back reflexively into him again. Seungcheol shudders against him, hips jerking up in a twitch and a hand cupping at Jihoon waist, reeling him closer. From their close proximity, Jihoon can feel the thick outline of Seungcheol’s cock pressing against his ass and it’s comforting to know that Seungcheol’s as turned on from this as he is.

“What are you doing Jellybean?” Seungcheol murmured, and Jihoon couldn’t help the thready sigh he released or the shiver running down his spine that had nothing to do with the temperature and a lot to so with the warm mouth brushing over the curve of his ear.

Jihoon’s entire body throbs in time with his heart, once, then twice before he is able to respond, voice somewhat strangled. “Proving you wrong.”

Seungcheol appears to visibly relax in his seat and then deliberately licks the curl of Jihoon’s ear before dragging his lips along until he gets to the lobe. Maybe he’s been conditioned into this response, but Jihoon feels his face heat, can hear the catch in his own breathing as he waits for Seungcheol to do something, anything. His skin feeling unbearably sensitized and when Seungcheol slowly tongues the skin under Jihoon’s ear and then sucks the lobe in between sharp teeth, Jihoon makes a high, desperate noise and tilts his head to give Seungcheol access to anything he wants.

Seungcheol abandons Jihoon’s ear to taste the underside of his jaw, and he murmurs “So fucking pretty, you know that.” As he starts working his lips down Jihoon’s neck, tugging the jacket collar enough to pull the impeding fabric out of the way so he can lick and suck along Jihoon’s skin. The next few moments are a mad blur of sucking kisses against Jihoon’s too-sensitive throat that leave him gasping before Seungcheol, tilts his chin to the side and finally kisses him.

Jihoon’s eyes slide shut and he stops grinding his ass back, because this, this moment here, needs his complete and entire attention.

Jihoon feels desperate and relieved and so stupidly aroused that he doesn’t know what to do with it -- and Seungcheol must feel the same way, because he doesn’t stop kissing Jihoon, just wraps his arms around him and holds onto him like he’s afraid Jihoon might run off somewhere, like Jihoon isn’t clutching his arms and trembling between his thighs and sighing into his mouth and trying to touch as much of Seungcheol as he can reach.

The only thing Jihoon can focus on is the warm press of Seungcheol’s lips against his, the swipe of Seungcheol’s tongue in his mouth, the little subvocal groans Seungcheol is making, like there’s nothing better than this, nothing more that Seungcheol wants. All Jihoon can do in turn is crane his neck at an angle and open his mouth to Seungcheol and suck on his tongue and make more of those terribly indecent noises in the back of his throat when Seungcheol nibbles at his lips and tries to press their bodies closer still. The angle is awkward, though, and gives Jihoon a bit of a crick in his neck so he breaks the kiss reluctantly, panting.

He opts instead to reach for the hand grip again and proceeds to grind his hips down in Seungcheol’s lap, moving his hips in tight, slow circles that get him a stuttered groan from Seungcheol for a change. “Fuck—Jihoon” Seungcheol grits out, all hoarse and broken syllables. “You’re not so innocent when it comes to some things, eh baby?” he whispers hotly against his cheek.

Jihoon keens, eyes wetting, lips trembling, heart pounding, lust a snake slithering through his veins. He grinds back again, enjoying the small semblance of control it gives him; that edge of assurance
for the bite of embarrassment bubbling in his blood.

Seungcheol has just worked a hand up under the front of Jihoon’s shirt, to skate over his ribs and rub against his nipples, when the first specks of rain start falling from the heavens. A splash of water on Jihoon’s forehead is startling enough to end the heated exchange as he jolts forward in his seat.

Seungcheol sits back and shakes his head, he sits there quietly, smiling between breaths and watching Jihoon slowly regain himself until his breathing has slowed to something approaching normal. “It’s raining.” Seungcheol states needlessly, lifting his gaze up at the rapidly darkening sky. “We better find shelter.” He adds, jumping off the bike to retrieve their helmets.

Jihoon climbs back off the bike and stands awkwardly to the side. “We can…” Jihoon says, pausing a little for breath, and then decides more encouragement is in order. “Go back to my place?”

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell who my bias is yet? LOL.
I write from Jihoon's POV most of the time for a good reason. Such a slut for Seungcheol XD
Anyway, sorry this chapter is not heavy on the car education, don't worry...I know you guys love learning about cars! XD I'll get write back to that ASAP!
Anyway! Hope you enjoy and feedback is always appreciated!
I get some great ideas from Jicheol Fam on Twitter and @oozicle suggested the jacket loaning. How precious would Jihoon be in Seungcheol's jacket ^_^ He def would punch him in the face though XD
xxx
Jihoon suggests they take from shelter from the rain back at his apartment and before you say anything, shut the fuck up.

So he’s only known Seungcheol for like, a week, and the guy has a gun tucked in the back of his pants and that spells trouble, even though Seungcheol was real nice and comforting about Jihoon’s little breakdown earlier. Jihoon supposes that this whole thing could be an elaborate ploy to get into his house and steal his impressive, mint edition comic book collection at gunpoint. But Seungcheol doesn’t strike him as a collector, and that was definitely a hard dick pressed against his ass moments ago.

Thankfully, he is spared of overthinking when Seungcheol agrees to his suggestion without hesitation.

It starts to rain hard on the drive over, cold and steady. Seungcheol parks the bike up in a sheltered location near Jihoon’s apartment and they make a break for the front door. It’s too late, though — it’s coming down hard, and they’re both soaked by the time they get there. Jihoon unlocks the door and goes in first, and Seungcheol is wiping uselessly at his wet clothing as he follows.

It was blissfully warm inside Jihoon’s apartment compared to the biting chill in the air outside. Stepping through the door they dripped little pools of water everywhere as they hung up their helmets in the entryway.

“Shoes...on or off?” Seungcheol asked pointing to his boots, that were responsible for their own little puddle of water on the stained wood.

“Off please, there’s a drying wrack over there” Jihoon gestures, but bites back the instinct to add ‘How about you take the rest of your clothes off while you’re at it!’ Jihoon isn’t immune to the sexual tension that bubbles between the two of them as they shuck their outer clothing, quietly in the entryway. He keeps his gaze lowered throughout but can’t keep the flush from his cheeks when Seungcheol winks at him.

“Kitchen’s through here.” Jihoon says, leading Seungcheol through into the open area of the kitchen. “I’ll get you a towel.” He whispers, eyes closed and quietly thrilled at the sound of Seungcheol’s heavier footsteps following him.
“Uhmm...would you like a Coffee? Tea?....Beer?” My ass?

“Coffee’s good…..thanks.” Seungcheol says.

Jihoon fills the kettle, sets it to boil and pads quietly down the hallway to fetch some dry towels. When he returns, Seungcheol has settled his hip against the counter, tilted to almost face Jihoon a wry smile on his face.

Jihoon meets Seungcheol’s eyes. They were different, lighter, less intensely-focused, but still they bored into Jihoon as the warmth seemed to leech into his grin. “What?”

“Nothing.” Seungcheol says, still smiling as he accepts the dry towel from Jihoon. “Thanks Jellybean,” he purrs, eyes hooded and flirtatious as he shifts his weight to lean back on the counter again and running the towel over his hair and face.

The hush between them is comfortable, broken only by the rumbling of the water in the kettle and the clinking of the spoon as Jihoon’s prepares the coffee. After a while, Jihoon is unable to bear the steady weight of Seungcheol’s gaze on his back and only then realises, he’s been stirring the coffee for forever, like 5 minutes or something. “Sorry.” He blurts out.

“Sorry for what?” Seungcheol asks, and Jihoon can just hear him say it through a wide grin.

“I’m not very good at this.” He mumbles with a small, self-deprecating smile.

“At what….making coffee?”

Jihoon breathes deeply and closes his eyes. “No….initiating a proposal to engage in sexual intercourse. I’m not good at making coffee either so don’t hold any hopes on this brew.”

Seungcheol blinks, and then a broad, suggestive grin begins to spread across his face “Maybe that’s your problem, you’re making it sound so scientific. It’s not a chore, we’re not conducting some research in a lab….it’s sex…it’s fun….call it… banging or…humping”

Jihoon wrinkles his nose, smiling even as he blushes slightly “I sound so awkward when I try saying those words. It’s ….embarrassing.”

Seungcheol’s smile softens. “That’s just what you think, you just need to get used to using those words. Look, I’ll list a few of my favourite ones, and you can pick what suits you. First up, there’s porking.”

Jihoon clenches his eyes shut tighter and cringes “Eww. No. That sounds…..sweaty.”

“Yeah, well…that’s a given with sex. Good sex anyway. But a lot of people don’t like that term so how about an old favourite. Boning….Let’s bone!”

“I dunno, it sounds a little vague…”

“Alright…how about. Roasting the Broomstick? That’s a lot less vague, you have to admit.”

Jihoon giggled. “Yeah….I don’t think I could take anyone seriously if they asked to…roast their broomstick…See...it just feels awkward saying those words now that I’ve heard them in that context.” He whines, ducking his head bashfully.

“Baking the potato?”
Jihoon bites at his bottom lip, considering. “Now you’re just making me hungry.”

“Oh?” Seungcheol’s voice lightens.

“Not like that.” Jihoon giggles.

“Oh.” Seungcheol’s voice drops. “Ok...what about… Churning butter?”

Jihoon shakes his head. “Sounds... Amish.”

Seungcheol laughs hard. “Afternoon delight?”


“Ok, ok..... Banana in the fruit salad?”

“Oh my god!” Jihoon gapes “Have you ever used that?”

“Nah....it’s creative though. Has a ring to it!” He offers and Jihoon gives an unimpressed hum in response. “Alright, I have hundreds of these.... Bumping Uglies, Burying the weasel, Cave diving, Docking, Dance with no pants, Doing the nasty, Driving Miss Daisy, Heel’s to Jesus, Nailing, Nut in the Gut, Rogering, Rutting, Rummaging in the root cellar, Screwing, Sinking the Pink, Tapping Ass, Vulcanizing the—”

“Oh...okay. Those are all awful!” Jihoon said, tittering in amusement. “I can’t believe you use those.”

“I don’t....I was just trying to get you to relax.” Seungcheol spoke steadily.

“Oh, “ Jihoon says, biting his lip and nodding, unaware that Seungcheol was watching him, intensely focused like a predator “then...what word do you use?”

“I like to keep it plain and simple.... fucking.” Seungcheol enunciates.

Jihoon swallows, his eyes unfocused on the rapidly cooling coffee cup in front of him. He tenses, more aware than ever of his heart banging violently against his ribs as he feels Seungcheol shift behind him, moving closer.

"Do you want it in a sentence?....I want to fuck you Jihoon. I want to fuck your sweet little ass. I want to fuck you so hard your neighbours are going to call the police cause you’ll be screaming your head off when I fuck you so good. You’ll lose your voice because you’ll be screaming so much when I fuck you.” Seungcheol says in a note of dark and confident promise. “Can I fuck you Jihoon?” Seungcheol ground out, gutturally from immediately behind him.

Jihoon turns to face him abruptly and spins right into him. Seungcheol’s arms instantly come up to steady him, surrounding him, every inch of Jihoon pressed to every inch of him. Jihoon gasps, his hands holding onto the first things they find – Seungcheol’s shoulder and his arm –as he stumbles forward into Seungcheol’s embrace.

“Sorry,” Jihoon pants, taking a quick breath and oh wow, Seungcheol’s chest was right there and it feels really firm. And big.

“Stop apologizing.” Seungcheol replies softly.

Jihoon tells himself to remove his hands, to take a step back, but he is here now, and Seungcheol is
also here and despite himself, Jihoon clutches Seungcheol a little tighter, leaning into him. Seungcheol doesn’t do anything for a split second, but then his hands move, one falling down Jihoon’s back, grazing the top of Jihoon’s ass while the other slides over the back of his shoulders, slipping up to the back of Jihoon’s neck. Jihoon’s eyes flutter shut, pushing himself closer, pushing himself up on his toes, forehead brushing against Seungcheol’s chin. “Seungcheol,” he whispers through a tremulous breath, turning his face up to Seungcheol’s.

He feels Seungcheol’s arms tightening, his fingers gripping Jihoon tighter. His body is hard, so hard against Jihoon’s, and warm, and he feels and smells so good. How many times has he dreamed about this, thought about this, wondered. Seungcheol leans forward a little and breathes in through his nose, and Jihoon has a moment of wondering if the scented oils he bathed in liberally are still lingering on his skin, before Seungcheol hastily closes the miniscule distance between them, closing one hand around the back of Jihoon’s head, and pressing their mouths together.

Jihoon startles for an instant, a little off-centre in his panic but then he exhales hard, his hands coming up to frame Seungcheol’s face as he melts into him. Seungcheol holds Jihoon steady and gently works his mouth open for small sipping kisses, one after another. Jihoon kisses him back until the air in his lungs is tight and hot. He exhales through his nose, shaky and harsh, and Seungcheol pulls him in closer, fucks his tongue into his mouth.

Seungcheol pulls back, dragging his mouth, hot and wet along the line of Jihoon’s throat, burying a kiss under his jaw, in the dip below his ear. Jihoon makes a small mewling noise when Seungcheol scrapes his teeth over his neck, and Seungcheol must like that sound — he must like it a lot, because he growls and he puts one leg between Jihoon’s thighs, and oh shit, there’s no hiding Jihoon’s arousal now, not that Seungcheol seems to object because he is rocking his thigh up and sucking on Jihoon’s collar.

Seungcheol has one broad hand wrapped around Jihoon’s thigh, and he rocks unsteadily forwards to rub his dick against the line of Jihoon’s hip. Jihoon is so used to yearning that actually having throws him a little off-balance, leaves him breathless. He’s gasping when the words leak from his mouth, “Cheol… the bedroom… can we?” He asks, rhetorically, verging on needy.

Seungcheol smirks, “But I haven’t drunk my coffee yet.” He smokes in Jihoon’s ear, voice tinged with arousal and faint amusement.

“Cheol!” Jihoon whines pitifully.

“Hmm, so eager.” Seungcheol chuckles. He doesn’t step back immediately, but he does stop molesting Jihoon’s neck and removes his leg so that Jihoon is no longer riding his thigh. His breathing evens out, and then he pulls back enough to look at Jihoon’s face.

Before Jihoon can blink, his arms are rising as Seungcheol tugs off his sweater and his wet jeans are hitting the tiled floor, followed by his boxer briefs as Seungcheol backs him up against the counter and boost him up. Seungcheol leans in to kiss Jihoon again, this time with a hand sliding down Jihoon’s taut belly and in between his spread thighs. Jihoon makes a pleased sound — and his hips jolt into Seungcheol’s first touch, his cock filling hot and hardening fully as Seungcheol tugs at it and kisses Jihoon’s soft yielding mouth.

“You’re a wet dream, baby.” Seungcheol murmurs wetly, low and reverent as he returns to nip at the thin skin along Jihoon’s throat, nose nudging against the sharp hinge of Jihoon’s jaw while he suckles on it until blood pools, purpling it into a bruise. “Got me so hard with your pretty face, your pretty cock, pretty thighs…. pretty everything.” Seungcheol purrs, smoothing his hands over Jihoon’s stomach, down to his thighs.
Jihoon feels the pink bloom from his cheeks and to the tip of his cock, already wetting with precome. Seungcheol tugs on his legs and pulls his ass to the edge of the counter, forcing him to lie down for balance.

Jihoon fights off a giggle when Seungcheol dips his tongue in his navel, and then he’s definitely not laughing when Seungcheol kisses and licks his way down Jihoon’s stomach, head cushioned between Jihoon’s thighs as he tastes the delicate skin of his inner thigh. Jihoon doesn’t even have time to have any reservations when Seungcheol leaves his legs high, bending him backwards and nuzzles his face in between Jihoon’s butt cheeks, probing at his hole with the hot tip of his tongue, before slipping it in.

“Oh my god,” Jihoon says brokenly, because Seungcheol’s tongue is destroying him, curling and twisting and all he can do is weakly clutch the counter edge to keep himself grounded. The noises he’s making echo in the kitchen, and if it sounds loud to him, then Seungcheol has to hear every gasp as a scream, every choked moan as a wail — and when Jihoon tries to beg him to stop before he comes, Seungcheol just grabs his ass with both hands and spears his tongue in deeper.

“Oh—god—cheool—hmmmm!” Jihoon moans whorishly. He’s not at the edge, yet. Not really, but Seungcheol’s tongue will definitely get him there soon. It’s pulsing in his clenching asshole, warming him from the low of his balls, up to the pebbling tips of his nipples, and gets his cock head tightening with each pulse of precome.

“Cheol please …don’t make me come like this!” Jihoon cries out.

Seungcheol jerks back, alarmed by his cry, then chuckles softly. He clears his throat, “You got lube, Marshmallow?”

Marshmallow? Jihoon moans into a weak, shaky laugh, “Are you calling me pale and bloated?”

“I’m calling you soft, sweet and squishy.” Seungcheol counters, pinching the soft flesh of Jihoon’s inner thigh for emphasis.

“Oh, ok. Uhmm……in the bedroom.” Jihoon informs. Seungcheol guides Jihoon’s slim legs around his waist and with two strong hands cupping his ass, he lifts Jihoon of the counter and down the corridor. Seungcheol places him on the large bed carefully, unwrapping Jihoon’s legs and taking that opportunity to divest himself of his clothing.

Jihoon quickly sits up, suddenly super invested in getting Seungcheol equally naked. He helps, or at least tries to help Seungcheol peel of his damp T-shirt over his head and his other hand slides down to fumble with the button of Seungcheol’s jeans; he tries at pushing them off over the curve of his ass but he gets distracted by the alluring slant of Seungcheol’s abs. Seungcheol steps back, whips of his belt and kicks off his pants, a hand coming up to slick his hair back quickly as he steps back over to Jihoon.

Jihoon thinks all his Christmases and Birthdays have come at once. Wow. Jihoon’s mind supplies, lying back down to get the full view: Seungcheol stripped to his skin, firm and broad and converging to a very inviting point of interest at hip-level, where his cock is straining for attention. Jihoon’s brain may have dissolved into mush at the moment but his mouth is still functioning, apparently, “Hot.” he says softly to himself, beyond the point of filtering his thoughts before they drip from his lips. It’s all he can manage with his speech, faced as he is with Seungcheol’s gorgeous body.

Seungcheol grins smugly and kneels on the bed and Jihoon instinctively spreads his thighs, inviting him to settle in between them. His hands grasp on Seungcheol’s shoulders, gravitating him closer until their hips slot within each other.
One of Jihoon’s hands starts to trail a path down the planes of Seungcheol’s chest, fingers stippling along Seungcheol’s abs, biceps, glutes, hips and thighs. The brush of his fingertips, gentle but focused, as he admires the strong, nicely sculpted body before him. “I’m not complaining but what you’re doing…. is really ticklish.” Seungcheol says, all slow as blood rushed south with Jihoon’s careful caresses.

Jihoon withdraws his hand almost immediately, bashful. “Sorry.”

“Don’t …..don’t apologize Jellybean…It was nice. I liked it.” Seungcheol affirms, taking Jihoon’s hand and guiding back to his chest. “Do what you want.”

Jihoon hesitates for a moment, then resumes his wondering exploration of Seungcheol’s body. Seungcheol is unexpectedly vocal, whining and hissing, lips twitching as Jihoon continues petting little strokes and pats all over him, turning him into a quivering mess. Jihoon marvels at the contrast in his demeanour. Seungcheol is strong and firm and cocky, but he’s lush and receptive and sweet too.

When his ticklish caress reaches low on Seungcheol’s abdomen, he traces his delicate fingers tips down the length of Seungcheol’s aching shaft with the, barest, softest of touches. Seungcheol practically buckles in response above him and it encourages Jihoon to then scan his fingers over Seungcheol’s cock again and again, the barest of traction. Seungcheol’s mouth gives up twitching and curves wide, popping dimples into his cheeks. “You’re trying to kill me, right?” he says, a little sheepishly.

“I’m hardly touching you.” Jihoon whispers, licking his lips prettily as he gazes up at Seungcheol.

“That’s the problem baby…..” Seungcheol allows him a few more minutes of wondrous exploration before making a low noise of complete, utter frustration and stilling Jihoon’s hand. “My turn Marshmallow.” He states, sitting up on his heels.

“Lube?” He enquires and Jihoon arches over to the bedside cabinet to rummage through the drawer there. He scarcely manages to handle the bottle before Seungcheol is dragging him into the centre of the bed impatiently and kissing the life out of him again, disarming him of the bottle and flipping the cap.

“When was the last time you got fucked?” Seungcheol enquires, slicking up his fingers with a generous amount.

Jihoon flushes hotly at the question, which is a little silly considering his current position: spread out on the bed underneath Seungcheol. It’s been close to 6 months since he’s had anything other than his own fingers stretching him, and even then, his last partner wasn’t nearly as big as Seungcheol. He doesn’t know why he lies to Seungcheol, probably a mixture of embarrassment and desperation but he open his mouth and says. “A month.”

“Okay, great.” Seungcheol smiles. He smiles so content and gracious, confident and coaxing as he slips in the first finger into Jihoon’s slick hole. Jihoon spreads his legs wide and raises his hips, trying to make it easier for him. Seungcheol eases the digit in carefully, brows furrowed with focus as he works into Jihoon’s clasping heat, then he pauses, cocking a brow speculatively at Jihoon.

“Just one month?” Seungcheol queries dryly, “Try again Marshmallow” he titters gently.

“Six months.” Jihoon murmurs, a rueful smile tugging at one corner of his lips.

“Hmm….yeah….feels like never right now….so tight and hot, you’re practically swallowing my
finger.” Seungcheol smirks. Jihoon whines in mortification, embarrassed by his own body’s eager response to being penetrated. Seungcheol’s sharp gaze gentled in sympathy “Sshhh, hey, it’s okay… shhh.” he soothes Jihoon. “I like it….I’m not complaining….I want you to be tight Marshmallow.” He says, crooking his finger and grinning as Jihoon moans and clenches around him harder.

“Can’t wait to sink into your tight little hole Jihoonie. You’re going to feel so good, I know you will.” Seungcheol says against his lips as he removes his finger from Jihoon’s ass. The absence is palpable, pronounced, but then Seungcheol is slipping two thick fingers inside Jihoon in the next second, so it's worth it.

Seungcheol starts scissoring him open in earnest then, and Jihoon is swallowed, he is captive, with the rough friction of Seungcheol’s fingertips scraping over his sensitive inner walls, again and again.

"You like this?" Seungcheol asks him, knowing Jihoon's too gone to respond. He kisses Jihoon’s brow, lips brushing against rain-slackened locks of hair. Some part of Jihoon is present enough to still be tugging at Seungcheol’s arm, trying to get him to stop. His body aches; he needs Seungcheol’s cock, needs to take him in, and yet needs to be fucked by his fingers at the same time.

Seungcheol watches him struggle weakly, trying to grasp on to his arm. “I’m—ready.” Jihoon whimpers. Seungcheol ignores him, withdrawing his fingers, slicking up a third and re-sheathing them slowly. He pushes them in to the last knuckle and twists, relishing the little scream Jihoon makes as he is stretched wider, his hole clenching snugly around three fingers.

“You doing okay, baby?” Seungcheol asks, his nose nudging against the shell of Jihoon’s ear. “Does it feel good?” The answering moan is harsh and twisted in Jihoon's throat. There's no dulling this pleasure now; no backing away from this, no ignoring the points where Seungcheol's fingers are pressed inside him, bringing him closer to the edge, closer to insanity.

"Fuck—jellybean. You’re so soft and hot around my fingers, I might not fit." Seungcheol mutters against his ear, his breath wet, leaving him heady and stuttering. “Only one way to find out I guess.”

"Hmm, yess…yess!" Jihoon hisses into Seungcheol's shoulders as he withdraws his slick fingers, settles more firmly between Jihoon thighs and lines his cock up. Seungcheol closes the distance and Jihoon can feel the blunt head of his cock nudging lightly at his entrance; thick as it spears him. Then Seungcheol's hips jerk.

Fuck, Jihoon thinks, before he stops thinking anything at all. Seungcheol chokes out this erotic sound that Jihoon will be jerking off to for the rest of his life. “Fuck,” Seungcheol grunts lowly, slurs out another curse. “You’re so tight Jellybean.”

“C’hol,” Jihoon grunts, the vowels of his name getting lost with the wet, hollow gasp he makes. It's a gasping few seconds before Jihoon thinks to relax and loosen and let Seungcheol slide in further.

He rolls his hips gently, slightly—and maybe because he hasn’t done this in a while or with someone quite this big but, all he feels is just tight, tight, tight. It’s almost as if Seungcheol’s cock moulds to the hot insides of his ass, the thick head pressing against all the sensitive areas around Jihoon’s prostate. Seungcheol doesn’t push all the way in, he shallowly thrusts in most of the way and stops, gauging Jihoon’s readiness.

He hears Seungcheol swear swiftly under his breath, the sound muffled against Jihoon’s neck “How are you—doing Jellybean? Are—are—you okay?”

“Yes—Oh—god. Please—move!—Fuck!” Jihoon pants.
Seungcheol lowers himself down on Jihoon completely, skin on skin. Giving them yet another point of friction, a way to make this even more fucking intoxicating. He starts moving his hips with, slow shallow thrusts, a hand poised on the headboard, giving him leverage on each lunge. Jihoon can hear Seungcheol's breath, can hear the way it breaks in his throat every time he slides into Jihoon. It's erratic, a counterpoint with the slow and rhythmic motions of his hips that are leaving Jihoon utterly adrift.

Jihoon digs his fingers into Seungcheol’s shoulders, feeling the contained strength there, the tension of restraint that Seungcheol has obviously been holding back amazingly well during all of this. “Please Seungcheol, I want all of your cock inside me”

Seungcheol groans and props his hips forward in a hard thrust, an uncoordinated response to Jihoon’s plea that has him balls deep in Jihoon. Jihoon is crying out, and Seungcheol doesn’t know whether to apologise or just keep going because Jihoon is clearly past the point of words now, open-mouthed and panting and shivering. Seungcheol compromises, leaning forward again, pressing his belly and chest flush against Jihoon’s. Jihoon frees one hand from Seungcheol’s shoulder and paws at his cheek with fumbling fingers, entreating. Seungcheol answers by pulling back a little and rocking in again, deeper. Jihoon tosses his head back, mouth open in a silent scream.

From this angle Seungcheol can fuck him deeper, and he slides an arm around Jihoon’s waist, holding him steady while he thrusts in sweet slow waves. It's nothing like the forceful almost pounding sex Jihoon had idly imagined between them. Jihoon kisses Seungcheol’s temple and flicks his tongue over his piercing and marvels at how wrong he'd been all this time.

Eventually it’s not enough, this slow rocking together, and Seungcheol has to settle back onto his knees again, get Jihoon’s hips in his hands, and start fucking him in earnest. Jihoon meets him there, cupping the back of his knees and holding his legs open, angling his hips until Seungcheol is stroking into exactly the right place, judging by the spine numbing tingle that shoots up Jihoon’s spine.

Jihoon’s head lolls on the pillow as his orgasm builds. God, he wants this to last forever. His grip loosens around his knees and his legs drop, Seungcheol pulls out a fraction and hooks his legs over his shoulders before sliding in again. The new angle is enough of a change to drag him back to a duller pleasure, something blunter that keeps him balancing on the head of that needle. Jihoon starts whining now; he can't get the leverage to cant his hips, but he can suck on Seungcheol's tongue, he can buck up against Seungcheol’s hips and clench his hole in subtle strokes that he knows will drive Seungcheol crazy. It does; Seungcheol loses his rhythm, and Jihoon revels in it, rides the current into something slower again –something intense and hot, burning him slowly from the inside out.

"You’re driving me crazy Jellybean." Seungcheol tells him. His voice is low at his ear as he sets a new pace. Seungcheol's husky voice acts like a compass, giving Jihoon something to focus on, to ground him, to keep him present in this sweet reality as Seungcheol thrusts relentless inside him. “Uhh—yeah—Gonna fuck you—so good baby, till you’re—sore and can’t take—anymore. Then – gonna fuck your pretty—marshmallow thighs.”

Jihoon’s fingers tighten reflexively on the back of Seungcheol’s neck because he can hear the way that Seungcheol’s breath is snatched ragged now, and the rhythm of his hips is stuttering out of time now, and – “I want it,” Jihoon says, feeling incoherent. “Make—me come please!” Jihoon pleads hoarsely, throat parched.

Seungcheol speeds up right then, taking a sharp angle that jostles Jihoon further up the bed momentarily before righting his balance again. Jihoon’s heart stutters, adrenaline flooding his arms and toes while his cock fills up with more blood and a slow building urgency. Seungcheol breaks his
rhythm a little when he opens his mouth to say, “Don’t muffle your noises—baby. Love your pretty little moans. Wanna hear you Jellybean—Please?”

Yeah, Jihoon has been subconsciously holding back on his vocal contributions, so centred on trying to feel every burning thrust of Seungcheol’s cock in his asshole. Focusing on the way his prostate is throbbing with the over-stimulation, inflamed with the sensations and pleasure and how his cock is grinding against the stiff muscles of Seungcheol’s abdomen—a soft friction that gives enough pressure against the under head of his cock. ”Oh god. Cheol,” Jihoon gasps out, a stringy high sound that is all wet with spit. “Please, Cheol. Fuck me!. Fuck me—fuckme—fuckme.” He blabbers.

Seungcheol complies with his plea and starts slamming his hips in and out, pistoning with a new enforced speed. It makes Jihoon jerk forward, hands pushing against the headboard while his ass bounces off the bed. The head of Seungcheol’s cock batters his prostate—buzzing and fucking him into a new level of sensitivity until his balls start twisting all high and tight into his body, abdomen quivering with sheer need and hips start to undulate, chasing for his release.

“Ahrgg—yessh—hmm—mmaaa!” Jihoon bites down on Seungcheol shoulder when he starts to garble out weak, choked up noises because—that’s it. His cock goes rigid, at the very precipice of an orgasm that arches his back all tight with tension. A heat furls from the tips of his toes up his spine until it shoots out of his cock, all hot and white and messy. Seungcheol chokes out a litany of Jihoon’s name like a goddamn fucking prayer as Jihoon’s asshole flutters and clenches with each spurt, enveloping him in an unbearable heated pressure.

A heartbeat later, when the orgasm is slowly leaving his body, he is aware of Seungcheol still moving inside him, wrapped around him and drawing these loud, labored breaths. “Ji—hoonie. Baby,” Seungcheol whispers brokenly, kissing the damp hair along his temple and forehead. There’s the slow creeping twinge of ache and soreness from the oversensitivity that has his ass screaming for Seungcheol to come and finish. “So pretty. So good. So close baby, just hold on for me…gonna come soon.”

“Please,” Jihoon slurs against Seungcheol’s neck, the wash of his breath is drenched with satiation and voice shot with thickness. “Fill me up Cheol.”

“Oh—fuck, I will.” Seungcheol grins wolfishly against his shoulder, Jihoon hears it in smugness of his voice, “Gonna fill you up. Gonna make you all mine.”

It’s seven hard thrusts later, delivered with a curse, a stilling of hips and a full body tremor, when Seungcheol comes inside him. The hot spurt of Seungcheol’s come against Jihoon’s sensitized prostate is so good, Jihoon’s limp, sated member gives a weak pulse in response.

Seungcheol collapses against him, dropping his head into the crook of Jihoon’s neck, his breath heaving in his chest. Jihoon’s fingers thread tenderly at Seungcheol’s hairline, his lips set against Seungcheol’s temple in a gratifying gesture. It’s a long, long time after that before either one of them moves.

Jihoon first awoke in the grey light of dawn, with the sound of birdsong greeting him outside his window. He spared a glance at his sleeping companion; who was smiling contently in his sleep, he was hit with the sudden urge to reach out and trace the slope of Seungcheol’s nose, but he resisted, not wishing to risk rousing him from his slumber.

He submersed himself in the bedsheets again and slept a while longer and when he opened his eyes again, the angle of the sun told him it was well into afternoon. Seungcheol was awake now, the
glazed look in his eyes determined he hadn’t been awake for long. He smirked at Jihoon, lying naked with his hair splayed out messily. The sight of him sent a pang of longing down Jihoon’s spine. “Good morning.” Jihoon greets, a little stunned at the hoarseness of his voice.

Well, Seungcheol did promise to make him scream till he lost it.

“Hm….think it’s too late to say good morning.” Seungcheol said huskily, then he yawned and stretched, putting his sleep-flushed and slightly scratched and bitten torso on display. “Yeah, uhm….last night was pretty awesome.” Jihoon says, wincing at the plain honesty and creeping desperation he hears in his voice. He clears his throat. “Did you sleep well?” he asks.

“Yeah, like a baby. This bed is too comfortable!” Seungcheol laughs.

Jihoon flops down from where he had kept himself propped up on the elbows, smile on his lips as he takes in the hair nest/mohawk displayed on the top of Seungcheol’s head. It should be infuriating how bed hair still looks great on the guy. “Are you hungry?” he begins, “Can I…. I can make you breakfast?”

Seungcheol chuckles, amusement on his breath. “I’m starving,” he says, then gazes down at his wristwatch, eyes turning unreadable with an emotion Jihoon can’t place, before he moves to roll out of the bed. “No actually, I gotta go.” He says, all on a rush of breath. “Got a lot of stuff to do and I’ve already wasted too much time.” He adds, and as simple as that, the illusion is shattered.

Jihoon winces internally, feeling lost. Wasted too much time?..... It can easily be considered an off-handed comment, a little chit-chat that would probably slip insignificant if Jihoon doesn’t have a brain that tears apart conversations, trying to make a puzzle out of it.

“Oh,” Jihoon says dumbly, the single syllable falling from his lips like a careless tumble on the sheets, a solitary act of thoughtlessness. “Oh, yeah….of course.” he says, quietly chiding himself for assuming that Seungcheol would hang around for fucking breakfast and soppy affectionate shit.

Everything in him shouts 'stupid-stupid-stupid, what were you expecting, breakfast is too weird after the first night'

He couldn't bear it, suddenly, to be here, lying within arms reach of Seungcheol, on such false pretences. “If you’re free later…mm-aybe we could get a drink?” Jihoon tries for casual and hates himself for the tremor mid-statement.

“I can’t,” Seungcheol dismisses quickly, and the two words are heavy in the air, sinking like stones into the already-widening gulf between them. “I’m gonna be busy all day.” He says, dressing quickly without meeting Jihoon’s eyes.

The enthusiasm goes out of Jihoon almost visibly, hopefulness tangibly slipping away. “Okay.” he murmurs in his own voice, sounding defeated even to his own ears. He focuses his eyes towards the wall, deliberately looking anywhere but at Seungcheol. “Don’t forget your belt.” he gestures vaguely in the direction of the chair the item was discarded on.

“I guess I’ll see you later…. when I pick up the car.” Jihoon says with a smile and voice serrated at the edges.

“Probably best you don’t stop off at the garage.” Seungcheol says, slipping his belt through the belt loops. He buckles it and abruptly turns to the door, not looking at Jihoon as he leaves. “I’ll get one of my guys to drop your car off later.” he says over his shoulder.

Something about the finality in his tone keeps Jihoon silent and understanding dawns on him in cold
wash of vicious heartache. He thought his self-esteem, was beyond the point of sinking, and is wearily surprised to discover that it can lower even further when Seungcheol turns him down so easily. Jihoon gives some sort of non-committal reply, heartsore and emotionally drained. He wanders out of the room behind Seungcheol, limping slightly as he makes his way towards the front door. Seungcheol seems desperate to get away now, like he’s in some mad rush to be rid of Jihoon, not even glancing back once as he walks down the corridor. Jihoon watches him slip on his boots, face impassive as he leans against the wall to lace them up.

Then he is gone, blindingly white t-shirt and black leather disappearing out the door and into the glaring light of the midday sun. The last glimpse Jihoon catches of him is of his face, his beautiful, sinful face tilted up to the sky, breath-taking eyes reflecting the rays of the sun, lighting his features like a warm caress, before he slips his helmet on. It’s more fleeting yet more lasting than Jihoon’s mark on him would ever be.

Seungcheol hates when a mission fails. It’s a personal failure for him. Plans are faultless, especially if they’re his plans. Execution on the other hand, that’s when it gets a little tricky and relying on third party information to execute your plan is even trickier. Too many variations, too much hearsay and not enough facts. Their most recent job was supposed to be simple, as far as run-of-the-mill jobs like it went. If it’s one thing Seungcheol’s learnt, though, it’s that simple jobs never turn out that way.

When he arrives back at the garage, he identifies Jeonghan’s car parked near the entrance.

“Boss, you’re back!” Jun exclaims, lifting up his welders helmet to address him.

“Yep, are we still on schedule?” He asks, not slowing down as he passes Jun, heading towards the office.

“Yes, just a few modifications to make on the cruiser and Mingyu and Vernon are packing the shipment now.”

“Good.” He says, giving Jun a thumbs up as he enters the office. “I’m late.” Seungcheol declares, pushing the door to the office open.

Jeonghan steps back from where he is hovering near the desk and scoffs. “That’s not an apology.” He chastises, throwing Seungcheol a saccharine smile.

“Apology?” Seungcheol echoes flatly, frowning. “I wasn’t apologising. I was just stating a fact, I wouldn’t waste and apology on you.” He growls, ushering Jeonghan onto one of the chairs in front of his desk, taking a seat himself and propping his feet up as he leans back.

Jeonghan blinks, and his smile goes a little stiff around the edges as he slinks into his seat. “I see you’re still annoyed about the little clusterfuck on Tuesday…..that wasn’t my fault.”

“Oh?” Seungcheol enquires seriously “Then who’s fault was it? I pay you to get me all the necessary information to plan these missions and then I get side winded by an ambush. Wonwoo was injured and I lost a third of my shipment.” He snaps, irate.

“Only a third….not so much of a loss when you consider who you were up ag—”

“I don’t like losing anything!” Seungcheol interjects brusquely “I don’t like surprises….not when I am the one on the receiving end anyway. You—fucked—up.”

Jeonghan rolls his eyes. “We—fucked up. We—are a team. Can I please not get scapegoated.
Besides…I was double-crossed; my usual source of information has proven to be somewhat, unreliable….but I’m taking care of it.

Seungcheol snorts, shaking his head. “You better be, I don’t want a repeat of this.” Seungcheol warns, affecting a disappointed stance although the tightness about his eyes, lessens somewhat.

“Of course.” Jeonghan acquiesces, head tilting slightly. “Except for the little, surprise, was the shipment what we were expecting?” he asks.

“See for yourself.” Seungcheol says, reaching into the desk drawer and pulling out a handgun, sliding it across the desk towards Jeonghan.

Jeonghan inspects and press checks the gun, dropping the mag, locking the slide back. Satisfied he sets the pistol back down on the table with a decisive click and slides it back over. “Unmarked, high resale value, high commodity. Even with the loss….you’re making a huge profit.”

Seungcheol laughs softly, dismally “It’s not about the money for me anymore Hannie, It’s about my reputation.”

Jeonghan slants a wry look his way. “Well, you need to get over that, because it’s all about the money for everyone else.”

They discuss the pertinent details of the next job they have lined up, who Jeonghan recommends they bring in, what kind of firepower they will need and the most important part, the payload. The conversation eventually rounds back to shop talk and the elevation in Jeonghan’s mood is hard to miss.

“So, I hear you’ve been kept busy recently, playing pretend mechanic.” He tells Seungcheol, a ghost of a smile on his lips, contemptuous and hard-like-diamonds.

Seungcheol frowns, equal parts resigned and slightly bemused just because Jeonghan looks at him with this vaguely defiant stare, like he expects Seungcheol to reject his statement. “I’ve been pretending to play mechanic for a while Jeonghan. It was your idea to have this cover in place…..have you forgotten?”

“I’m not talking about this ‘front’—stop playing coy.” Jeonghan laughs.

Seungcheol mentally curses Jeonghan for always having the inside track, always being able to read him like a book. Ironically, the trait that annoys him the most is exactly what he pays Jeonghan to do. Seungcheol has never been very good at lying, which is hardly becoming of a professional criminal. He can pass muster when it comes to meeting clients and slipping into new aliases, but he generally leaves the deception and long-cons to the professionals on his team. He’s more brute strength then covert and that’s okay, he has a tight team that compensate for each other’s deficiencies.

Seungcheol leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, narrowing his gaze at Jeonghan as he re-bricks his defences with stoicism and a firm jaw.

Jeonghan stares at him for a long beat, and holds his breath before he releases it on a long exhale. “Look,” he says, pulling off a mischievous expression. “I’ve heard all about this twink you’ve got on the side.”

Seungcheol’s answering stare is hard. “He’s not a twink on the side!” he counters automictically, not missing a beat.

“Woah!—I do apologise,” Jeonghan states, eyebrows raising in disbelief. “Somebody is a little
defensive today!”

Seungcheol sighs loudly, letting his head drop a little in frustration. He runs a tired hand down his face, the first and hopefully the last concession of the day that he makes towards this revelation. “He’s not a twink, he’s not on the side…he’s none of your business.”

Jeonghan levels a probing stare at him, eyes incisive. “Maybe he is Seungcheol….I’m here to analyse the technical aspects of your business and check for outliers, liabilities. Maybe he’s a liability and that definitely makes him my business.” He adds tentatively.

Seungcheol shakes his head dismissively. “He doesn’t know anything about the business. He thinks I’m a mechanic who carries a gun around to threaten people who write bad yelp reviews about my garage.” he explains.

Jeonghan throws his head back and laughs. The warehouse is empty save for the two of them, and a few mechanics loitering outside the office, so Jeonghan’s harsh barks echo off the hollow walls around them. Wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, Jeonghan pants for air “Oh god….that’s too funny…bless him.” He hiccups.

“You should have seen him yesterday. I caught him, pretending to ride my bike outside, It was really fucking adorable. I wanted to …wrap him in bubble wrap or blankets or something…. carry him around in my pocket.” Seungcheol snickers, recalling the incident fondly. He can’t help but smile as his mind wanders back to Jihoon; so gorgeous, all milky skinned and slim-hipped and boyish in the right light. Seungcheol knows he’s been caught simpering in adoration over Jihoon and forces his eyes back to Jeonghan’s, schooling his features into assertiveness once more. 

Jeonghan quirks the ends of his lips up into a semblance of a smile. “Then maybe you should ask yourself if you want to drag somebody so….innocent….into your, not-so-innocent life.” Jeonghan muses.

Seungcheol stares at Jeonghan for several more seconds, the gaze weighty and considering. Jihoon’s edges might have been blunted by youth and innocence, but underneath it, he was sharp and smart and could pin Seungcheol down for the what he truly was the first chance he had. “I’m not planning on bringing him along on missions with me Hannie…he’s a nice…distraction from this part of my life. When it comes to the business, I’m going to keep him at arms length. I’ve already thought about this and I don’t plan on bringing him around here again, it’s too dangerous for him.”

“Too dangerous for him?” Jeonghan parrots in an amused tone. “Aren’t we being the thoughtful sort suddenly.”

Seungcheol quirked a brow, unable to keep the scorn from his voice as he spoke. “He thinks I’m a mechanic…..I want to keep it that way. The more time he spends around here….around the likes of you, the sooner that little bubble will burst.”

“Okay,” Jeonghan replies. “If that’s how you want to play it, then okay. But… - ” he trails off abruptly, and this catches Seungcheol’s full attention, because the Jeonghan he knows is never anything less than certain. “Job’s like ours don’t exactly make for a ‘bubble-wrap’ environment. Just make sure he can live outside the bubble wrap, if it comes to it.”

“It won’t come to it. And if it does…he’s not completely fragile….he’s got claws” Seungcheol assures, and he believes his assessment of Jihoon too.

Sure, Jihoon was lovely, beautiful and delicate in a way that could be inevitably tragic and painful. But a sharpness prevails underneath, so veiled it is misleading at first glance. But Seungcheol has
seen it, it’s what attracted him to Jihoon in the first place.

Jeonghan blinks, slow and surprised, before he smiles and rises from his seat. “As long as he won’t affect the job.”

“He won’t.” Seungcheol assures. This seems enough to placate Jeonghan, who nods once before turning to saunter out of the office, leaving Seungcheol sitting alone in the shadowed office.

The day passes in a blur of preparation for their next job. They’re souping up a car to increase its resilience for an off-road pursuit, whilst ensuring speed and manoeuvrability is retained. It’s gruelling work and the cramped space under the chasse, coupled with the strenuous work and long hours cramp Seungcheol’s back and make his neck ache.

Mingyu, who has been busy making some modifications to a stolen police cruiser, clocks off at eight, announcing his departure with a stifled yawn. Seungcheol nods and waves Mingyu away, concentration on the task at hand. It is nearing nine when a warm hand drops onto his shoulder, breaking his train of thought. He looks up from his work to find Jun standing over him. “Calling it a day boss, don’t you think you should?” Jun says, smile forming at the corners of his lips.

Seungcheol nods in agreement, sharp-eyed once more even as he smiles gently. “I will soon….the last thing I want is for the job to go south because the car wasn’t up to par.”

“Don’t overdo it. By the way…..I’ve finished fixing that car…..with the engine light issue. Turns out it needed a new airflow sensor. Anyway, all clear now, do you want me to drive it over?” Jun offers.

“Awesome. Yea, if you could. Thanks.” Seungcheol says, aware of Jun’s steady stare on him and trying not to sulk internally at his own decision.

Sex with Jihoon last night had been stunningly intimate. Breath-taking. Unparalleled. Almost frightening.

Mostly when Seungcheol is fucking someone, there’s not a whole lot of thinking happening, it’s all instinct and pleasure and drive comingled with the desire to make himself come as hard and as fast as possible. But with Jihoon, Seungcheol found himself able for some reason to take it all in, all the details of sex that are usually subsumed in lust and urgency.

Seungcheol is desperately reminded, suddenly, of last night. Of the sounds in the room, the hard needful slap of his thighs against Jihoon’s, the rough counterpoint of their breathing and grunting. He recalls hungrily watching the movement of his cock, sinking into Jihoon faster and harder, Jihoon shaking to pieces under him, the too-lovely sprawl of Jihoon’s pale limbs under him, the dark mussed spill of Jihoon’s damp hair on the pillow.

Seungcheol watches Jun head out back towards the exit, Jihoon’s car keys in hand. It is a combination of protectiveness and a consuming, burning desire to see Jihoon again that has Seungcheol calling out after him. “Jun…..On second thought, I’ll drive it myself.”

Jihoon spends the rest of his Saturday in a sad slump, a fragile little bubble of regret. He’s feeling so low, so pitiful, he decides to do some work—on a Saturday for fucks sake, his sacred no-work—no-how day. It’s mostly to stifle his mind from brooding, and pondering, and imagining better outcomes.
It doesn’t work. He whittled an hour or so away with some new code his team was tasked with, sneering at himself when he found his usual ease somewhat lacking, his mind elsewhere even when forcefully applied. Usually typing away on his laptop, testing new software and making corrections was enough to lull Jihoon into an almost Zen-like state, but not today. Today it seemed that each tap of his keyboard set off a chain reaction of frustrating and unhelpful thoughts, cascading over each other until he was nearly blinded by meaningless memories.

It’s depressing to think of himself as a one trick pony when it comes to physical interactions. Only good for one fuck, one time, nothing more. He strives and struggles to shift the bone-shaking fatigue and insidious grief that has been gnawing at him ever since Seungcheol turned him down.

He does not want to think about how he slinked back into bed after Seungcheol left and groaned miserably into his pillow for an hour. He absolutely does not think about how he slumped against the tiled wall in the shower, washing away Seungcheol’s dried come between his legs. He’s not going to think about the smattering of bruises along his hips and thighs, imprinted memories of Seungcheol’s hands, lips and teeth, colouring his skin.

He shook his head, dispelling the mental images with a soft, broken noise and slaps down his laptop cover in frustration. He feels stuck in a limbo of his own foolish making. They were no more than two men, two not-strangers and not-quite-friends, who fucked. He shouldn’t have expected anything. I’m so stupid—Jihoon thinks, it was stupid to think that Seungcheol would see him as more than just a casual hole to stick his dick into, and he forces his foolish hopes away, locking them in untouchable places, far out of his own reach.

He gives up on trying to work productively, changes his bedsheets, and sinks down into the area of the couch still graced by sunlight, trying not to examine the dark corners of his own mind. When he gets hungry, he eats an apple and because that is zero percent satisfying, he orders pizza and flips through the TV channels aimlessly. He settles for watching some reality TV show where the participants seem to be injuring themselves for entertainment; the irony in his choice doesn’t fail to register with him.

When Jihoon answers the door, he’s expecting the pizza delivery guy and answers it dressed casually in an extremely oversized sweater and shorts and hair he hasn’t bothered to brush since he wrung his hands through it in frustration.


Jihoon steels himself, crushing his wallet in his fist so hard he can feel the credit cards bend against the leather. He knew somebody was going to deliver his car today, he just wasn’t expecting Seungcheol to grace his doorstep again. He promised himself he’d act normal if they ever crossed paths again. So he would, no matter much how it hurt. “Hi.” He answers quietly.

“Finished working on your car. It was a fault with your air-flow sensor….not that that piece of information will matter to you.” Seungcheol teases, poking Jihoon’s shoulder in a show of friendly affection.

“You’re right….it won’t.” Jihoon says flatly and he has to muster up more strength than he thought he would need to send Seungcheol a weak smile to accompany his weak answer. His poor performance does little to fool Seungcheol, and inwardly, Jihoon swears, because he really should be better at this, he should know by now this is how casual hook-ups work.
Seungcheol’s eyes are searching and speculative on his for a brief second, before flickering to his usual teasing condescension as he holds out the palm with Jihoon’s car keys. Jihoon reaches down to deftly pluck them from his fingers.

“Thank you.” He flips open his wallet and starts thumbing through the wad of bills he has tucked away. “How much do I owe you Seungcheol.” he asks, voice pitched low and quiet.


“You’ve worked on my car twice now and I haven’t handed over a single dollar. That doesn’t class me as a fair business transaction.” Jihoon says, voice steady and chest hurting, keeping his eyes lowered as he thumbs through an approximate amount he thinks an ‘air flow sensor’ replacement would cost. He has no fucking clue so quickly fishes out his phone and while Seungcheol is standing there, does a search ‘How much does an Air-flow sensor replacement cost?’

Seungcheol detects a note of something in Jihoon’s tone, and he frowns a little, straightening up from where he is leant against the doorframe to turn and face him fully. "Jellybean," he said on a low, rising tone, like the start of a question. Whatever it was, Jihoon knew he didn’t want to answer it.

“Shush.” Jihoon quietens him, still searching through his phone.

Apparently Air-Flow sensors errors are a common malfunction in the model of his car, one search hit reveals, $250 dollars + labour for a replacement, another search determines.

“What are you doin-“ Seungcheol asks, trying to peek at his mobile.

“I said shush! I’m trying to calculate something!” Jihoon cuts him off. He rounds the airflow replacement up to $300, then adds the $400 for the tires Seungcheol replaced earlier that week and counts out the money.

Seungcheol quiets, clearly sensing that something is wrong. “Jellybean,” he says softly after a moment, “What’s wrong?” he asks, then reaches out to cup Jihoon’s cheek. He isn’t prepared for the intensity of Jihoon’s reaction. Jihoon jerks away, his face immediately shutting and closing off, eyes flashing with an emotion Seungcheol can’t quite catch before walling off into blankness again.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just paying you for your mechanical services. I would hate to owe you anything.” Jihoon replies dryly. Biting down on his lip, almost hard enough to draw blood. He folds the bills in half and then shoves them in Seungcheol’s hand. “You should go. I wouldn’t want to waste anymore of your time.” he adds as a grand, shattering finale.

Dumbstruck and gaping, Seungcheol vocalises a strangled noise. “Wait-wha?”

“Bye!” He says, mockingly sweet before stepping back into the apartment and slamming the door shut in Seungcheol’s face.

*Bob and his Wacky waving inflatable arm flailing tube man would never have made me feel like this!*
Jihoon, frankly, has had better weeks.

To top of the nice portion of misery and self-loathing he had dished out over the weekend, the rest of the following week hadn’t faired any better.

His monthly mortgage payments have increased. **Which is awesome.**

Not only can he **not** sell his apartment because of its undesirable location and slump in the market, now he has to pay more each month for the privilege of living in it.

His plumbing system is a complete mess! That’s the houses plumbing system by the way—**perverts.** So now he has to find a decent plumber, who’s going to charge him way over the top to come out, survey the damage and possibly—**lay some pipe.** No, not like that—we’re still talking about the house here—**perverts!**

And about an hour ago he got a memo asking him to attend a strategy business meeting at work, which is just the biggest waste of time ever.

These meetings have nothing to do with him or his line of work but, **apparently,** every project manager simply must attend!

Jihoon thinks it’s some clever attempt at giving some useless shit at head office a job to do.

Obviously, these people have NOTHING better to do with their time and they need to look busy, so planning a meeting will activate enough braincells in their tiny useless brains to keep them functioning.

Jihoon detests these meetings because usually he just sits there looking constipated while some corporate moron waves a hand around a pie chart and throws out business jargon like:

**‘Moving forward’:** As opposed to what? Moving backwards? We’re creating software you fucking twat not driving a bus!

**‘It is what it is’:** Oh is it? Is it though? It is—Is it?

**‘Let’s think outside the box’:** What is this hypothetical box? And why was anyone thinking inside the box in the first place?

**‘Giving 110%’:** Not possible, just take your extra 10% and shove it up your ass!

**‘Peel the onion’:** Because designing software and writing code is a lot like being a chef? **What the**
‘Let’s take this offline’: Usually his manager spews this out when Jihoon actually has something relevant to say, but the incompetent fucktard can’t answer the query so, ‘Let’s take this offline Jihoon’ is used so that he can buy himself more time to do some research.

Usually Jihoon uses meetings of this variety as an excuse to daydream away from his computer and lately those daydreams had been of—Seungcheol; riding in to the boardroom on his motorcycle like some knight in shining armour and sweeping Jihoon off his highly uncomfortable chair to the shock and jealousy of his colleagues.

(How Seungcheol gets the motorcycle up five flights of stairs and through the endless sets of double doors is irrelevant—it’s a daydream ok, he can forgo the realism.)

But he’s not daydreaming about Seungcheol today—nope. Fuck him and his awesome motorcycle, Jihoon’s had his fill of hot studs that wear leather and make him feel like shit.

The meeting is scheduled for 2pm and as Jihoon is a punctual, professional and studious worker he shows up at 2.30pm—because he knows these meetings always start late. But when he pushes through the double doors into the boardroom he freezes, because he is definitely the last one there this time and all eyes turn to him.

“Uhm, sorry I’m late?” He says, unapologetically, because fuck this shit, these guys are usually never on time!

“Take a seat Jihoon.” The CEO commands. He’s standing near the top with two suspicious looking men in dark suits flanking him.

Seungkwan, a casual acquaintance from another team pats the chair next to his in welcome, and as soon as Jihoon takes a seat, the double doors are closed and locked.

The CEO frowns briefly and his eyes rake quickly over Jihoon’s easy slouch at the table, noting his delightful calm suspiciously.

“We’ve gathered you here today under the guise of a business meeting to keep this situation as discreet as possible. I trust that anything you hear today, anything that is discussed will not leave this room. It will be a breach of your contracts and can be punishable by disciplinary procedures, dismissal and potential court action.” The CEO warns.

Jihoon rolls his eyes, believing these threats to be corporate embellishment, at best.

The company designed a lot of high value, commercially applicable software and competed with other companies for commercial and government contracts all the time. Everyone must disclose any conflicts of interest when they are employed and sharing project details was practically unheard of. It doesn’t stop the atmosphere in the room turning cold as everyone stiffens in their seats.

The rise and fall of the CEO’s shoulders is steady in the long moment for which he is silent. He turns his gaze around the room slowly, jaw set hard and something unflinching in his gaze, and then quietly, he says, “We’ve been made aware of a breach in our software programming code, designed by Dr. Raine. Unfortunately, this breach was not from an outside source, but rather from a member of our programming team.” he explains.

Jihoon is caught off-guard and the room descends in hushed whispers and gasps.

He feels an odd pang in his gut that reminds him of the last time he spoke to Dr.Raine over the phone.
and how different he sounded.

‘Jihoon, remember—everything is fake!’ He had told Jihoon.

Jihoon doesn’t have time to think back on the details of the conversation now because the CEO is thumping the desk and calling for silence.

The CEO raises his hand to calm the panic. “These are enforcement officers sent from the Bureau to conduct an investigation, I have agreed to cooperate fully with them as should everyone in this room.”

“Hold on—what breach exactly?” a senior manager asks.

“Why is Dr Raine not here?!” Another asks in a panic.

“I am not in a position to answer question at this moment in time. All we know is, Dr Raine was involved with the breach, he designed and re-wrote the code and it was used to hack into a banking network to siphon off funds. Now Dr Raine is missing and we have reason to suspect it has to do with the code.”

Jihoon, frozen with his coffee halfway to his mouth, merely gapes at this sudden revelation. “Oh god.” He gasps quietly.

“Oh my god!” Seungkwan yells dramatically with a burst of sound and unfounded terror. “I don’t believe this! He was such a nice, caring man! Was it to cure his sick daughter? I knew he had a sick daughter and he wanted to raise funds for some novel treatment abroad.”

The CEO lifts an eyebrow, face impassive. “Perhaps. Perhaps that was a factor in his decision, but from what we have seen in our investigation so far, he has been siphoning funds discreetly for a number of years, well before he started claiming health insurance for his daughters illness. We estimate an excess of 20 million dollars.”

Even with Jihoon’s slightly reserved nature he can’t help but be affected by the frenzied panic all around him – most particularly Seungkwan’s hysterical approach.

“Oh MY GOD!” Seungkwan hollers. “I knew he was a crook from the moment I laid eyes on him! He probably doesn’t even have a daughter or anything! He’s probably on a cruise somewhere in Italy sunning his wrinkly ass!” he hisses spitefully.

Jihoon mutters a snide “That’s bulshit.” before he realizes that his voice has travelled through the sudden silence of the room.

He squirms in his seat as eyes turn to him after his quiet outburst and he speaks up. “Dr. Raine is a great guy. We all know him and we all know he would never have done anything illegal.” he defends, gesturing loosely at the room.

The CEO waves away Jihoon’s comment with a frustrated sigh and frown. “Yes, Jihoon. I know you were close with Dr. Raine, he recruited you after all. We understand this is a difficult time for you, to process all this information.” he says in a tone of casual disinterest, smoothing out an already straight jacket lapel.

Jihoon fights the urge to grab his collar and shake some sense into him, but answers through clenched teeth, voice stronger now, firmer. “He did more than that! He trained me, taught me everything I know! Yeah he had a sick daughter but that doesn’t mean he would have turned on the company or, resorted to illegal activities.” he defends.
“That’s true Jihoon. You were particularly close with him.” The CEO drawls and Jihoon blinks even as everyone fixes him with baleful, accusing stare.

“So?” Jihoon asks in what he hopes is a bored tone.

“So—,” The CEO echoes, his eyes boring into Jihoon. “so that’s why we have selected you to have the polygraph testing done first.”

“WHAT!”

Jihoon is outraged, he has never stolen a thing in his life!

Well, that’s not entirely true. Once when he was six and shopping with his mother in the local supermarket, he stuffed a lollipop into his pocket and got all the way to the car before he broke down in guilt and admitted to the theft.

His mother had made such a big show of marching him into the store and making him apologize to the manager that it scarred him effectively for life! The manager laughed it off and let Jihoon keep the lollipop but Jihoon’s pretty sure the guy still holds a grudge over the whole thing and watches him like a hawk whenever he graces the supermarkets shop floor till this day.

Jihoon isn’t worried about his results.

He takes the polygraph and answers a slew of questions one after the other.

The adrenaline sharpens him, and answers come quickly to him even when he is asked to recall past interactions with Dr. Raine in detail, for the most part, he is unruffled by the whole experience.

Thankfully, Jihoon is not a thief or a liar and the test reveals that much, to the chagrin of the CEO who probably thought he was on to something there for a moment.

Unfortunately for Seungkwan however, when posed with the question ‘Have you ever stolen or planned to steal company property’, ge answered NO and that was revealed to be a lie.

He then broke down and revealed that he had been stealing tea bags from the office canteen for three years.

They are dismissed from the boardroom, as the investigation continues and are advised to return to work as to limit the suspicion of junior staff.

A road diversion on his usual path home means Jihoon has to take an extra fifteen minutes to drive home.

He’s is still reeling from the news of Dr. Raine’s disappearance and potential criminal activities. The devastating rush of everything that’s happened this week hits him now and leaves his throat tight, his heart a crushing lead weight.

He doesn’t believe it; he doesn’t understand.

He’s known Dr Raine practically his whole adult life—which isn’t long to be fair but the man had
recruited Jihoon straight out of high school and offered him an apprenticeship and after, a well paying job in software programming.

The man was essentially a father figure away from home. Jihoon always relied on him for advice and help in his first few years working with the company and they had always remained in close contact until his daughter fell ill, over a year ago.

He just can’t believe somebody he was so close with was a criminal and he couldn’t see it!

It boggled his mind.

He never thought himself to be naïve but Dr. Raine must have gone to great lengths to conceal his criminal enterprises all these years.

Jihoon’s driving along in deep thought, when his dash light flashes. It startles him for a moment and carelessly he lets his eyes sweep downwards to study the small red flashing symbol, trying to remember what it means.

He turns his head back up, not even seconds later as he notices a flash of white and a truck crosses his path—but it’s too late. The truck clips his front bumper and Jihoon’s car goes flying, with Jihoon in it.

All the lights on the dashboard are flashing when Jihoon cracks open his eyes a few seconds later. It feels like a few seconds, it’s probably been longer because, yep, the car is definitely not on the road anymore.

Jihoon can see grass and dirt through his cracked windscreen and feels a twinge in his neck so sharp, his eyes water.

He tilts his neck around cautiously to survey the wreckage around him through bleary eyes when a wave of nausea washes over him and he has to take a deep breath to quell the contents of his stomach threatening to wretch.

“Fuck.” He croaks before panic settles in and he scrambles to get out of his seat.

He’s struggling to move but it’s because the belt is still locked in, keeping him in place. It probably saved his life, but he can’t think of that now he just wants out, out, out! He takes a few deep breaths before reaching down to unclip himself. Which in hindsight, was not the best idea because he’s not prepared to face plant into the roof of the car when the buckle releases.

“Ow.” Jihoon mumbles plaintively from where his face is still mashed against the padded car roof. He struggles on his hands and feet to crawl through the smashed car window nearest to him and then climbs to his feet.

“Are you fucking blind!” A voice booms down the embankment.

The driver of the truck waves his fist tightly at Jihoon as he stumbles up to the side of the road.

The trucker moves away to quickly check on the status of his vehicle, too intent on making sure all the damage is accounted for to stay and gripe.

“Oh my god! Are you alright?!” a passer-by who has witnessed the collision calls out.

Jihoon stands and trembles, swallowing his shock and bone wobbling terror as he looks back at the wreckage behind him. His chest was tight as he puffs disbelieving breaths, patting himself for injuries
as he sways in place.

“Um,” he says in both startled relief and inexpressible regret. “I’m, I’m good, thanks. I mean – thank you – but, no. I’m good.” He manages to say.

“I think that truck clipped the front of your car, it all happened so fast. Oh shit, I think you hit your head? You’re bleeding.” The passer-by says, reaching out to pat Jihoon’s forehead and Ow, yeah, that hurts.

“I’ll call an ambulance!” the passer-by assures him.

And then Jihoon’s world starts to spin together, sounds and lights and people blurring into one and – Jihoon crumples to sit cross legged suddenly on the tarmac. “Oh—okay. Thanks. I think I’ll sit down for a minute.”

The ambulance arrives soon after and the kind paramedic, who introduces himself as Joshua, leads Jihoon to the back of the ambulance to assess his injuries.

“Please look into the light.” Joshua directs.

“Now, follow the light with your eyes.” He orders next, swaying the flashlight back and forth as he stares inquisitively at Jihoon’s face before smiling. “Good, you don’t appear concussed but I’m going to ask you a series of questions, take your time answering them.”

“What’s your name?”

“Lee Jihoon.”

“Ok, good. Now tell me Jihoon how does you head feel?”

“Fine, I feel fine.” Jihoon answers quickly.

“Sure?” Joshua asks and Jihoon blinks in turn.

“Yes, certain.” Jihoon manages and the paramedic smiles, finally releasing his arm from the blood pressure cuff and folding over his medical bag before stepping back.

“Do you have any pre-existing medical conditions?”

“Uhhm, no,” he paused. “I don’t think so, wait, is backache a medical condition? Because I have backache all the time but I think it’s because I don’t adopt good posture when I’m at work. I work in front of a computer all day and my doctor tells me I should exercise more but I really don’t want to sign up for the Gym. It’s not that I’m lazy it’s just that I’m not ready for that kind of commitment to exercise right now. Besides I really don’t have the time and the nearest gym is like, a 30 minute drive from my house and-.”

He stops mid rant, realising that he is rambling and apologises softly, grateful that somehow the Joshua knew not to mock him for the obvious affect the accident was having on him.

“Look, it’s normal. You’re going into shock after your accident. You just need to sit down and take some deep, calming breaths.” Joshua comforts, patting down Jihoon’s jacket and fishing out his wallet and checking for a medical card.
The cool air that Jihoon draws in on a long, shaky breath seems to roll down through his body until it bottoms out at the tips of his toes and rebounds back upward in a slow, sluggish wave until it finally reaches his brain.

“Ok, so I don’t see any medical cards here so I am going to assume you have no underlying medical conditions we should be cautious of. Is there anyone you would like us to contact? Any relatives or friends that can pick you up?” Joshua asks.

“No, I don’t have any family. Well, I do but they live really far away and they don’t drive. I should visit them more and I do feel guilty about it but who says I have to be the one to visit? They should visit me! I guess my parents don’t like driving long distances and my mom has a fear of flying so it’s really up to me to keep in contact, but still. I have a sister but she’s a major pain in my-”. He pauses mid-rant again.

“Sorry.” Jihoon laughs, short and sharp, lifting a hand to cover his mouth briefly at the shock of tears in his eyes, blinking them back before they can do more than burn him.

Joshua pats his back soothingly. “It’s okay, it’s normal. You’ve just had a bad accident and you’ve made it out in one piece. It’s normal to get emotional. Are you sure your head feels okay? I’d like you to have a routine check back at the hospital just in case.” he suggests.

Jihoon shakes his head quickly, he really doesn’t want to be hauled to the hospital for head trauma or a psych evaluation.

Maybe Joshua can put his break down to some kind of post-accident, adrenaline-fueled freak out.

“No—no, I’m fine. I think I just would like to go home.” He starts to pat around his jacket for his car keys. “Wait, oh god—where are my car keys? I think I dropped my car keys!” He panics.

Joshua cocks his head to one side, eyes gleaming.

“Jihoon—relax. You’re car keys are still in the vehicle and you won’t be able to drive your car anywhere because it’s overturned on the side of the road, remember?”

“Oh, shit. Yeah, sorry.” Jihoon blinks, shaking his head.

Joshua smiles kindly. “I understand this is a lot to take in and you’re confused but we will call a tow truck to remove your vehicle for you. Ok?”

“Yeah, okay.” Jihoon agrees, hunching down with his head in his hands.

Joshua steps back from the ambulance for a bit to make a phone call and he seems satisfied when he returns.

“Okay, so I’ve called your mechanic and he’s on his way to tow your vehicle.” Joshua informs him.

“Great, thanks.” Jihoon smiles weakly, then the words sink in a little and his eyes widen. “Wait—how did you know who my mechanic was?”

“Well, I noticed you had his card on the inside of your wallet when I was checking for a medical card earlier.” He says, holding out Jihoon’s wallet.

Jihoon flips it open quickly and checks the card slotted in the divider.

*Just great.*
Typical. Just as he’s resolved to carefully put away his feelings and not revisit them again.

“No! No, no,no,no,no,no!” he grimaces to accompany his whine.


“Not the physical kind.” he winces, “It’s nothing. It's just.....he’s just about the last person I want to see today.” Jihoon shrugs and grins at the paramedics startled expression, “This week just keeps getting better.”

Joshua is busy attending to the driver of the truck who is now complaining of whiplash, like the classic insurance scamming bastard he is, even though it’s Jihoon’s car crumpled in a ditch.

Jihoon’s may not have any physical injuries to speak of, but he has emotional injuries: his phone has suffered the most out of this whole thing.

He almost doesn’t give a shit about the state of the car but his phone is his lifeline, his baby, and the massive crack down the centre of the screen renders the touch screen senseless to touch.

He tries to activate the voice command app instead but the microphone has been damaged too and so a search for ‘Car Repair’ comes up with ‘Cat cafe’ and dammit, he’s going to have to go there now cause that sounds amazing?

An unknown instinct forces his eyes up from his cracked phone screen and they still abruptly as they fall on the imposing figure of Seungcheol, standing next to a tow truck a short distance ahead.

Jihoon looks at him – at the tilt of his warm smile, the creases that kiss the corners of his eyes, the confidence all through his expression that renders him impossibly smug, and tries to imagine punching him in the face.

Jihoon trembles, flattening his hand against the ambulance door in an attempt to steady himself as he watches Seungcheol walk up to stand in front of him with his breath catching in his chest.

Jihoon’s skin blazes at his approach and for a beat they each simply stand there and breathe.

Seungcheol’s eyes fix on him, heavy like an almost starved physical touch as they try and catalogue every scratch and bump on Jihoon’s body.

They hold, frozen for a moment with the shock of actually facing each other as their eyes pierce and the noise of moving traffic washes over them, scattering the warmth that seemed to briefly enfold them, and then...

“Hey Jel.....Hello Jihoon.” Seungcheol greets and Jihoon’s fingers spasm lightly at his sides as his body briefly fights, and loses, the fight against the warmth that steals straight up and through him at both Seungcheol’s voice and the memories it brings.

It’s easy to say he’s getting over the guy when he doesn’t have to see Seungcheol, doesn’t have to interact with him. It’s entirely different when Seungcheol’s standing there, looking like sex incarnate.

Jihoon curses himself inwardly and his jaw cramps as he clenches his teeth against the fury he wants to turn upon himself.

He was better than this, this pathetic sharpening of his senses; as though any moment not
experienced around Seungcheol was somehow lesser for his absence. As though Jihoon ceases to live his own life and now follows Seungcheol’s own existence like a sad, puny little moon circling the brilliant, blazing sun.

Jihoon drops his gaze, aware that his eyes had held Seungcheol’s for too long. But the imprint of Seungcheol’s perfect smile and hooded gaze is seared into the insides of his eyelids.

Seungcheol crowds him against the ambulance door, “Are you okay? What happened? Are you injured? You must be, shit your cars a wreck!” He says, voice worrying with concern, hands coming up to cup Jihoon’s chin and tilt his head, inspecting the prominent bump on his forehead.

Jihoon’s heart jumps, climbing up his throat for a quick second at the warmth in his touch – he tells himself he is just cold.

He shrugs Seungcheol off with a tight and mostly false smile.

“I’m fine.” He murmurs, and wishes it was less obvious that Seungcheol’s presence affects him.

“Physically he is fine, but he’s in a little shock which is understandable.” Joshua explains, returning to Jihoon’s side and unclipping the O2 reader from his finger.

“But he’s good to go, his vitals check out.” He beams, passing the smile between Jihoon and Seungcheol’s unwavering gaze at each other.

Seungcheol nods absently at Joshua’s assessment, not moving his eyes from Jihoon’s face.

“That bump on your head looks bad, you might have a concussion. Are you sure you’re okay? Do you feel faint?” Seungcheol asks in a rush, need and worry rife in his tone.

A fierce clutch of tenderness makes his chest seize so painfully that Jihoon’s eyes threaten to water.

After his cool disregard for Jihoon last week, Seungcheol’s concern feels so absurd, Jihoon wants to laugh and throttle him all at once.

He’s amazed at himself, that he can’t even insult or dismiss Seungcheol on autopilot, despite the inward sneer his last memory of him creates deep inside. “I said—I’m fine.” he insists sharply.

Seungcheol’s smile falters briefly as his lips purse in a seemingly fleeting thought before he leans closer, regarding Jihoon steadily.

“I’ve brought a tow, so we’ll be able to haul your vehicle out of that ditch and check how damaged it is. It might not be as bad as it looks.” Seungcheol tugs him away from the ambulance, giving Joshua a little nod, before he slips a hand between Jihoon’s shoulders and guides him towards the truck.

“I’ve left the tow truck running so it’s warm, get comfortable inside and I’ll hook the car up and start dragging it up.” He says, doing a very good job of making Jihoon feel weak and small and useless, that is until suddenly Jihoon spins around to face him.

Jihoon huffs a breath out through his nose. “Look, I didn’t call you. The paramedic did, because he found your card in my wallet. I don’t want your help. I don’t need your help so you can just go. Sorry to waste your time—again!” he states precisely.

He feels Seungcheol tense as the warmth dims from his face, replaced with a sharp crackle of surprise, then a slow grey swirl of confusion.
Seungcheol begins a smile that falters, falling into a frown even as a soft laugh builds in his chest as he splutters “Right—right. Well, I’m here now. So you might as well take my help and get in the truck.”

Jihoon places his hands on his hips and glares balefully at Seungcheol. “No, I’d rather not, thanks. I have a new mechanic and as soon as I get my phone screen cooperating again, I will call him.”

Seungcheol crosses his arms over his chest, his features smoothing into a skilled poker face. “Get in the truck Jihoon.” He says flatly.

Jihoon blinks, slowly, purposefully, giving himself the needed time to rein in the fury that is building as he stares angrily at the man before him. “I said NO.” he spits but then Seungcheol steps so close, Jihoon is briefly able to see his own reflection in his eyes, before all he can see is Seungcheol’s unyielding expression before him.

Jihoon pulls a face, a light flush of embarrassment staining his cheekbones and darkening his already cold bitten-rosy skin. “You—you can’t make me.” He whispers, hating himself for the tremor in his voice.

Seungcheol stiffens and his gaze lifts, both darkly amused and too-serious all at once. “I can make you. I totally can. But I think that would just piss you off more so I’m being polite and giving you options.” He says, stepping completely into Jihoon’s personal space, his chest nearly brushing Jihoon’s with every breath as he lifts a hand and rests it on Jihoon’s shoulder.

“You can get in the truck now or I will carry you to the truck.” Seungcheol says gruffly, his voice low enough to be casual even as the unflinching focus on his face gave the words an almost gentle menace that bit into Jihoon’s skin and stayed as the words dissipated between them.

“No. I’m not going anywhere with you. Just leave.”

Jihoon would protest more but his teeth took that moment to begin chattering and Seungcheol sighs, releasing him and instinctively shrugs his jacket off to cover Jihoon.

Jihoon frowns and starts to object but the jacket is already warming him deliciously and no he did not just sniff it again, FUCK!

Seungcheol drops his voice. “You’ve just been in an accident, your car is probably going to get written off from what I can see. I’ll take you wherever you want to go.” Seungcheol lets out a low, growled mutter. “Why are you suddenly angry with me?”

Jihoon barely manages to deal with the shivery, hot-tight ball in the pit of his belly that accompanies Seungcheol’s scent, his gentle touch and pleading eyes. He clenches his jaw as Seungcheol moves back around to stand before him, the offending jacket now settled over his shoulders.

“Why do you care? Besides, I’m not angry, I just don’t want your help.” Jihoon manages, his tone wavering as he meets Seungcheol’s gaze squarely.

Seungcheol snorts briefly, before not-quite sneering at Jihoon. “I don’t get it. And who is going to tow your vehicle out of the ditch huh? You got another plan?” He asks, one eyebrow raising expectantly, even as something serious lurked behind his teasing, derisive grin.

Jihoon feels perhaps he has a point, but he’s not about to admit that.

“I don’t—I don’t care. Anyone but you.” he says quietly and something in his chest burns bright and
hot. He stands, swaying and squeezes his eyes shut.

When he opens his eyes again it is to the sensation of tears stinging his eyes and the familiar strong sense of stubbornness rising from within.

Some of his hurt must register on his face, because Seungcheol’s expression softens, his eyes warming to an apologetic glaze, lips parting to most likely mumble stale words of apology that Jihoon doesn’t want to hear, because why should Seungcheol apologise if he doesn’t give a shit, if he’s just doing his job, if he doesn’t want Jihoon like he used to anymore?

Jihoon turns to walk away but Seungcheol lifts his hands, resting them at his full arms-length, pressing down against Jihoon’s shoulders as though he might take nervous flight without the weight of his touch to hold him steady.

“Is this because of my gun? Are you afraid of that? I didn’t bring it with me because I knew you would be scared. I thought, we cleared that up Jihoon? I don’t know why you’re upset with me, I just want to make sure you’re okay.” He lowers both his grip and gaze and pulls at where the jacket is slipping of Jihoon’s shoulders, pulling it close around his frame to warm him.

Jihoon slips his arms into the armholes, gaze lowered, pinned and uneasy on the spot with Seungcheol crowding him close and warm.

“Please, I just wanted to help you. I just—let me take you home.” Seungcheol pleads as he steps back.

Jihoon notes that his mouth has lost its amused curve but a self-deprecating warmth lingers around his eyes.

There was something gentle and imporing in his expression, for all his stiffened stance and Jihoon feels the crackling grit of his irritation soften, relaxing into a low, easy hum.

“Fine, okay.” Jihoon says quietly, steadily, and walks with intentional indifference up to the ambulance to collect his belongings.

He makes his way around Seungcheol to the truck, coiled and tight, unsure as to why his fingers and knees are trembling. He draws in deep, desperate breaths as though the repeated, steady motion might keep his body from tearing itself in all directions at once.

Suddenly a hand claps, heavy and painful on Jihoon’s shoulder once again, and he is dragged back roughly to face the trucker his car collided with.

“There’s not planning on going anywhere without exchanging insurance details are ya?” the trucker hisses.

“No—oh no, I wasn’t.” Jihoon shakes his head minutely, reaching for his phone and tapping on the cracked screen. “I’m sorry, it’s just that—my details are on my phone and the touch screen is cracked. Do you have contact details I can forward them on to?” He offers.

“Oh no! Nice try pintsize! I wasn’t in the wrong here! You should have been paying attention. I don’t care if you got swatted off the road. Don’t try and pin this on me kid!” he warns, pointing his finger at Jihoon menacingly.

“I – I wasn’t going to,” Jihoon stutters, shifting uneasily. Suddenly the trucker’s features contort in pain and he yelps, dropping his grip on Jihoon’s shoulder.
“What the fuck are you doin?” Seungcheol hisses, twisting the truckers arm behind his back. “Who said you could touch him? It’s a good thing there is an ambulance here, maybe they can tend to your mangled arm. The one I break because you’re a little heavy handed with my marshmallow?”

My Marshmallow?

Jihoon is abruptly breathless - almost dizzy, a bolt of something like nervousness - but somewhat crushingly, shamefully more akin to arousal - coils itself about his spine as he hears the raw possessiveness in Seungcheol’s tone.

“Uhh….I uhh…just..uhh..” The trucker stutters nervously, yelping once more as Seungcheol tightens his grip. “I just wanted his insurance details…it’s not my truck and my employer will have my head if I leave the scene without it.” He protests urgently.

“You call that an apology?” Seungcheol practically froths, voice and eyes abruptly terrifying, a vicious smile curling his lips. “Try again.” He spits, wrenching his arm back further and the trucker yelps undignified in pain.

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry!” he barely manages to mutter, clearly petrified, and Seungcheol steps forward, loosening his painful grip on the arm before shoving him off to the side.

“Fuck off back to your truck and don’t approach him again. You’ll get your details when he’s good and ready to hand them over.” He spits.

Jihoon winces, grimacing at Seungcheol’s no-nonsense tone, the low, forced-casual timbre of his voice grating over Jihoon’s shock-bared nerves.

The trucker nods stiffly and steps back, leaving Jihoon to smile warmly at Seungcheol as he sweeps a studied eye over his frame. “You okay?” he asks softly, a hand squeezing, heavy and reassuring, at his shoulder.

Something breaks in Jihoon so hard it hurts to do more than simply stand there breathing for a moment.

My marshmallow?

“Yes—uhm, thank you Seungcheol.” Jihoon doesn’t plan the way that his voice comes out soft, awed but Seungcheol smirks and Jihoon has to turn away before he catches him blushing.

Jihoon has time to neither flinch nor ponder if Seungcheol meant those words before he is ushered into the tow truck passenger compartment.

Jihoon swallows heavily as Seungcheol leans over to buckle him in, facing him with a low-lidded stare; the weight of his possessiveness was distinctly more unbearable for its lack of mention.

Seungcheol abruptly turns to walk away, conversing with the trucker in a low tone before Jihoon has finished blinking from the loss of dark eyes on his.

As Seungcheol was busy hauling the vehicle out of the ditch, Jihoon sat deliciously weary in the drivers compartment.

Despite his hurt and confusion a week ago, he can’t help but curl into the memory of Seungcheol’s bright gaze and gentle touch. It warms him instinctively like the sparks that still fly between them.
They drive to Jihoon’s apartment in complete silence, the sound of the radio ramping up the tension in the air because for some reason its seems, tonight—every fucking radio station in the area is playing suitably apt heart break songs!

First they had to endure the classic ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, which naturally made them both squirm in their seats.

The next radio station is playing ‘Yesterday’ by ‘The Beatles’ and Jihoon has to look at the window and cringe; the lyrics relate almost perfectly to their situation.

‘Why she had to go, I don’t know, she wouldn’t say’

‘I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday’

Then some delightfully nostalgic grunge, ‘Black’ by ‘Pearl Jam’ starts playing and Jihoon hums along with the tune quietly until the lyrics register with him.

‘I know you’ll be a sun in somebody else’s sky, but why?’

‘Why can’t it be, can’t it be mine?’

Then things get super awkward super fast when Kelly Fucking Clarkson starts belting out ‘BECAUSE OF YOU!’ and they both scramble for the radio dial to switch stations.

“What the fuck is up with the radio tonight!” Seungcheol groans.

“Tell me about it!” Jihoon confers.

When the tow truck pulls up at the front of Jihoon’s apartment, Seungcheol kills the engine and sits back in his seat, quietly resigned.

Jihoon figures this is his cue to say something grateful and let the extreme awkwardness commence, or continue, really. Seungcheol reaches into his glove compartment and fishes out a card.

“This is the impound lot I’m going to be taking the car. Usually the insurance company send somebody out to assess whether the vehicle is salvageable or a total write off and then it can be taken for repairs or crushed from there.”

Jihoon nods and takes the card, slipping his arms out of Seungcheol’s jacket and folding it neatly on his lap. He digs his fingers into the lining of the jacket.

“Listen,” he says, because Seungcheol probably thinks it’s part of his job, but that doesn’t change that its nice of him to do. “Thanks for coming out and towing my car and giving me a lift home. It was nice of you.”

Seungcheol doesn’t say anything, or even give him some sort of bro nod. He just sits there, eyes so intent on Jihoon’s face that he feels utterly exposed, mouth dry, pulse thudding all too obviously at his throat.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier.” Jihoon says, and swallows. “I’ve had a rough week.” He offers then cringes, regretting his choice of words; but the feeling swiftly dissipates as, as he watches Seungcheol slowly criss-cross his body with his eyes, sweeping down from his head and then up again to lock gazes with him, an oddly amused smile on his face.

Seungcheol nods thoughtfully. “S’okay. If you want, I can take you there tomorrow to pick up any
personal belongings or, I dunno, say your goodbyes—because honestly—I don’t think it’s looking good for your car.”

Jihoon considers his suggestion, he closes his eyes for a moment, and then says, “Uhm, I—don’t—“ he starts to say.

Seungcheol roughly palms his hair back over his skull before interjecting gruffly. “How’d you crash it?”

Jihoon’s brow crinkles at the conversational leap. “I was kinda distracted, I got some bad news at work and then a light flashed on by dashboard. I think it was the break light and I got distracted looking at it and when I missed the truck crossing in front of me.”

“The break light?” Seungcheol says darkly, and he looks pissed. “The round circle with the small dashes around it?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit.” Seungcheol says, pursing his lips vaguely, as though troubled by the answer.

“I’m sorry. I did that. I faulted your—“ He cuts himself off and licks his lips with something that looks like frustration before something surprising and sweet, almost a smile, tugs at their corners. “I, uhm. I tampered with the dash so that your lights would flash occasionally.”

Brow furrowing, Jihoon wet his lips “Why?”

Seungcheol’s bites his lower lip for a moment, before releasing it with a sigh. “So that you would have to bring back your car to the garage. So I could see you again.”

Jihoon knows his mouth is open, and he really should shut it, but that’s — that’s something guys usually don’t say, especially not to Jihoon.

“Because I don’t know anything about cars and you were gonna fleece me for more money? Cause I’m a good returning customer? Because you’re insane in the membrane—Insane in the brain?”

Jihoon hazards, stilling his features into what he hopes looks a vacant neutral.

“Cypress Hill?—awesome.” He says, and abruptly the smile that has been forming around his words crack and his chin dips downwards as they each regard the other with an almost shocked silence in place between them. “No,” he says slowly. “Because I like you.”

After a moment of his heart pounding openly in his mouth - shocked and surprised and amazed and confused - Jihoon tears his eyes away from Seungcheol’s to try and digest.

He turns, licking dry lips as he faces Seungcheol again, hoping the darkness masks the uncertainty he knew still trembles beneath his skin.

“I thought—you said,” Jihoon starts haltingly. He doesn't know what to say, gut-wrenched and heart-sore, reluctant to cede this tiny piece that Seungcheol has revealed to him. “But—why?”

Seungcheol actually cracks a smile at that.

“What do you mean, why?” Seungcheol asks him, pinning Jihoon with a look that makes him swallow.

“I just like you. I think you’re hot. I wanted sex and then, we had sex and I thought, ya know...there
was something *between* us. I changed your tyres and then damaged your airflow sensor, so you
would have to come back on Friday. Then when I was fixing that, I was planning on tampering with
something else so a few days down the line you would have had to come back to get it fixed and
then I could spend more time with you.” Seungcheol says, with such certainty that Jihoon stares at
him wide-eyed, disbelieving, but Seungcheol doesn’t make it into a joke, doesn’t take it back, just
keeps his eyes locked on Jihoon’s.

Jihoon takes a long minute to process that, and to cut himself some slack, he’s had a long, eventful
day already.

“Oh my god,” Jihoon says, jaw dropping. “You—but you—you said,” He takes a deep, calming
breath before continuing. “You told me not to stop off at the garage.”

Seungcheol waves his hands around silently in frustration before he finds the ability to speak again.

“I didn’t want you to drop off at the garage because it’s too dangerous for you.” He growls.

“Too dangerous?” Jihoon asks incredulously.

“Yeah!” Seungcheol confirms, slumping back into his seat and resting his head on the steering
wheel.

(He thinks about how easy it would be to explain the *real* danger to Jihoon, but that’s exactly what
he’s been trying to avoid this whole time. So he lies instead.)

“It’s too dangerous because, the guys at work are all perverts and the I didn’t want them to ogle you
and get handsy.”

Jihoon’s eyebrows, which have been settling back down, shoot up again.

“Wait a minute!” he rushes, his brain jumping track as it’s wont to do. “So you don’t think sleeping
with me was a waste of time?” Jihoon asks, his voice so soft and vulnerable to his own ears that it
almost hurts to hear.

“What the fuck? No! Why would you say-” Seungcheol pauses, getting it now, catching the slight
dilation of Jihoon’s pupils, the faint flush at the tips of his ears, all the small nearly invisible signs that
point to the true source of Jihoon’s irritation.

Seungcheol laughs shortly, pushing his hands up over his hair to shake his head ruefully, his eyes
twinkling as the tension simply bleeds from him.

There was a look in Jihoon’s eyes, like a cornered rabbit, and Seungcheol knew he was responsible
for it. He leans into Jihoon’s space, lifts a hand to his face, sweeps his thumb over the edge of his jaw
and curls his fingers under to cup his face in his palm.

“I think we’ve got our wires crossed a little.” Seungcheol says, low and earnest.

Smiling slowly, he pulls at a stray lock of brown hair hanging in front of Jihoon’s ear, tucking it back
and then lingering over it, the slippery soft feel of the strands under his fingertips.

“You are not a waste of time Jihoonie, you’re so sweet. Come here my pretty Marshmallow.”

Seungcheol finally manages to say and smiles anew at the gentle blush that tints the tips of Jihoon’s
ears.

Jihoon’s answering smile is dazzling, wanton, and shy as Seungcheol closes the distance between
them and Jihoon’s eyes are already sliding shut when Seungcheol kisses him.

It’s slow, and heartbreakingly tender, a golden-sweet pressure that makes his lips sing.

It’s like Seungcheol just wants to take all the time in the world to kiss Jihoon, just for the sake of kissing him. And when he breaks the kiss, he nuzzles gently at Jihoon’s throat,

“Hmm, Jellybean.” Seungcheol murmurs before he hauls Jihoon over the gear stick on to his lap and kisses him breathless.

Chapter End Notes

1) Told you I can't angst for long :)
2) Heartbreak songs....lol. I actually had to research that more than details about cars!!
3) Obliviously innocent Jihoon, I love the concept.
   Anyway! Hope you enjoy the update! Feedback is always appreciated :)


Jihoon is *so* bone tired after he finally makes it into his apartment that night, he collapses into bed almost immediately, not even bothering to remove most of his clothes. So, the first thing he does when he wakes up the next morning is strip and jump straight into the shower.

He sets the dial to hot and tilts his face into the shower’s deliciously rejuvenating spray, letting it drum down on his brow to sting the bump on his forehead as it pounds away his sweat and the accumulated tension from the day before. He groans then sighs blissfully as the rivulets unravel the knots that had gathered at the base of his neck.

It has been an odd week or so, from the sudden debilitating weight of rejection that followed last weekend to the dizzying, almost blissful step backwards.

Jihoon moans softly as the focused needles of wet heat drill pleasurably into his scalp, washing away the shampoo suds from his hair. He tips his head further forward and rests the crown of his head against the glass door, hands holding him steady as he closes his eyes and lets the water sway him beneath the heavy spray. He must have been standing there for at least ten minutes, enjoying the surprisingly undiminished hot water against his skin before a gentle tap on the screen startles him into opening his eyes beneath the stream.

“AHHHHH!” He screams in shock. Because one of the first horror movies he ever watched was Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and he’s had numerous nightmares about getting murdered mid shower since.

He freezes as a bark of laughter bounces against the tiles and Seungcheol’s hoarse voice breaks in. “Ya know, I love it when you scream but not when it’s in fear Jellybean.”

Jihoon winces—*Oh god it’s just Seungcheol*—his brain reminds him clearly. “Sorry, I forgot you were coming to take me to the impound lot.” He yells over the shower spray.

He hears Seungcheol chuckle softly, he’s probably shaking his head in amusement too. “Who did you think I was then?” he queries.

“Oh—a serial killer.” Jihoon informs him.

“A serial killer.” Seungcheol repeats, very dry. “Who politely knocks on the shower screen to alert you to your impending death?” he mocks none too gently.

Jihoon pokes his head out from behind the glass screen slowly, carefully, as his eyes follow Seungcheol’s voice to where he stands a little way back near the towel rail. “The polite thing to do would have been to wait outside the bathroom when you heard the shower running. Not just walk in and watch me shower through the steamy glass window, *you—pervert.*” He flat tones, schooling his
features into what he hopes is casual amusement versus the idiotic hammering that kicks within his chest at the sight of Seungcheol standing in his bathroom.

Seungcheol affects an insulted expression forcing Jihoon to bite the inside of his cheek to hold back both the laugh as well as the longing. “I called out your name! You didn’t answer.” he defends with a sly grin that says he never called out. “When you didn’t answer immediately, I thought the worst. I thought that maybe that bump on your head had turned into a full blown concussion and I rushed in here to make sure you were okay.”

“Sure, what a gentleman you are.” Jihoon laughs, rolling his eyes in deliberate view. “Pass me a towel.” He requests, holding his arm out in preparation.

Seungcheol turns to look at the towels neatly slung over the towel rail, then turns back slowly towards Jihoon. “No.” He says, sending a lascivious, mocking leer towards him.

Jihoon blushes and puffs shortly through his nose, impatient and lightly embarrassed. “What? Why not? Pass me a towel you jerk.” He huffs, then adds. “Please?”

Seungcheol pulls his lower lip in under his teeth to wet it in a way that Jihoon has come to recognize as a sign of impending mischief. “Well, since you asked nicely, my answer is still no.” He smirks.

Jihoon feels his blood rushing intensely in his skull, desperation tingeing each breath and suddenly he can’t bear the intoxicating thrill that is blossoming under the weight of Seungcheol’s steady leer. “Stop being a dick. Pass me a towel or else I’ll just stay in here.” Jihoon says, shying behind the frosted glass partition.

“Alright, alright. Here you go.” Seungcheol assents, lifting a teeny weeny hand towel up for Jihoon to take.

Jihoon snarls silently, turning the dial to off, blinking with lashes that have formed into water logged spikes and suddenly, in the confines of that shower, he is absurdly shy of his body.

Seungcheol, ever the mind reader, senses this and with a quirk of one brow he says “Why are you so shy Jellybean? I’ve seen it all and I’m going to see it again.” His reassurances fall far from the target because he sounds pretty smug about the whole thing.

Jihoon sighs loudly even as his ears redden and burn. “That was different, you were naked too.”

“You were naked first. I could get naked if that makes it easier for you to get out of the shower.” Seungcheol suggests with wry amusement on his face.

Jihoon studies the tiny towel in his hands and tries to imagine some make shift modesty concealer he can fashion out of it, but the thing is just too damn small! “If you can get me like, fifty of these tiny towels I will come out.” he bargains.

“Nope. You get just one.” Seungcheol answers abruptly. Jihoon pokes his head out of the shower again to glare at Seungcheol but finds him standing with a much larger towel held open in welcome. “Come on, I’ll help you dry.” he offers with a wiggle of his brows.

Jihoon swallows down a whimper because he is not going to let this shame him, not when he’s had Seungcheol’s hands greedy on him last night in the truck, not when Seungcheol’s told him how perfect he is in his arms. He’s hasn’t felt this good about himself in years. He takes a short breath, bristling slightly with nervousness before he climbs out of the shower gingerly. He can’t help but tremble under Seungcheol’s covetous stare as he steps closer, his pale skin flushed and dripping as he folds his arms to retain some heat.
“Huhnnn—“ Seungcheol groans thickly, gazing unabashedly at Jihoon’s nakedness. His eyes glaze over as he takes in the beads of water rolling over Jihoon's clean, wet skin. His eyes follow the thin rivulets of water running down through Jihoon's eyes and over his lips, gulping as the droplets catch momentarily on Jihoon's collarbone before they stream down over his chest and lower. He's utterly transfixed but he doesn’t hesitate to wrap the towel around Jihoon the moment he is in arms reach, greedily yanking him closer and sealing him in a tight embrace. “Good boy!” He coos as Jihoon breathes, relieved and quivering against his chest.

“Jerk.” Jihoon croaks in a tone he tells himself is not fond and when he tries to take hold of the towel Seungcheol titters and wraps him in it tighter.

“Uh-uh.” He tuts. “This is my job.” Seungcheol begins towelling him dry in the most agonisingly slowest way possible, smoothing the towel down over Jihoon’s still juddering form, cupping it at his hip bone and patting it down over his thigh, all the while muttering words like pretty and stubborn and shy until finally, Jihoon’s shivering subsides. Seungcheol hooks the towel around Jihoon’s back and drags him closer still, stroking his sides and spine in long, soothing sweeps catching droplets of water escaping down his neck and back in a ticklish caress.

Jihoon slowly eases his arms to his sides, rocking gently on the balls of his feet as he bites the inside of his cheek to keep from giggling. Seungcheol smirks at him knowingly, then fists the towel and slowly works it between Jihoon’s thighs, nudging them apart even as Jihoon tries to squeeze them together. He spends an age towelling that area, just rubbing the towel back and forth along his sensitive inner thigh before he pulls the towel away completely, letting it drop to the floor with a soft murmur of damp fabric.

“Cheol!” Jihoon whines, blushing vigorously as his body is put on display again. He shivers as Seungcheol's warm, dry palm smooths across his stomach.

Seungcheol is transfixed again, his eyes roam the subtle slopes and curves and sudden sharp angles of Jihoon's body. His gaze is just as unquenchably needy as his hands across Jihoon’s skin. Jihoon swallows as Seungcheol’s hands still, his eyes taking over the exploration completely as they linger on the taut expanse of skin where droplets still run downward from his hair to embrace gravity.

“You’re so beautiful.” Seungcheol whispers worshipfully, leaning down to press a kiss to Jihoon’s bare shoulder.

“Hmm, Seungcheol.” Jihoon all but whimpers as the hushed mutter crosses his lips. His mind fights unsuccessfully to slow his aroused state even as his blood thickens in him to the point of desperation. His tongue darts out to wet his bite-swollen lips and his breath catches in his throat as he feels Seungcheol’s hands lift to brush against his waist. “I should get dressed, we should head out soon if we’re going car shopping later.” He tries to excuse.

“Shss shhhhh, I haven’t finished Marshmallow, I need to dry you properly or else you’ll catch a cold!” Seungcheol admonishes huskily, moving slower still so that Jihoon has no choice but to watch him, trapped by his own body’s response to Seungcheol’s touch and his vice-like hold on his hips.

Seungcheol beams delightedly as his hands skate casually up Jihoon’s sides, then skim over his shoulders and down until he has a palm on each pert butt cheek. Squeezing them firmly, he draws them slightly apart in wonderment

“Hnn—Ch-cheol!” Jihoon croaks and bites the inside of his cheek as Seungcheol releases them, only to reaffirm his grip once more and start to knead them, hard.

Jihoon’s eyelashes quiver shut as Seungcheol’s lips mash to the wet, lickable expanse of his throat, dragging slowly against his skin. Then he gasps – open mouthed, wide and wanton – as Seungcheol
digs his fingers deeply into the firm flesh of his rear, before using his grip to better roll their hips together.

“Ah—cheol, hmm—annnn.”

He arches up, twisting and thrashing beneath the torturous grind of Seungcheol’s hands over his ass and cries out, wordlessly with surprise when Seungcheol bends down and seals his mouth over a nipple, sucking softly. Jihoon whines as the tongue repeatedly flickers back and forth over the sensitive nub. He threads his fingers through Seungcheol’s hair, moaning and sobbing continuously under the onslaught of Seungcheol’s tongue as he switches from left to right and back again, merciless, playful and sure.

Seungcheol bites gently on the pink bud between his lips and Jihoon lets the next moan bubble up freely from his throat before grasping one of Seungcheol’s hands where it’s cupping his ass and dragging it around between his legs. A soft moan vibrates against his ear and Seungcheol’s thick fingers curve over his groin.

Seungcheol releases Jihoon’s nipple and slides his hand lower, nestling it between his creamy thighs then groans, a raw, deep noise that Jihoon swears he can feel roll right through him.

“Fuck—I couldn’t wait to get my hands on you again.” Seungcheol pants sliding his hand higher, then again, “Couldn’t stop thinking about you all week Jellybean.”

“Hnn—yes, me too.” Jihoon murmurs back, choking down a moan as Seungcheol’s fingers finally wrap around his cock.

Then, the door bells rings. Because this is Jihoon’s life, were nothing goes to fucking plan and the prevalence of blue balls is endemic.

Seungcheol tugs Jihoon closer, hands returning to tighten at his hips, eyes bright and fierce as they flash over Jihoon’s face, cataloguing his almost embarrassing need. “Expecting visitors?” he asks breathlessly, curious and mildly curt as he holds Jihoon’s gaze so firmly it suggests he was staring through him.

“Uhm, no—It’s probably the mailman.” Jihoon offers.

Seungcheol purses his lips in thought. “Maybe he’ll just leave if we stay real qui-“

The sentence falls away as the door bell rings again, twice in succession.

“Fuck.”

“Go, answer it.” Jihoon huffs, shoving him gently towards the door.

“Dammit.” Seungcheol huffs, withdrawing his hand but not before pinching the soft flesh of Jihoon's inner thigh quickly. He pecks Jihoon on the nose then saunters out of the bathroom and down the hallway to answer the door.

Jihoon dips down quickly to pick up the discarded towel and wraps it sarong-style, tight and secure at his waist, before his body has anymore great ideas about embarrassing him. He slips into the bedroom and grabs another towel to dry his hair, then quickly picks out some clothes to wear.

When he looks up again Seungcheol is leaning against the doorway, holding what looks like a small parcel in his hand, glaring at it with unmasked irritation. “It’s from Amazon. What did you order?”
“Oh—fuck.” Jihoon replies, voice muffled by the shirt he’s pulling on. “It’s a bobble heads for the car-dash. For the car I just wrote off.” He laughs at the irony.

“A bobble-head?” Seungcheol repeats, trying not to laugh.

“Yeah. I collect them. You should see my desk at work.”

There is a pause while Seungcheol considers this “You’re adorable.” He says after a minute, without nearly enough mockery in his voice, because he’s thought it a million times and he might as well voice it.

Jihoon squints and punches him in the arm, but not all that hard.

They collect Jihoon’s personal belongings from his wreck of a car at the impound lot and after an unemotional farewell, they go car shopping. Jihoon suggests that they scope out Big Bob’s Brilliant Bargain Motor Madness to inspect his selection of cars.

“Big Bob’s Brilliant what?” Seungcheol asks, furrowing his brow, he’s currently looking torn between amusement and irritation.

“Brilliant Bargain Motor Madness.” Jihoon completes for him, shaking his head. “It’s where I bought my last car and he was, uhm—also my mechanic before you where my mechanic. I can’t believe you don’t know Big Bob, his face is everywhere! Haven’t you seen the commercial?”

“Oh I know Big Bob,” There is the very faintest of pauses. Then: “I just don’t know him as—well—Big Bob.” Seungcheol says, a slight smile fighting against the frown.

Jihoon raises his eyebrows and gives Seungcheol a sharp assessing look. “Oh? That what do you know him as?”

There is a brief silence between them before Seungcheol answers. “It doesn’t matter.” Seungcheol dismisses with a cluck of his tongue.

When they enter the showroom floor, Jihoon is about to stride out ahead like a man on a mission until he feels fingers nudging against his. He hasn’t even fully processed what’s happening when Seungcheol turns his hand over and slides their palms together.

“Oh,” Jihoon says, and then blushes when Seungcheol raises an eyebrow at him.

“It’s a big place Jellybean, don’t want you getting lost.” He grins, lacing their fingers together.

"Ok." Jihoon agrees quietly, shivering pleasantly as Seungcheol strokes gently at the soft webbing between his thumb and forefinger. He clears his throat pointedly before they start walking and even though the stupid flush to his cheeks decidedly fails to go away, he doesn’t let go of Seungcheol’s hand.

They spend the afternoon at the car court, window shopping at cars as they walk down the lanes upon lanes of vehicles in the showroom. They’re still holding hands and even though he should be looking at cars and is intent on finalising a purchase today, Jihoon spends a considerable amount of time staring at Seungcheol instead. Seungcheol catches him at it sometimes, and smiles, and Jihoon tries to look away before Seungcheol can see him blush. Generally he fails.
“What about that one.” Jihoon points.

A noncommittal noise is all Seungcheol can get out, at first. “It’s okay, but it’s not really—you. It’s too big and don’t you work in the city? What do you need a 4x4 for?”

“Okay, fair point. It’s too expensive anyway. What about this one?”

A laugh bubbles up from Seungcheol’s throat, accompanied by a pair of dimples. “Woah, You didn’t tell me you were a soccer mom with 2.5 kids.” He teases, sniggering at Jihoon’s choice.

"Alright-fine, dickhead. What about that one over there?"
"What the fuck Jihoon I don't think that's a real car. I think that's a prop. Are you even looking at these cars before you choose them?" Seungcheol laughs.

Jihoon has to pinch him to shut him up, he laughs for so long. “You know what—Fuck you.” He grumbles.

Seungcheol smothers his laugh with a fake cough but the loud bark of mirth has several people looking their way. “Alright, I’m just messing with you, you have great taste.” he offers, still smiling at Jihoon like Jihoon is his personal entertainment for the day.

Jihoon rolls his eyes like he’s extremely bored with him. “Nevermind, I’m going with your first opinion.” He huffs, turning his back to Seungcheol. “Ok, what about the red car over there.”

Seungcheol’s grimace is instantaneous and almost as swiftly punished as Jihoon reaches up to cuff him. “Sorry, it’s just that—that’s a FIAT and you know what that means.”

Jihoon sighs gustily and steps back to look up, earnestly, into Seungcheol’s face. “No—what does that mean?”

Seungcheol shoots him a sidelong grin. “You know, FIAT, Fix-It-Again-Tomorrow.”

“Oh, well—doesn’t that line your pockets? A car that needs fixing everyday! You should be recommending that car!” Jihoon snaps, endeavouring to sound condescending.

Seungcheol emulates a sassy eye roll Jihoon himself has used countless times. “Excuse me? I’m an honest mechanic. I only want what’s best for people. I couldn’t sleep at night if I did somebody a disservice like that.”

“You tampered with my last car!” Jihoon points out, guffawing with scandalized delight.

Seungcheol swallows thickly, realising he has been caught out. “That’s different. I did that so I could see you again! You can’t use that against me.” He huffs, scrabbling for purchase and failing to find any.

“I’m not going to argue with your weird logic right now.” he chokes and Seungcheol sniggers.

Walking a little further down the lane of parked cars, Jihoon makes a sweeping gesture towards another car and favours Seungcheol with a heavy-lidded, focused stare. “How about this one, good right?” He asks hopefully.
But it’s obviously the worst car in the world or something because Seungcheol practically recoils on the spot. “That’s a NISSAN-fucking-MICRA! That’s it, you shouldn’t be allowed to go car shopping by yourself ever again!” he warns, shoulders bristling with indignation.

"Hmm," Jihoon hums, deciding not to rise to it. “Well then, what do you suggest I drive?” he asks, spreading his arms in exasperation.

He’s expecting a shrug in response, but Seungcheol beams brightly him, seemingly pleased to have been asked and he bites his lip thoughtfully as he glances around them. “How about a SMART car?” he finally replies, quirking a smile.

Jihoon blinks, entirely unfamiliar with the model. “Uhm, never heard of it.”

“I’ll show you, come here.” Seungcheol says, tugging Jihoon past a few lanes towards another row of smaller cars. He stops in his tracks and points at the first one in the line-up.

Jihoon laughs, a rough-edged burst of sound. “Holy shit, that’s a car? I thought it was like one of those props. It looks like a regular car after it gets crushed in the compacter, what the fuck.” He spends a moment in silence, looking down at the car with badly concealed amusement until a sudden prickle of extra warmth rolls down his right side as Seungcheol steps casually closer.

“I think we might have found the perfect car for you.” Seungcheol muses aloud. “Here me out, it’s convenient for parking and driving in urban areas, it has a fantastic miles per gallon, and it’s cheaper to insure and tax. And--” he trails off.

“And?” Jihoon prompts.

“It’s small and cute, just like my little Jellybean.” Seungcheol laughs then, but it's awfully fond.

Jihoon pouts, fighting to not smile as he flushes scarlet with embarrassment. “I’m not small and cute.” he murmurs, barely audible.
Seungcheol can't fight his grin and leans forward to press a kiss to Jihoon's ear. “How about you get in and get a feel for it.” He suggests, opening the car door and ushering Jihoon to take a seat.

Jihoon slips into the drivers seat and pivots his feet into the foot-well. Admittedly the car is a better fit for him and now he doesn’t have to incline the seat quite as much to look out of the windscreen. Feeling a little pleased with himself, he bounces up and down in the seat just to get a feel for it and runs his hands along the arch of the steering wheel. “How do I look?” He asks Seungcheol, who is standing arms crossed, watching him with a sly grin.

“In that car, you look like a normal sized person.” Seungcheol returns, his tone both mocking and fond.

The smiles slides off Jihoon’s face like sand through an hourglass. He glares at Seungcheol, fully aware that he can cut an intimidating figure if he wants to, even if the effect is muted somewhat by the fact that he is tiny man sitting in a tiny car. Jihoon pulls the door shut and pushes the lock in, slumping back in the seat with his arms crossed in a huff. He busies himself fiddling with his sleeve, admiring the steering wheel, looking out the windscreen, looking everywhere and anywhere except at Seungcheol.

Meanwhile Seungcheol is standing outside laughing his head off at his own joke. When his laughter dies down, he leans over to rap his knuckles against the window to get Jihoon's attention. Jihoon's lip curls up in a sneer, an expression that is trying for malicious but succeeds only in making him look young and preciously petulant.

“You think this little tantrum is proving me wrong? Do you realise how adorable you look right now?” Seungcheol’s laughs, his voice traveling through the glass in a mocking warble.

Jihoon wrinkles his nose as he rolls down the window. “Go away, I don’t want your help because you’re being a jerk about my height. Go be a disingenuous turd somewhere else.” he sniffs, looking at Seungcheol disdainfully.

“Ok, I shouldn’t joke but I like it when you’re a little outraged. It’s doubly cute when you’re soft and small.” Seungcheol tries to placate but Jihoon must mistake his tone for further condescension and flips him off before rolling up the window again.

“Fine, I’m sorry.” Seungcheol says, and he actually sounds a little sorry but Jihoon isn’t budging this time. “I’ll go have a look around and see if I can find a sales person, yeah?” Seungcheol shouts through the window before grinning at Jihoon’s icy response and stepping back to search for some assistance.

After a few minutes of sulking in the car, Jihoon kicks the door open and lounges half in and half out of the drivers seat, perusing a sales brochure for deals. He looks up at the sound of approaching footsteps and glances up to find Big Bob himself sauntering towards him.

“Well, well, well—look who came crawling back.” Bob drawls, favouring Jihoon with a glance so laden with self-satisfaction, Jihoon is forced to hate him on sight.

Jihoon’s so fed up at this point, he can't even work up the energy to flip him off. “I didn’t crawl, I walked in here.” He counters flatly.

“But you came back! Like I said you would!” Bob replies, sounding almost as wry and conceited as ever, and Jihoon feels his irritation simmer slightly.
Jihoon rolls his eyes and his head on his neck all at once. “Yeah, I had a car accident and wrote my car off. I’m shopping around for another one. But your deals are pretty shitty so I probably won’t buy from here this time.”

“Oh, hohohoho.” Big Bob chortles with amusement. “I think you’ll find my deals are very competitive Jihoon. I see you’re eyeing up this SMART car. Are you interested in the 2 seater or 4 seater model?”

“The 2 seater but, what kinda deal can you give me? How low can you go on the asking price?” Jihoon asks.

Big Bob hums dismissively, shaking his head. “Like I said, my prices are competitive. Not a penny lower.”

A hand claps down on Big Bob’s shoulder then; Seungcheol has returned and he steps closer to speak in Bob’s ear. “Hello—Robert.” He greets silkily.

“Huh?” Bob jerks his head to look at Seungcheol, only to jerk it back once more in horror.“Oh—shit, shit, shit, sh-”

Seungcheol lets out a gusty breath, closing his eyes “Stop cursing.” He says quietly.

“I’m sorry, sorry.” He croaks, mortified. “You just caught me off guard there, Cheol—uhh, Seungcheol, Seungcheol sir.”

“Stop—stammering.” Seungcheol commands through gritted teeth, clenching his fist around Bob’s shoulder.

“Of course. Immediately. I uhm—” He begins to sweat profusely, then speaks in a lowered tone. “This is my place of business, I don’t mean any offence but I’m up to date with all my payments I haven’t fallen back on any since last July, please.”

Seungcheol regards him for a long moment, his silence as eloquent as the warning he was biting back. He squeezes Bob’s shoulder harshly before speaking again, low enough that only Bob could hear him. “I’m not here about your payments. I’m—car shopping.” He explains, nodding towards a pre-occupied Jihoon and then speaking louder for Jihoon’s benefit. “We’re here car shopping, ey Jihoonie?”

Jihoon let his eyes drift up when he hears his name. “Well—I was car shopping. You, Seungcheol were busy making fun of me.” He bites, narrowing his eyes for appearance’s sake, before turning back to the brochure. “Anyway, Big Bob says he can’t go a penny lower on the asking price so—”

“Is that true, Robert?” Seungcheol interjects swiftly, tone mockingly incredulous. “Did you tell my boyfriend that you wouldn’t go a penny lower on the asking price?” He gasps, voice politely disbelieving but the undertone of a threat is clear and Big Bob winces in response.

“Oh—god, no!” Big Bob panics, holding his hands out, palms spread wide in defence. “I had no idea he was your boyfriend. If I had have known I wou—”

“Well he is!” Seungcheol interrupts sternly, but his mouth is twitching at the corners. “And he trusts you to give him the best deal available.” There is another pause, which is considerably more foreboding then the first. “Are you going to breach that trust Robert?” Seungcheol hisses, a vague threat lurking just behind the quirk of his brow and the hidden depths of his eyes.

Big Bob glances between them nervously, stammering as Seungcheol smirks and Jihoon affects a
long-suffering look. The color deepens across his face and neck and flushes high across his collarbones as he shifts anxiously from foot to foot. He gulps and sighs in a tone that indicates that this interaction with Seungcheol is probably the worst part of his day, or maybe even his week. “The best deal, yes—I can do that. How about I take 10% off the top?” he offers.

Seungcheol gives him an unimpressed look. “Make it 20.” he hisses, quiet enough that Jihoon can’t hear him.

“Yes! Of course, anything.” Bob mumbles, panic gripping him.

Seungcheol nods in approval before speaking louder. “Hear that Jellybean? Big Bob is so generous, he’s going to knock 20% off the car’s price for you.”

“Really? Wow, thanks Bob.” Jihoon mutters distractedly, eyes scanning through the deals brochure on his lap. “Does that come with the 2 years free insurance and the tax deal?” he asks, pointing to the offer on the page held open in front of him.

“Oh no, that’s not part of the Smart car package—“ Bob explains automatically, then his brain catches up with his mouth and his tone rockets straight from smug to freaked in seconds as Seungcheol’s hand on his shoulder clenches painfully once more. “But I’ll add it on as a free extra, just for you, my most valued customer!” he revises his comment quickly.

The change in Bob’s tone catches Jihoon’s attention and he sets the brochure down to focus on the duo conversing with low voices a short distance away. “Really?” He marvels, “That’s very kind of you Bob.” He says, watching the large man standing next to Seungcheol, noting how he looks uncomfortable, suddenly, strained and worried.

“Yeah, Bob’s super generous.” Seungcheol agrees and Bob nods quickly, the panic in his eyes shifting into stunned relief.

“Not—usually.” Jihoon murmurs after a long minute, sounding faintly amazed. “I noticed in the brochure it said I could pick between fabric seats and leather. I prefer the leather seats because of comfort, but just how easy are they to maintain?”

Bob has to be prompted with a cough to answer Jihoon’s questions, because he’s so busy wilting under Seungcheol’s presence to think reflexively. “Uhh—well—uhmm- Fabric has longevity, leather is a luxury so needs proper maintenance. Leather seats need—proper conditioning and the cost can add up.”

“Don’t you have a car valeting service here, Robert?” Seungcheol enquires, narrowing his eyes in a contemplative glare.

Jihoon raises his eyebrows when he sees Bob flinch out of the corner of his eye, and a quick glance up determines that the uncomfortable expression is firmly back on Bob's face. “I do-yes and you can leave your car in anytime to get the leather polished at no extra cost!” Bob stammers and now Jihoon is starting to grow suspicious of their private rumblings, but he knows better than to say anything just yet.

“Wow, I’m speechless.” Jihoon smiles wearily, aware of the sheer fear and frayed nerves the large man is broadcasting at that moment. It’s a little alarming because he's dealt with Big Bob before, he knows the man usually drives a hard sale, ruthless till the end but today something is different. Jihoon lets it slide though, because he is smart enough to take his wins without question. “I can’t say no to an offer like that. What—what do you think Cheol?”
“Hmmm, it’s your car baby. Pick what you like, I shouldn’t be involved in the decision making process really. But maybe if Bob can throw in the premium alloy tyres it would be a done deal?”

“You’re breaking my balls here!” Bob hisses back quietly, waving his arms in exasperation.

Seungcheol clenches his jaw. “There are other things I can break Bob. Things you actually use and will sorely miss.” he growls warningly, not at all impressed by Bob’s resistance.

Bob raises his eyebrows at the admittedly powerful gambit and sighs in resignation. “Free valeting, all inclusive and the premium tyres.” He conceits, smiling at Jihoon hesitantly, like he’s not sure it’s the right expression.

Jihoon breaks into a brilliant smile, bright and uninhibited. “Okay, I’ll take it!”

Later that evening, they’re back in Jihoon’s apartment and barely through the front door when Jihoon spins on his heels and plants his hands on Seungcheol’s biceps, lipping Seungcheol a lazy kiss that separates with a too loud smack.

“Thanks for taking me car shopping. I’m sorry my poor taste in motor vehicles amuses you so.” Jihoon says, gazing at Seungcheol with an expression that's hard to read. Seungcheol can't tell if it's irritation or gratitude.

“You're welcome?” Seungcheol replies hesitantly, guessing his response will come across as sardonic if it’s irritation or sincere if it’s the latter. “And just for the record, I happen to find your taste in motor vehicles—unique.”

An unattractive guffaw escapes Jihoon despite his best efforts, and he buries his face into Seungcheol’s shoulder, snorting with laughter. “That’s hardly a compliment. But thank you anyway and—thank you for getting me a good deal.” he adds, rubbing his thigh against Seungcheol’s hip suggestively. A sly smile follows.

Seungcheol blinks, then his eyebrows draw together and the smile on his face collapses into worry for half a second before hardening into a frown. “I didn’t-“

“Don’t,” Jihoon interrupts. “I’m not stupid Cheol, I’m not a genius with cars but I’ve dealt with Big Bob before and he was never that nice to me. You probably have some, ‘secret mechanic code’ you used to get a better deal. I saw you whisper something to him. You were talking in code—right?”

“Yeah,” Seungcheol nods numbly, for a few seconds he won’t meet Jihoon’s eyes and there’s a very faint flush to his cheeks, then he breezes past the rest of the details to confirm “secret mechanic code, that’s the—uhh—what I used..”

“I knew it!” Jihoon continues over the top of him, smiling in victory. “He got all flustered too, because you’re a mechanic and you know your shit and knew how to drive a hard bargain. Right?” Jihoon continues.

“Yeah. You’re a smart little cookie aren’t you.” Seungcheol chuckles, his tone is sarcastic but there's something soft and sweet underneath, something that makes Jihoon duck his head and blush a little.

“I don’t know shit about cars. But I like to think I have lots of street smarts.” Jihoon murmurs quickly because Seungcheol’s been moving him back against the wall steadily, closing him in and now they’re nearly nose-to-nose.
“Hmm, I don’t know about that. But you're definitely right about one thing.” Seungcheol brushes the words against his lips, and Jihoon can’t help but hold his breath so he doesn’t miss a sound. “I know how to drive a hard bargain. Want me to show you?” he quips with a husky, roughened voice that has Jihoon half hard in seconds.

Jihoon practically convulses at the predatory promise of Seungcheol’s eyes on him and he closes the breath of distance between them, sliding his tongue along Seungcheol’s bottom lip until he can slip inside and taste the coffee and chewing gum flavour from Seungcheol’s mouth. He slides a hand up Seungcheol’s chest to curl over his shoulder and hold him in place. “Stay,” Jihoon whispers when he pulls back, dragging his hand further up the curve of Seungcheol’s collarbone until he’s got his fingers around the nape of Seungcheol’s neck. He's not entirely certain it's the right thing to say—whether it's trekking too far past their newly established boundaries. “I mean, if you want to—if you’re not busy, I’m not forcing you to stay, I’m not just suggesting—”

It takes him a few solid seconds of still trying to talk and not understanding the resistance to realize that Seungcheol was kissing him. Hand on his jaw turning his face to the side, lips pressed against his own, a firm grip on his thigh where Seungcheol’s other hand was supporting him off the ground. It takes seconds, barely even ten, but by the time Jihoon catches up, Seungcheol’s already pulling away.

“Yeah, I’d like to stay Jellybean.” Seungcheol says quietly, pressing his mouth to Jihoon’s, the words blurring amidst their breath. He says it like there had never been any interruption or doubt and he’s still palming Jihoon’s jaw, thumb pressed into Jihoon’s cheekbone, fingers curled against his neck.

Jihoon smiles, feeling strangely light in the chest area, as if his heart was fluttering like a small, frightened bird in his chest. He watches Seungcheol pull back, enough that he can shrug off his jacket and hang it, before wrapping both arms low around Jihoon’s hips.

Their next kiss is as chaste as the first, but the third—the third kiss starts with Jihoon winding his arms around Seungcheol’s neck and ends with him flat on his back on his mattress, Seungcheol’s hips cradled between his thighs and one hand pushing his T-Shirt higher up Seungcheol’s ribs.

“Fuck, you’re so hot.” Jihoon murmurs, tugging Seungcheol’s shirt over his head and pinching a sensitive nipple, which earns him a hiss of pleasure from Seungcheol who then slams their mouths together. Jihoon moans and grinds into him, dragging his teeth across Seungcheol’s lower lip, running his nails along his shoulders and back before he pulls back gasping for air.

"Get your dick out—now." Jihoon commands, breathless.

"Sir, yes, sir—General Marshmallow." Seungcheol half salutes, already scrambling out of his pants and boxers. Jihoon has his jeans half undone when Seungcheol tugs them off his legs, ditching them easily. Next, Seungcheol grips the hem of Jihoon’s sweater and pulls it over his head, bending down to bite at Jihoon's nipples even as Jihoon fumbles a hand between his legs to start preparing himself.

“Woah-woah-woah.” Seungcheol admonishes, tugging Jihoon’s hand away. “With all due respect Commander Jellybean, that’s my job.” He points out, reaching over to the nightstand where he knows Jihoon keeps his lube.

"I’m just trying to speed things along.” Jihoon huffs, trying to free his hand from Seungcheol’s grip unsuccessfully. “It’s my butthole.” He shoots back, a ferocity in his voice when Seungcheol seems insistent on taking it slow and preparing him properly.

Seungcheol beams down at him, quirking a brow. “Are you—pulling rank on me?” he teases,
snapping open the cap of the bottle.

“God—you’re so annoying!” Jihoon huffs, then shudders a moment later as the arm looped about his waist dips low to press a questing finger to his throbbing hole. Seungcheol works the first digit in and out quickly, biting his lip in concentration and a little in anticipation as Jihoon clamps his internal muscles around it.

“Ahh—yes.” Jihoon affirms with a shiver when Seungcheol adds a second finger, pressing the blunt tip along his inner wall in a way that has Jihoon shivering, moaning, embarrassingly loud beneath the strong, heavy press of Seungcheol’s body. “Hmm, Cheol-ah!” Jihoon groans encouragingly as a third finger slides inside him, pistoning in and out.

“So eager baby, I love how much you want it.” Seungcheol croons as Jihoon rides his fingers with a whine and Jihoon quickly bites Seungcheol’s lip to punish him for the gravelly smug chuckle he releases against his mouth.

“Cheol pleeaass-.” Jihoon’s words break off into a hiss of pleasure as Seungcheol takes hold of his erection and strokes him slow and firm, thumbing the head of his cock. His knuckles brush Jihoon’s stomach with every upwards tug, and he bends down to initiate a sweet kiss. Jihoon is momentarily distracted from the burning stretch by the firm grip on his cock and the persistent pressure of Seungcheol’s lips against his and Seungcheol uses it to his advantage, pressing a forth finger into him just to feel him shake. Jihoon releases a strangled half scream and arches his entire back, almost heaving himself off the bed entirely. "Oh, Jesus—FUCK, what--what the hell are you doing, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god--"

"Sorry, Jellybean," Seungcheol says, not sorry at all. He leans back and smirks, his fingers still buried deep, and uses his free hand to lube his prick up. "Just relax baby." Seungcheol murmurs encouragingly.

In truth, Seungcheol himself is having some trouble with self-control, finding his words awkward in his mouth—because Jihoon is really fucking gorgeous like this, writhing and sweating, pupils blown wide, a complete, deconstructed wreck.

“How much of me do you want inside of you Jihoonie?” Seungcheol purrs, slipping his fingers out and rubbing a soothing thumb over Jihoon’s hole when he keens at the loss. As he waits for his answer, he grabs Jihoon’s legs and slips them over his waist.

“All of you, the whole thing—hnnn—want it now.” Jihoon says, and it’s mostly a sob than speech. Seungcheol smirks and grips the base of his cock, aligning it, dripping and ready. Jihoon is desperate to close his eyes in anticipation of the pain, but he doesn’t. He looks up at Seungcheol instead, who is intent and silent over him, his expression something serious, focused and raw as he presses the head of his cock past the tight ring of muscle. Despite the preparation, it’s a tight slide in and Jihoon hisses out a shuddery breath as Seungcheol pushes his full length in, tantalizingly slow.

“Nnn,” Jihoon sighs, hips already itching to hitch upwards as Seungcheol’s cock stretches him. Seungcheol is poised over top of him, eyes shut tight and forehead creased with concentration—resisting the urge to move, Jihoon realizes. Jihoon sucks his earlobe, distracting him into a kiss. A minute later he's breaks the kiss, and Seungcheol opens his eyes slowly, watching Jihoon's face.

“I'm fine,” Jihoon murmurs, tilting his hips up and clenching his hole around Seungcheol’s cock, enjoying Seungcheol’s low hiss and appreciative groan as his length catches and drags inside Jihoon’s heat. “Please—Cheol—fuck me.” Jihoon croaks, wrapping slender calves around his waist tightly and crossing his ankles.
Seungcheol nods and begins moving inside Jihoon, pressing himself deeper on each thrust, bringing Jihoon apart stroke by aching stroke. A litany of broken syllables pouring out of him as he presses his lips to Jihoon’s neck. “Fuck—fu-ck—yess—hnn—fuck—baby.” Jihoon tightens his thighs and his calves and his ass around Seungcheol just to feel him shudder, pulls his hair too hard, licks a stripe up his neck until Seungcheol hisses against the shell of his ear. “My slutty little marshmallow likes it rough huh?” he grunts as he pounds Jihoon mercilessly, slipping a hand between their bodies to fist Jihoon’s cock and jerk him in time with his thrusts.

Jihoon nips at Seungcheol’s chin, throwing his head back against the sheets as the friction of Seungcheol's cock inside of him becomes maddening, and Seungcheol steadies him with hands gripping the back of his thighs as the bed rocks beneath them.

"Ahh—more," Jihoon grinds out, "harder, now, Cheol, shit, right—fucking now--"

"Like this?" Seungcheol asks, and jerks back and forward again, shoving himself into Jihoon's prostate. Jihoon groans and jerks, his fingers clenching on Seungcheol's shoulders in response to the heightened stimulation.

“Nnyesss—yes—ahhh—Just like—that.” Jihoon’s a quivering mess, his hair everywhere, drips of precome coating his stomach and thighs, and he can’t argue when Seungcheol slips his arms under his back and picks him up, pulls them both into sitting. The change in position makes Jihoon moan, and he drops his head to Seungcheol’s shoulder, taking a shuddering, sobbing breath as Seungcheol drives his cock up into him again at a new glorious angle.

Jihoon keeps up a litany of curses, sentences he can't finish, Seungcheol's name, and random grunting curses and gasps. As they continue to rut, sweat trickles down Seungcheol’s temple and Jihoon wipes it away, whining throatily against his ear. It won't be long for him now, not with the lewd, slick noises coming from between his legs and the pressure building in his balls.

Seungcheol jerks himself up, ramming his cockhead against Jihoon’s prostrate once, twice, three times and Jihoon screams suddenly, delirious with delight and ecstasy and comes. His mouth hangs open and wet, body shaking apart at the seams as he struggles to stay coiled and rocking against the man who is relentlessly wringing every last drop of glass sharp pleasure from him.

"Fuck – oh FUCK Jihoonie...” Seungcheol lets out a guttural moan and tightens his arms around Jihoon, riding out the tight, fluttering clench of Jihoon’s hole around his cock. Jihoon's still in his lap, naked and shuddering, his legs wrapped around Seungcheol’s waist and his face mashed into Seungcheol’s neck. Seungcheol lets himself enjoy the slick heat of his ass for a few more quick thrusts before he follows him into orgasm, coming thick, slippery and hot inside Jihoon.

Jihoon feels Seungcheol lower him carefully back on the bed and exhaustion crashes through him, hot on the heels of his orgasm. He feels as though he could simply sink into the mattress and disappear under the weight of his blissful stupor and the warm, if crushing, weight of Seungcheol atop of him. He’s visibly shaking when Seungcheol’s arm slides beneath his weight, readjusting his position to lie more comfortably on the bed.

Jihoon whines softly when Seungcheol pulls his cock free, extricating himself as carefully as he can from Jihoon’s clamping heat. He braces himself on both arms above Jihoon, pressing a kiss to his cheekbone before dropping his head to let their sweat-slick foreheads touch as they pant into each others’ mouths.

Seungcheol cups Jihoon’s cheek and jaw for a moment before sliding his fingers into the perspiration damped strands at the nape of his neck. “That was amazing Jihoonie. God you’re something else. Are you okay baby?”
Despite his fucked out state, Jihoon apparently finds some as yet untapped well of energy deep within himself because he manages to lift up just enough to press an abruptly tender kiss to Seungcheol’s forehead. “Awesome. G-night.” He whispers, dropping both his eyes and head and smiling as he tumbles into well-deserved sleep.

As he drifts on the periphery of sleep, dozing blissfully, he’s awake just enough to feel Seungcheol quietly sliding into the bed and under the sheets and he presses back a little firmer into the warm weight of Seungcheol behind him. Then there’s a warm, dry press of lips against his shoulder, and the arm around his waist curls a little tighter before Seungcheol whispers. “Goodnight my pretty, little marshmallow.”

Chapter End Notes

1) No offence if you own a Nissan micra or a FIAT... Feel bad for you tho....
2) Not that I am endorsing SMART cars, I just though the idea of Jihoon, in the tiniest car was adorable. Just imagine him driving it around ^_^
3) Hope you enjoyed the update!
Jihoon doesn’t like crowds. He doesn’t mesh well with big groups of people who only talk to each other out of sheer proximity or necessity. Making friends at work is much like making friends in prison. You’re only talking to each other and being pleasant because you have to, because you have been forced into this strange co-habitation and you’re set to earn something from it. Frankly, he doesn’t have time for this disingenuous bullshit.

If Jihoon doesn’t escape work for lunch, he lunches in his office. Seungkwan has kindly forwarded him a number of articles about how eating at your desk can lead to CANCER and suggested on more than a dozen occasions, that Jihoon should lunch with him in the staff canteen. Jihoon points out that the research articles Seungkwan sends him are a load of sensationalized crap, that eating with Seungkwan would be more detrimental for his mental health and then politely, if somewhat belatedly, refuses his offer.

He usually gets a surprising amount of work done in that single lunch hour, without the constant disruptions from the other staff he basks in the reverie of solitude. Today, however, isn’t going to be one of those days.

His first disruption comes in the form of a cryptic text message from an unidentified number.

**Xxxxxxxxxx: Forecasting heavy showers. Bring an umbrella.**

Jihoon stares at the message for a minute and then rapidly replies.

**Jihoon: Who dis? Don’t need an umbrella! I have a car!**

The second interruption is a slow forming migraine that starts at the base of his neck and travels into his eye sockets. He thinks it’s related to his vision and probably why he’s been squinting a lot more at the screen recently. He wastes 15 minutes he could have used productively, on hold with the eye clinic to schedule an appointment.

The third interruption comes in the form of the company CEO knocking on his office door. Jihoon catches his reflection in the monitor before he hears the door swing open and he sighs internally. He gives up on the code he is correcting as his migraine intensifies from the man’s mere presence.

He should have had lunch in the canteen with Seungkwan.

“Jihoon, do you have a minute?” The CEO asks.

Jihoon feels his hands twitch in annoyance, loathing that hollowed-out voice. He nods without looking up from his screen and spins in his chair to face the man once he takes a seat at the empty desk behind his.
The CEO leans forward to flick one of the bobble head mascots stuck to Jihoon’s desk and smiles, his expression deceivingly pleasant. “How have you been Jihoon? How is your work progressing?” He asks, his tone is oddly formal, polite, and Jihoon tenses, wondering why a man who usually does a good job ignoring him, is suddenly so interested in his work.

“Fine thanks.” Jihoon replies, lifting a hand to stop the bobble head from wobbling. And—uhm, how are y-

“I’m not here to exchange pleasantries actually.” The CEO cuts in curtly.

Jihoon flushes an angry bright red and speaks his mind before he can stop himself. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have asked me how I was?”

“Moving forward,” The CEO drawls, ignoring Jihoon’s comment except for a tense, if preoccupied, half-scowl. “The investigation in Dr Raine’s work is coming to an end and the Bureau are satisfied that no one else in the company has been involved with the hack.” He explains, flicking a different bobble head and disturbing the neat arrangement on Jihoon’s desk. Jihoon doesn’t make a move to stop it this time, even as the sound it makes tingles in his ears and heightens his headache.

“That’s good news.” Jihoon nods, beginning to swivel his chair back but a hand reaches out to stop him mid turn.

“I’m not quite finished.” The CEO counters tersely. “Now, Dr Raine’s absence has left the company with a vacancy that we are eager to fill as soon as possible. And seeing as you have worked closely with him in the past and are the most familiar with his work, how would you feel about taking up his position as lead analyst?”

Jihoon says nothing for a moment and the man merely waits for a response, giving nothing away in his expression. “It would feel weird and a little wrong to take over my ex mentor’s job. Especially considering the circumstances of his departure and the facts that he’s still missing.” He swallows and focuses on the bobble head wobbling on the desk rather than on the CEO’s soft snort of amusement.

“Of course, I appreciate that it’s indelicate for you to take up his exact job but perhaps we could create a role for you that had similar responsibilities and call it something else like—consultant analyst.” He suggests, his long fingers making air quotes beside his head.

“‘It would still feel weird.’ Jihoon replies crisply.

“Are you concerned that you are lacking the necessary skills to complete Dr Raine’s work?” He snarks, looking back over at Jihoon with scepticism.

Jihoon frowns, staring down at his hands, frustration bubbling in his throat. He knows he’s being bated, he can hear it in the tone of the man’s voice, but that knowledge doesn’t stop his jaw from clenching in irritation nonetheless. “I’m more than capable of completing his work—I’m over qualified in fact. You know that.” He seethes, because he’s frustrated and nothing if not stubborn.

The CEO apparently notices the flash of temper; his eyes narrow. “Then I don’t see why you should be so opposed to a promotion? A salary rise, company benefits, increased shares—unless” He pauses mid-sentence, a brow raised in amusement. “Unless—you have a reason for not wanting the position?”

“I’d like some time to think about it.” Jihoon says, turning away, trying to redirect his thoughts. “And if I do accept, I want time to complete my current projects. I don’t like leaving things half done.”

“Yes, of course. That’s why you will be so perfect for the position. You’re quite the perfectionist.”
He grins sharply, rising swiftly out of his seat. “Think about it.” He says, turning on his heel and leaving the office, but not before brushing his hand over all the bobble heads, face twisting in sadistic glee as they rattle violently.

Jihoon turns back to his desk, feeling unnerved. It doesn’t help that he has another cryptic message on his phone.

**XXXXXX: Heavy showers. Remain in doors.**

He huffs and types back a reply before blocking the number.

**Jihoon: Wrong number!**

So, how was your weekend?” Jeonghan asks, lounging in the armchair in Seungcheol’s office, finalising some last minute details as he taps away on his phone.

Seungcheol inhales, a quick breath in through his nose, blinking and sitting back in place. “Amazing.”

“Amazing? Well—**good.** Has this got anything to do with your little twink putting out again?” Jeonghan asks with a smile. It’s his best smile, the one he uses to charm his way into whatever he wants. It has **never** worked on Seungcheol.

Jeonghan raises his hands in submission when Seungcheol’s arrow-quick gaze sears him. “What did I tell you about calling him that?”

“I know—I know. I only jest Seungcheol. I just wanted to know how it was all going. Wondering if your mask was still—holding up.” He says, his tone brisk, impersonal but for the sharp, intense look he rakes Seungcheol with.

“Everything is fine. He hasn’t picked up on anything.” Seungcheol says, and then he pauses and amends “Maybe he has, I don’t know, it hard to say. We haven’t got to know each other well yet. So, who knows how convincing I can be further down the line. Eventually he’s going to have questions I guess. He’ll want to know more about me.”

Jeonghan purses his lips, turning his attention back to his phone. “Haven’t you guys fucked?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you already know each other **intimately,** what’s more to know?” Jeonghan inquires, honestly curious.

Seungcheol opens his mouth, shuts it again, and then he sighs. “That’s not enough. I want to **know** him. I want to spend time with him that’s—not just sex.” He admits, and he feels the blush start at his neck and actively forces it back.

To his horror, Jeonghan’s looking up again, intrigue in his eyes now. “**Oh my god**—you’re falling for him.” He gasps, covering his mouth dramatically and Seungcheol rolls his eyes.

“Tell him about the cute date idea you’ve got planned hyung!” Wonwoo chirps in from the corner of the room, midway through reassembling a gun he’s just cleaned.

Jeonghan raises both eyebrows, puts down his phone, and narrows his eyes. "You’re planning a cute
date?" he asks Seungcheol, and Seungcheol snaps "No" and the same time Wonwoo says "Yes."

Seungcheol shoots Wonwoo a glare as the corners of Jeonghan’s mouth turn up. Wonwoo makes a face that seems to suggest his own innocence, and when Seungcheol continues to glare, he throws up his hands in despair. "Come on," Wonwoo says, "don't look at me like that. You've been gushing about him non-stop. At least I haven’t told Jeonghan about all the cute nicknames you have for him."

Seungcheol opens his mouth to yell but Jeonghan’s eyebrows are already shooting up into his hairline, and he whistles. “You have nicknames for him? Do—mes—tic” Jeonghan intones, looking like he’s trying hard not to laugh. “Tell me, what names do you have for him.”

Seungcheol resists the urge to throttle him, but it's a close thing. “No. You’ll just make fun.”

“Exactly, but it will be a good bonding moment for us all!” Jeonghan claps his hands gleefully. “NO!”

Jihoon’s getting a lot of new things in his life.

A new car, which he collected this week. Cute little thing that he can drive up the cycle lane if he so wishes, and did once when he was running late to work.

A new keyboard, because he spilt coffee all over the last one. There was a spider and a moment of fear induced insanity and drowning said spider in coffee was the only solution. It really was.

A new boyfriend. Ok—a boyfriend. He’s never really had a proper boyfriend before so Seungcheol is officially his first.

And a new pair of glasses. This, he is less happy about. Who knows where his old pair have disappeared to. He can’t even remember that last time he wore them and according to his optician—it’s been a while, because his prescription has worsened.

It’s an occupational hazard really, working day and night at a computer screen is bound to affect your vision and his migraines have been getting more frequent since he misplaced his last pair. So he’s going to make a conscious effort to wear these new glasses more often, even if they’re fucking huge and keep dipping down on to the bridge of his nose. He doesn’t think he suits glasses or has what you might call ‘a glasses face’, but ‘Macular Degeneration’ was a big word his optician was throwing about during his appointment and he’s ready to do anything to get that guy to shut up about it.

He almost forgets that he’s wearing his new glasses until few people at work comment on them. Then a few more, and a few more and now every time someone brings it up, he flinches a little harder and readjusts them and feels disgustingly self-conscious.

He practically jumps out of his skin when Seungcheol mentions them. It’s his day off and he’s rushing to get ready for his date when he answers the doorbell wearing them.

"Wow, and here I thought you couldn’t look any cuter.” Seungcheol says, leaning against the wall and looking at Jihoon with a flirty smile. His eyes trace the edges of the frames before he whispers “Nerd” fondly and Jihoon rolls his eyes, slips the glasses off and pockets them.

“Aw—no, don’t take them off. I like them.” He huffs, trying to reach for them but Jihoon succeeds in slapping his hand away.
“No, they’re just for work and they won’t fit under the helmet anyway.” He dismisses, straightening the collar of his sweater.

“I’ll get you a bigger helmet then.” Seungcheol offers with an eyebrow wiggle.

Jihoon purses his lips, ready to cancel this date and tell Seungcheol to fuck off, too grouchy and stupidly sensitive to handle any teasing today. Then a warm hand settles on his butt and Seungcheol smiles, soft and fond and ridiculously happy. Jihoon could kill him with how infuriatingly effective his smiles are on his resolve.

“I’m not wearing the glasses Seungcheol, drop it.” Jihoon monotones.

Seungcheol holds his palms up in a pacifying gesture. “Okay, okay. I didn’t realize this was such a sensitive topic. I think they suit you.”

“Are we going somewhere or are we going to discuss my macular degeneration on my doorstep?” Jihoon drawls back, his tone bored.

“Arrghh. Just, let’s go.” Jihoon groans in frustration, stepping out of the door and slamming it shut behind him.

“Okay, but first—kiss me.” Seungcheol demands breathlessly, tilting his head down to level his lips with Jihoon’s.

Jihoon hums out a soft sound, which is intended to communicate irritation but registers as soft and fond instead. “Uhm—why? What have you done for me lately?” Jihoon says, biting back a laugh when Seungcheol stares at him incredulously.

“We’re going on a date Jellybean! People usually kiss on dates.” He whines.

Jihoon furrows his brow and tries to stop himself from smiling, with very limited success. “Correction, people might get a kiss at the end of a date IF the date goes well. You started this date by calling me a nerd. So far you haven’t scored any points.”

“I called you a cute nerd.” Seungcheol purrs, eyes hooded as he attempts to hide his amusement.

“Semantics.” Jihoon states with reluctant delight.

“I’m going to win this date and I’m going to get a kiss from you.” Seungcheol hypothesizes.

“This date isn’t a competition Cheol!” Jihoon protests with mock indignation.

“You just established a point based scoring system, that makes it competitive.”

Jihoon glares at him and Seungcheol simply smiles back, entirely unrepentant. “You’re running into negative points territory right now Seungcheol.”

“Oh, okay. Let me start over please, now that I know your scoring rules.”


Seungcheol beams at him, then takes a deep breath and says. “Hello my precious little marshmallow jellybean nerd.” All in one breath.
Jihoon opens his mouth, shuts it, and opens it again. Seungcheol is amused and delighted to note that he is blushing. “Minus ten points.”

“Aww—c’mon!” Seungcheol guffaws.

..........................

It’s not a winning start for Seungcheol, but Jihoon knocks him up to plus five points for wearing that leather jacket again and bringing that motorcycle. It’s not the leather jacket or motorcycles fault that their owner is a moron. Seungcheol doesn’t disclose where he’s taking them, they just helmet up and ride out of the city for 30 minutes until they arrive at an outcrop.

Seungcheol pulls in down a secluded trail to park the bike at a small cabin. Jihoon climbs off the back and stretches his legs, wondering tentatively to the edge of a grassy knoll to look out over the horizon. He’s adding another 5 points to Seungcheol’s score because it’s a spectacular view of the city. He imagines it would border on breath-taking at night or at sunset and Seungcheol definitely deserves bonus points for location.

“It’s an impressive view.” Jihoon says wonderingly.

“You should see it at night.” Seungcheol chirps from somewhere behind him. Jihoon turns to acknowledge him and nearly topples over the knoll in shock because Seungcheol chooses that moment to pop a champagne cork.

Jihoon steadies himself, blinking rapidly as he takes in the scene for a moment. There’s a large blanket spread out on the grass and a heaving hamper in the middle. Jihoon hadn’t noticed either as he walked up and somehow Seungcheol had set it up while he was distracted with the view. The gorgeous bastard was sneaky like that.

A picnic, on a secluded cliff, overlooking a beautiful view of the city. Seungcheol wasn’t kidding about winning this date, even if there isn’t a competition.

“I’m shocked.” Jihoon admits bashfully.

“You’re impressed.” Seungcheol replies smugly, cocking his head and grinning like the sun coming up.

Jihoon feels himself color and forcibly ignores it “Minus 5 points.” He deadpans.

“Hey—why?” Seungcheol sulks.

“You’re being cocky, nobody likes cockiness on a date.” Jihoon snaps, biting back a completely unwelcome smile.

Seungcheol purses his lips thoughtfully. “It’s not cockiness. I was just stating a fact.”

Jihoon rolls his eyes non-to discreetly. “Oh, would you look at that—you’re back in minus points territory again. You’re really not very good at this, are you Seungcheol.” He teases wryly.

“Alright. Okay, just, sit please.” Seungcheol says, gesturing at the tartan blanket.

Jihoon kicks off his boots and sinks down on the blanket to admire the view. It is certainly an excellent picnic spot: a sun kissed patch of grass overlooking a distant view of the city, surrounded by gently rolling hills and high pine trees that fill the air with a woodsy scent.
“Here you go,” Seungcheol says, handing Jihoon a glass before dropping down next to him and opening the picnic hamper. He pulls out various insulated compartments and Jihoon peers at the array of food inquisitively. There was fresh bread, tapenade, pate, a variety of dips, olives, cheeses, cherry tomatoes, fruit, chocolate and—marshmallows. It is the last thing he notices and the first thing Seungcheol feeds him, a chocolate dipped marshmallow.

“Okay—so you’re back in the running Cheol.” Jihoon says, licking his lips ever-so-slightly. He leans forward to bite the marshmallow out of Seungcheol’s hand. “This took some planning, I'll give you a few points for that. Do you own this place?” He gestures to the cabin a little way behind them.

“Yeah, it’s for work. I store some equipment here and I wouldn’t have been able to fit the picnic basket on the bike, so I came up here earlier to set up. The cabin used to be a summer retreat for my family when we were younger. Don’t really use it anymore but I still come up here for the view.” He says, taking a sip from his own glass and leaning back on his elbows, all languid elegance.

“Do you bring all your dates here Cheol?” Jihoon asks, plucking a mini marshmallow from the container and dipping it in the melted chocolate. He holds it over Seungcheol’s mouth and Seungcheol leans up and closes his lips around Jihoon’s fingers, sucking lightly. Its unexpected heat causes an answering flare low in Jihoon’s groin.

“You’re the only person I’ve ever brought here.” Seungcheol answers, a slow smile blossoming on his face, wicked and sweet in equal measures.

“Hmm—you just doubled your points Cheollie.” Jihoon quips, keeping his face slightly averted so that the sudden happiness scorching through him couldn’t be seen in his eyes.

The afternoon goes by in a blur of giddy awareness for Jihoon. Seungcheol is as attentive as he’s always been but somehow softer too, running his hands down Jihoon’s sides and pressing kisses into his skin like promises. The picnic food was good. In fact, it was fantastic. They try a bit of everything, Seungcheol leaning over often to feed Jihoon carefully. He lets Jihoon repay the favour sometimes, which causes him an unreasonable amount of amusement.

"Cheol, enough—I’m so full Hyung." Jihoon confesses as Seungcheol feeds him another juicy strawberry dipped in whipped cream. Jihoon can't resist sucking on Seungcheol’s finger and thumb, just briefly enough for it to seem accidental but just long enough for Seungcheol’s eyelids to droop in satisfaction.

“Just have one more, please.” Seungcheol insists, sweeping his knuckles playfully across Jihoon’s heated cheek.

They chat about anything and everything. Seungcheol asks him questions, lots of curious questions like he’s genuinely interested in Jihoon and everything that makes him tick and at first Jihoon replies with carefully rehearsed responses, then he loosens up on his second glass of champagne and the feel of Seungcheol’s warm hand on his thigh.

He’s never had anyone interested in HIM before. Not like this. He never talks about his family or work or general hatred of things with anyone he’s tried to be with. This was—different, and it’s nice to be genuine and unguarded of what he’s sharing for once.

“I just don’t think it would feel right taking his job. He recruited me in high school, he offered me this job and up until he—uhm—was dismissed, he was very supportive of me. It would just feel weird trying to take his place.” Jihoon explains.
Seungcheol nods considerately. “Well, if it’s not you it’s going to be somebody else right?”

“Probably.”

“Someone else isn’t going to have a problem taking his job and you might have missed out on an opportunity. Is it just loyalty to him or do you not like the idea of more responsibility this role will offer?”

“I respect him—or respected him once. It’s not loyalty really, just doubt. It doesn’t feel right. I always like a challenge and I’m always wanting to learn new things and Dr Raine was working on some pretty cool projects. But the promotion will mean I have to —manage a team. I work in a team sometimes now, and it’s a total pain, but I tend to just do my own thing and submit the project with the group.”

Seungcheol’s eyes crinkle around the corners as he grins. “Not a team player huh?”

Jihoon gives him a wry, shuttered look. “It’s not that. Well—it is that a little. But a lot of the people I work with are frankly—really shit at their jobs. They manage to get away with contributing the bare minimum. I end up having to pull their weight around and—they’re all leeches basically.” Jihoon counters, trying to keep the bitterness in his voice to a dull roar. At least Seungcheol seems to find his assessment amusing and his face creases in hilarity.

Jihoon’s suddenly aware that he’s been rambling on about himself and not once bothered to ask Seungcheol anything in return. “Wait—I’m doing all the sharing here.” Jihoon exclaims. He stretches out next to Seungcheol on the blanket, propping himself on his elbow. “What about you? Tell me about yourself. I wanna know things too.” He says, resting on his side to look at Seungcheol who is still lounged back on his elbows.

Seungcheol drops his head back a little and closes his eyes, “My life’s not that interesting.” He says, with a tight shrug of his shoulders.

“That’s not the point. My life isn’t interesting and I’ve managed to bleed your ears with details. We should know more about each other. This isn’t just the Jihoon show.”

“I like the Jihoon show.” Seungcheol smiles, his voice a husky rumble.

Jihoon shakes his head, managing a smile of his own. “No. It’s your turn. What about you. Did you always want to be a mechanic?” he asks

The corner of Seungcheol’s eye twitches, and he shifts his shoulders like he’s uncomfortable –then he smiles a little, meeting Jihoon's eyes fleetingly before looking back down. “Yes.”

Jihoon waits for an elaboration and gets none. “Okay—that’s nice. Can you elaborate on that?”

“Yes, I always wanted to be a mechanic.” Seungcheol says, flashing his dimples.

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Yes.”

Jihoon sighs loudly. “Ughh—elaborate please.”

“Yes, I enjoy being a mechanic.” Seungcheol says, wetting his lips nervously.

“Cheol!” Jihoon huffs, swatting him playfully. “Don’t be like this, why are you being so shady? I’m
gonna minus points off you for this and you were doing so well.”

“Okay, sorry, let me try again. No, I didn’t always want to be a mechanic. When I was very young I wanted to be a doctor, but I imagine most kids have that dream. Anyway, I would never have been cut out for med school and I have the attention span of a fish so that was never going to happen.” Seungcheol laughs.

“Do I enjoy it?” He asks himself after a reflective pause. “To a certain degree, I enjoy—certain aspects of it. I enjoy the power it gives me.”

“Power over cars? To fix cars?” Jihoon suggests hopefully.

Seungcheol blinks. “Yeah—sure—that. I like the freedom it gives me. I control my schedule and decide what jobs I want to take. When you run your own business, it gives you a sense of responsibility. Purpose.” He finishes with a smile. His smile was a tentative, fledgling thing, but it was there.

“Is it a family business?” Jihoon asks and there is a noticeable shift in Seungcheol’s calm. He can see the lines of tension forming over Seungcheol’s jaw and brow, it’s a delicate topic of conversation for him obviously and Jihoon can read Seungcheol’s body language like a faded novel.

“Oh—yeah. It is a little. I grew up here and my dad uhm—used to be a mechanic. He uh—ran a garage for many years and always told me I would take over.”

Jihoon pushes himself up and smiles, distracted by this new information. “That’s nice, following in his footsteps. He must be proud that you decided to continue the family business.” He studies Seungcheol, watching the play of emotion in those expressive eyes.

“He’s dead.” Seungcheol barely whispers it, his voice pained.

A thousand thoughts clamored for first ranking in Jihoon’s mind—at the forefront was the realization that he’s waded into heavy territory, goddamn it—but none of them were so powerful as the impulse to soothe the crease between Seungcheol’s brows. “Oh—Cheol, I’m sorry.” Jihoon says, smoothing his hand soothingly over Seungcheol’s arm.

“Nah—it’s alright. It was a long time ago and he had it coming.” he murmurs. He’s just a hair too casual about it, and something tight and strange flickers once in Jihoon's chest and dies.

“What?” Jihoon gasps, lifting an eyebrow, catching the hard, shuttered expression slip back over Seungcheol features as he turns away.

“Uhh—he—sorta had an accident on the job.” Seungcheol says quietly.

“Damn,” Jihoon gasps, he sits back, eyes distant, fixed on nothing as he considers Seungcheol’s words. “Do you mind me asking what happened?”

“He was working late one night, by himself, even though he knew he shouldn’t. He had gotten pretty careless and too comfortable.” Seungcheol says, with something that sounded like regret in his voice before he clears his throat uncomfortably. “I’ll spare you the gory details but basically, he employed the wrong people and was a little fast and loose with—uhh—health and safety standards? Anyway, he was aware of the danger he was getting into and an accident was—inevitable really.”

“That’s awful. But you still wanted to work as a mechanic after the accident?” Jihoon asks carefully.

Seungcheol laughs. It is strange, to hear him laugh—over a topic such as this, to get this particular
reaction from him. But he must have taken his father's death in his stride, or talked about it long enough with enough people for it not to be an issue. “I didn't really have much of a choice. When you are brought up and trained in the family business, you accept that you have certain responsibilities and a role to play early on. You don’t question it.” He explains.

When he opens his mouth to speak again, his tone is wrong, more exhausted than maybe he intends it, cut by fear and worry and the tight smile painted across his too-full lips. “After my dad died, I took over and I found out he hadn’t been running things as—cost effectively as we had thought. He owed a lot of debtors money and the business was in an—administration of sorts. I had to practically build it from the ground again. Establish my own reputation where his had failed.”

“It sounds like you’ve been under a lot of pressure Cheol from a young age. Now I understand why you get so upset about those bad yelp reviews, why you take it all so personally.” Jihoon muses aloud.

A slow grin splits the illusion of emotionlessness, and Jihoon smiles to see the real Seungcheol again. “Yeah, you’re right. I do take things personally.” He chuckles, then his face turns hard and closed off. “Those reviews are a real pain. But I haven’t had to deal with them in a while.” he says, tilting his head up to stare at the blissfully immobile sky. “I employ people who deal with them when they crop up and I have a good, solid reputation now. People don’t stand out of line anymore.”

Seungcheol stops looking at the sky to look at Jihoon, who was—staring right at him, a hesitant, almost scared expression on his face. Seungcheol thinks he’s said too much, given too much away and maybe in the process painted himself as some heartless fucker who doesn’t give a shit about his dead father’s legacy. He can’t believe, now, that he had ever imagined Jihoon as a naïve kid with rose tinted glasses who could have the wool pulled over his eyes; he can't think of anything further from the truth. Jihoon's eyes were playful and so sincere that they were actually suspicious and piercing, in a way Seungcheol can't quite figure out.

He opens his mouth to apologise, to change the topic, to pave over those cracks he’s just revealed when Jihoon pushes forward and seals his lips over his. Seungcheol gasps into the kiss, falling back onto the blanket. He runs his fingers through Jihoon's hair and kisses him back, hard and claiming

As the sun begins to set the air becomes noticeably chilly and Jihoon doesn’t even put up a fight when Seungcheol moves to sit behind him, draping him with his jacket. He leans back against Seungcheol’s chest and his senses abruptly rush by Seungcheol’s own scent mingled with the intoxicating scent of leather. “Hmm, that’s nice Cheol.” he mutters, eyes shutting in sudden sleepy ecstasy as the heat from Seungcheol’s firm body washes over him.

Seungcheol breaks the silence. “Just an FYI, I'm warning you so that you don't panic. But my gun is in my jacket pocket, the safety is on.” he explains carefully.

“Oh, okay.” Jihoon nods, sitting bolt upright, nearly shivering with anticipation. He remains silent for a long moment before turning his head round to face Seungcheol. “Can I touch it?”

Blinking owlishly, Seungcheol peers at Jihoon for a long moment, trying to figure out where such an off-the-wall question had come from. “Wh-what?” he rasps.

Jihoon touches the back of his neck, face twisting into a discomfited expression. “Sorry,” he says, and then gives a little self-deprecating laugh. “It’s just—you know what, nevermind.” he says, ducking his head too fast to notice the expression of shocked pleasure moving its way across the Seungcheol’s face.
“Wait, no—I—I just—you were upset before when I had it and—really?” he asks, his voice cracking a little. He sounds surprised, but not unpleasantly so.

Jihoon was at war with himself—on the one hand, the proximity of the gun, the heady rush of danger, is exhilarating. On the other hand, he’d freaked massively the last time he was in range of the weapon and his pride doesn’t need to be taken down another peg or two.

Jihoon shrugs his shoulders. “The safety is on and I’ve never held a gun before, I just thought it would be, I dunno—cool, to hold it a little. Maybe point it at that rock, pretend it was my boss and threaten it.” He smiles shy and sweet, and Seungcheol laps it up, beaming at him.

“Okay. Sure.” Seungcheol rushes, reaching in and pulling out his semi-automatic, grinning as he watches Jihoon bite his lip against barely contained excitement. He pulls the magazine out and checks the clip, ensures the safety is indeed on, before carefully holding it out, barrel dipped.

The guns sudden yet expected proximity sets Jihoon’s breath stuttering in his chest and he reaches over to poke it, once. “Wow.”


“Hey! Give me time! I’m adjusting.” Jihoon snaps.

It takes Jihoon a few more tentative pokes, and one high pitched scream when Seungcheol yells BAM and pretends the gun has misfired, to get him comfortable enough to pick it up. It’s good progress, even if Jihoon holds the gun like one would hold a very heavy, very dirty diaper. Pinching it, at arms length and eyeballing it dangerously.

Seungcheol has to bite back a peal of genuine laughter at the image Jihoon is painting. “You’re right Jihoon you look so cool right now.” Seungcheol deadpans.

Jihoon looks up sharply. “Shut up! I’m nervous. Is this not how people hold guns in real life?” he jokes back.

“Here, look—let me just.” Seungcheol moves to kneel behind him, readjusting the gun in his hand more firmly and bringing Jihoon’s other hand up, steadying it. “Always keep the gun pointed downrange in case it really does misfire. Hold it in your dominant hand and keep your middle, ring and pinky fingers curled around here, just below the trigger guard.” Seungcheol corrects the placement of his fingers accordingly. “Then use your non-dominant hand to support the weight of the gun.”

“Wow, it’s so big and thick and heavy.” Jihoon awes innocently.

Seungcheol has to repress a multitude of dirty replies and dirtier thoughts. “Are we still talking about the gun right now? Or is there something else on your mind?” He leers. Jihoon snaps his head to glare at him balefully. Seungcheol grins and then a light bulb moment occurs. “Hey, do you—maybe want to try shooting it?”


Seungcheol bites the inside of his cheek, hard, to keep himself from laughing outright. “Jihoon?”

“Yeah?”
“I’m not asking you to kill anyone. I’m just saying you can shoot it, like shoot some cans?” Seungcheol suggests, smiling down at him with the light of a challenge in his eyes.

“Oh—oh yeah. Uhm-okay. But you’ll show me right?” he says, feeling a thrill run up his spine.

“Of course.” Seungcheol stands and offers Jihoon a hand. Dizzily, he takes it, allows himself to be pulled to his feet and led uphill towards the cabin, near some rocks sticking up out of the grass.

Seungcheol sets up some empty cans on a flat rock a little way ahead and steps back behind Jihoon again. Jihoon eyes the setup of targets with resignation; after a moment, he realizes Seungcheol is pressing in close behind him. Seungcheol is one long line of heat and it feels right; like things clicking into place. Then a warm hand clasps him around the hips and pulls him back against Seungcheol’s chest.

Jihoon tilts his head around, meeting Seungcheol’s cool gaze with his own startled gaze back, and smiling before he could help himself. “If you’re planning on teaching me something, you’re going to have to stop pressing up against me like that. It’s really—distracting.”

“Oh?” Seungcheol grins wickedly and slips his hands up Jihoon's sweater, scratching lightly and watching him shudder. “I need to be this close to show you how it’s done Jellybean. I think it will help you focus.” He says, punctuating this with a cant of his hips, his cock rubbing up against Jihoon’s ass, sending sparks up his spine, causing him to moan.

“Cheol, stop teasing.” Jihoon whines, arching his back and using the leverage to roll his hips back in retaliation.

Seungcheol bites his lip and slides his hands up Jihoon’s chest, pressing him tight against his own body before reaching up to help Jihoon align the gun straight.

He never thought in a million years Jihoon would show interest in his gun. Especially not after his previous reaction to it. He’s a little excited to show and share this with him.

But actually teaching Jihoon how to shoot turns out to be an exercise in futility.

“Push the slide down to advance the first shell into the chamber. Spread your legs shoulder width apart and lean forward slightly with your knees bent. Your dominant hand should be straight. Now, align the front and rear sight, so that the target appears in this space. Then exhale and shoot.” Seungcheol instructs, sounding gruff, but his hands are gentle.

“Okay—okay.” Jihoon takes a deep breath in, then releases it slowly, closing one eye and staring down the aim.

“Wait.” Seungcheol signals for him to stop.

“What?” Jihoon panics.

“Why are you closing one eye?” Seungcheol asks.

“Uh—what—shouldn’t I do that, to shoot?” Jihoon defends. Seungcheol is silent for a minute. Then Jihoon hears him make a small noise, and he twists his head around a little and discovers that the bastard is stifling laughter. “What’s so funny you dick? Doesn’t closing your eye help you focus?” He spits.

“No! Closing an eye reduces your depth perception and your field of vision. It’s a semi-automatic Jihoonie, not a sniper rifle.” Seungcheol says, smothering his laugh un成功fully, his shoulders
jerking in amusement, tongue caught visibly between his teeth.

Jihoon swallows deeply. “But—in the movies, the shooter always closes one eye.” He murmurs in a hopeful, tremulous way and Seungcheol shakes his head mock-mournfully.

“Oh—Jellybean. Jellybean, Jellybean, Jellybean.” Seungcheol says consolingly, snorting out a laugh at the roll of Jihoon’s eyes. “Just to be clear, this is a real gun Jihoon. Not a film prop.” He corrects, a tad too condescending for Jihoon’s tastes and Jihoon scowls at him for it.

“Okay—fine. Good to know. You learn something new everyday.” He mutters, shooting Seungcheol a harassed if somewhat amused look before taking position again.

“You’re closing your eye again.” Seungcheol interjects and Jihoon blows air through his nose in frustration.

“I can’t fucking help it! It feels right to close my fucking eye. I see better when I close my fucking eye. Why have all the movies lied to me!”

“Look, I know you’re nervous but this is pretty straight forward. Closing your eye, limits your vision—that’s common sense. Maybe you should wear your glasses—so you can see better.” Seungcheol suggests wryly, then Jihoon glowers at him and he takes a step back, holding his hands up. “Sorry, sorry—take your time Jellybean.”

Jihoon turns his attention to the can in the middle. He takes in a deep breath, exhales and then holds it, before feeling a sharp spike of adrenaline. His finger doesn't shake on the trigger, but his heart is thumping hard and then:

“Pew—pew—pew”

Jihoon lowers the gun slowly, takes in a shaky breath and smiles, a little thrilled and terrified and maybe in the process of suffering a heart attack. “Wow, that was—wow. I feel so alive and energetic! My heartbeat is racing. I feel the blood rushing in my ears! That was so coo—“

“Jihoon?” Seungcheol interrupts his euphoric rambling.

“Yeah?”

“You haven’t fired a shot yet.”

“What?” Jihoon gasps.

“You haven’t fired the gun, you didn’t press the trigger baby. You just shouted out pew, pew, pew.” Seungcheol says flatly.

Jihoon stares at him, agape, for maybe fifteen seconds “I did?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Jihoon mumbles, looking down at the gun with a confused pout. Jihoon is, to his own shock, a little embarrassed. “Are you sure?” he asks, attempting to cover this, and Seungcheol gives him a soft, knowing look, before tipping his head back and roaring with laughier.

“Fuck you! It’s not funny Cheol!” Jihoon huffs, trying to not flush as Seungcheol laughs so hard he chokes and coughs, laughing past the tears that spring to his eyes. “I want to try again!” He demands, striding forward impatiently to take the gun out of a laughing Seungcheol’s grip and bating away the
hand that comes up to assist him. He feels stubborn enough to forget about his nerves.

He does pull the trigger this time and yelps, jerking backwards a little as the gun rebounds into his palm with the force of the ejection. A quick glance up reveals the cans remain untouched, but who knows where the fuck the bullet ended up lodging itself. “It shoved me. The gun pushed me Cheol!” He snaps, looking over his shoulder at Seungcheol accusingly.

“It’s the follow through Jihoonie. Rebound force. It happens. You get used to it after a while with smaller pistols but let me tell you, shotguns and semi-automatics still pack a punch no matter how long you use them.” Seungcheol explains openly. And carelessly.

He's realized his mistake a second too late, but before he could start stammering an excuse, Jihoon raises both eyebrows and offers him a slow, enthralled smile. He looks amused at this extra revelation, instead of terrified.

“You own more than one gun? Do you collect weapons or something Seungcheol?” Jihoon asks.

“I have a small, private collection.” He says, before adding. “I inherited them, from my father.” Seungcheol explains. Seungcheol maintains eye-contact, letting the truth -- or rather, the part of it that served him best just then -- show on his face until the line of Jihoon's shoulders relax.

Jihoon sweeps his eyes over Seungcheol’s face, considering him, taking in the details of his speech against the low-lidded, half-truth in his eyes. “You’ll have to show me your collection some day.” He mutters, handing the gun back to Seungcheol and rubbing his palm where the pressure of the handle lingers. Seungcheol gives him a small smile in return, and is about to slide the safety on when Jihoon stops him. “Wait. It’s your turn to shoot.”

“The cans?” Seungcheol asks.

“Yeah—I wanna see you shoot them.” Jihoon says with an amused quirk of his mouth before crossing his arms and standing back to watch.

Seungcheol nods, then smiles, a dangerous, enigmatic smile, and Jihoon could feel each hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Seungcheol aims the gun and in the blink of an eye releases three shots. The sound of metal dinging ricochets in Jihoon’s ears and when he looks up the three cans have disappeared off the rock.

“Show off.” Jihoon mutters, trying to sound unimpressed and irritated and he might have succeeded if watching Seungcheol handle a gun wasn't so utterly indescribably hot that it makes him dizzy on something other than adrenaline.

They sit down again on the blanket to catch the sunset, Seungcheol’s head pillowed in Jihoon’s lap, watching the horizon bleed as the sun faded in the distance. Seungcheol cranes his neck to look up at Jihoon and he smiles, silent in the still-warm evening.

Fuck, Jihoon was beautiful. In the dim glare of the sunset, with his hair falling over his head in soft curls and his sweater at least two sizes too big. Seungcheol’s knuckles skate across Jihoon's jawline and he slides his hand further up to palm his cheek.

Seungcheol has never seen anything he wants more, anything that looks more pure or safe. He turns his head back towards the sky again, and closes his eyes, wanting, more than anything, to let it go. He basks in the moment, appreciates it. For a while they’re just two men, isolated from the problems of the world, castaways from reality on a blanket on a hill.
Jihoon lifts a hand to cup Seungcheol’s jaw, his thumb stroking soothingly at the flush high on Seungcheol’s cheekbones, before lifting his hand again to run his nimble fingers through Seungcheol’s hair for a few minutes. Seungcheol sighs and keeps his eyes shut, imagining that with each gentle stroke, Jihoon was pulling this life away from him, stripping him of it.

"You’re not a mechanic, are you Seungcheol?" Jihoon says, finally. Seungcheol sighs.

"No," he says, and if his voice rasps a little on the word, so be it. "I’m not."

Chapter End Notes

1) Jihoon's glasses in the Boom Boom MV= adorkable.
2) What even is the perfect date? Does it matter as long as there is Seungcheol? Lol.
3) Jihoon is not as naïve as he appears.....
4) Hope you enjoy the update!
“Thank you for today. I had a lot of fun.” Jihoon tells Seungcheol.

This is after Seungcheol confesses he’s not who he says he is, but doesn’t reveal much else. After they spend a stunned, silent moment sitting beside each other, thigh to thigh on the picnic blanket, thinking things through. It’s after they pack up their picnic, after they’ve worked their way through city evening traffic on Seungcheol’s bike.

Perhaps Seungcheol was expecting Jihoon to scream and hurl things at the resignation written all through him, but Jihoon just climbs off his bike, smiles and thanks Seungcheol for a lovely evening.

For a long time, they stand there and Seungcheol tells himself he should leave, get back on his bike, maybe kiss Jihoon goodbye and drive off, out of his life for good. Give him a chance at having a life—an option he was never given. But Jihoon is standing there too and patient, with a little smile on his face and never once turns to leave.

Seungcheol’s stomach knots up with the anticipation. He swallows, forcing down the dread slicing at his gut like a knot of splintered rope. He breathes in. “Jihoo-“

“Would you like to come in for coffee?” Jihoon interjects, palming his front door keys out of his back pocket.

When Jihoon glances up at Seungcheol, he catches him shaking his head and blinking at him, bewildered as a kitten trying to catch a fly on the wrong side of a window.

Jihoon tilts his head thoughtfully and frowns. “What’s wrong?”

The exasperated look Seungcheol gives him is both well-deserved and incendiary. “I just told you I’m not a mechanic. That I’ve been lying to you for the past few weeks and you invite me in for—for coffee?”

“Yeah—so?“

Seungcheol looks as close to mortified as he can ever come. “So? So! What do you mean so! Have you no self-preservation instinct at all?” He spits, actually sounding angry.

Jihoon shrugs his shoulder affably. “Well, you did just take me on the nicest date I’ve ever been on. And you haven’t exactly told me what you are either. So, why should I jump to conclusions? What do I have to be defensive about?”
Seungcheol braces his hands on his hips, like he’s about to reprimand Jihoon for bad behaviour. “*Because*—because I could be *dangerous!* I could be like—a serial killer, and you would be inviting a serial killer into your house!” He snaps, sounding a little put out, which has a surge of light-headedness coaxing Jihoon’s lips upward as if he’s downed an entire bottle of champagne earlier as opposed to two glasses.

“Are you—a serial killer?” Jihoon asks pulling out his house keys, unable to completely wipe the smirk from his face.

Seungcheol throws his hands in the air. “No!”

“Then—what’s the problem?” Jihoon asks, ignoring the perplexed look on his face as he steps closer.

“I’m just concerned that you’re inviting people—who may or may not be dangerous into your house. It’s concerning behaviour. You should be more careful Jellybean!” Seungcheol’s voice is brusque, firm, like the click of a loaded revolver.

Jihoon allows himself a tight-lipped laugh “Wow—for a serial killer, you’re very considerate. That behaviour makes for a very lousy serial killer I imagine.” Jihoon deadpans,

“I’m not a fucking serial killer!” Seungcheol hisses.

“Okay good. So, about that coffee?”

Seungcheol drops his head into his hands in despair. “Jihoon, what I wanted to say—before you invited a potential axe wielding psycho into your house for coffee—Is that, I can leave you alone if you want, I won’t bother you again, if you wanted that.” Seungcheol says, a hint of gravel in his tone.

Jihoon weighs those words in his head. He knows Seungcheol could track him down at any time. He could push himself on Jihoon and into Jihoon’s life, but he’s giving him a way out. It’s actually rather gentlemanly of him, but Jihoon tries not to approve of that too much, for his own good.

Jihoon swallows and stares and sees too many emotions on the pale canvas of Seungcheol’s face. He steps a little closer. “And why would I want that?”

Seungcheol laughs, dark and delighted. “I’m just giving you the option. I can back off and let you have a nice, stress free life. You deserve something like that. You deserve nice things with nice people who can look after you.”

Jihoon knows he should snort and make an acerbic remark, but he can’t. His whole throat feels parched, like his very vocal cords have been somehow sucked dry. “I don’t need anybody to look after me. But, are you saying you can’t? That you don’t want to?—cause that’s different.”

Seungcheol’s voice is liquid sugar, smooth and decadent, when he whispers “Of course I want to Jellybean.” He steps forward, cups Jihoon’s face and knots his fingers in his hair. “Jihoon, I would take care of you. I just don’t know if you wanted me to.” He murmurs, his words are almost lost in the rhythm of Jihoon’s pulse under his palms.

Jihoon sighs and gives him a decidedly challenging look in the process. “I just invited you in for coffee—you do the maths.”

Seungcheol graces him with a half-smile, his hands still framing Jihoon’s face. “I suck at maths.”
“Fine.” Jihoon whispers, and closes the space between their lips for a brief kiss. “I don’t care what you do. Is that what you want to hear? I don’t give a shit.”

Seungcheol’s hands drop from his face, his fingers slip over the crest of Jihoon’s hip and his lashes sweep in their own kind of kiss against Jihoon’s cheek. “I can’t believe you,” he adds diffidently, “I thought for sure you would break up with me. Tell me to fuck off or call the police.” He murmurs, voice soft, verging on sad.

Jihoon shakes his head, an amused little smirk on his face “What are you so worried about?” he whispers, thumb glancing over the furrow deepening between Seungcheol’s eyebrows like hairline cracks in porcelain.

“I’m worried about ruining your life.” Seungcheol answers truthfully.

He sounds so sincere Jihoon wants to laugh. He contemplates a thousand unrelated replies and responses, before settling on. “Seungcheol, you’re not going to ruin my life, stop being so dramatic.”

Seungcheol frowns in reply and he seems to drop a dozen years off his age when he pouts too. In Jihoon’s private, never-to-be-spoken opinion, it was almost cute. Okay—it was very cute but—shut the fuck up.

Seungcheol’s shoulders slump and his gaze drops to the ground, eye lids drooping, lashes casting subtle shadows on his cheeks. But he doesn’t leave and he doesn’t protest when Jihoon’s hand slips around his wrist.

Jihoon sighs, rolls his eyes even though Seungcheol can’t see it, and answers as flippantly as he can. “Look, as much as you like to think I’m fresh off the boat because I can’t change a car tyre and I’m afraid of guns, I’m not completely innocent and naïve.”

Seungcheol’s pout eases up, ever so slightly and he lets Jihoon take him by the hand and guide him up the steps to his front door.

The minute he unlocks the front door and they step through the threshold, Seungcheol tugs him back gently, spins him around and grasps his shoulders, looks him straight in the eye. “Jellybean—after this, I’m not walking away. If you suddenly get morally conscientious and can’t handle the reality of what I do—I can’t just turn around and leave.” There’s a note to Seungcheol’s voice Jihoon hasn’t heard before. Then he actually takes Jihoon’s hand, lightly enough for Jihoon to pull it away. “You have to understand that. You have to understand that I want to be with you Jihoon. Are you sure about this?”

Jihoon’s eyes follow the line of Seungcheol’s arms down to where his hands are gripping his shoulders. The ridges of Seungcheol’s knuckles are scraped, as if he’s used his fists recently to punch something—or perhaps, someone, hard. Jihoon entertains thoughts of asking Seungcheol how and when. He thinks about asking Seungcheol if he’s ever killed anyone with that gun. But, he doesn’t want to hear. It isn’t important anyway, not with Seungcheol watching him with unblinking eyes and his question suspended delicately between them.

Jihoon can’t begin to reply initially, not in any way that would sound coherent. He’s the smartest one in his family, in his whole fucking town in fact and it’s appalling, how easily Seungcheol can rob him of words. Instead, Jihoon’s hand reaches up to slip around his neck. Seungcheol’s hair is smooth under his fingers, and when he slants their mouths together Seungcheol tastes of champagne and strawberries. He pulls back, a mere hairbreadth away to look up at him through lowered lashes. "Seungcheol," he hears himself saying slowly, "I want to you to stay. I want to be with you too. I am sure.” He finishes, feeling far more certain than he ever thought he would be.
“Now—are you coming in for coffee or are you going to make me cry?”

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“So—don’t you want to know what it is I—do?” Seungcheol asks, taking a sip of his coffee and sitting back on the couch, watching Jihoon as he potters around in the kitchen. It feels so strange to be sitting in Jihoon’s house, drinking coffee in his living room, even now when Jihoon knows he’s been lying. Seungcheol isn’t used to being himself anymore, not in person, not so openly and it chafes at him somehow. Being a criminal isn’t some kind of hobby a person can pick up and set aside as they please. It never has been.

There’s a heavy silence from the kitchen as Jihoon returns to the sitting area. It’s a big couch but he chooses to sit right next to Seungcheol and even rests a hand on his knee. “Well—we’ve established you’re not a serial killer. So, if I cross that off the unwholesome job list, that just leaves:

1) A pimp

2) A drug baron

3) An arms dealer

4) A loan shark

5) A thief

6) A contract killer/hitman
7) A car jacker

8) A Geography teacher.

“A geography teacher!” Seungcheol says, mouth twitching in amusement. The list is strangely accurate, with more creativity than Seungcheol would have thought to give him credit for, and it amuses him that maybe he’s missed something about Jihoon, something he should have seen before. “You bracket that in with the rest of those jobs?”

Letting his hand trail down one thigh, Jihoon chuckles quietly “C’mon Seungcheol—it’s a crummy job! The salary is low, you have to work with kids and let’s face it—that can be pretty thankless even if you were teaching something useful. I mean—who the fuck goes on to study geography anymore?” he laughs.

“What if I told you I was a little bit of all of those things—‘Seungcheol answers, pronouncing each word with a terrible hesitancy, and after ten seconds of silence it was too late to take those words back or pass them off as hypothetical. He tries to ease the silence on Jihoon’s end. “Minus the geography teacher job.”

Jihoon is regarding him languidly, a wry twist to his lips and a heaviness to his eyes. “Honestly—I’d be relieved that you didn’t teach Geography and weren’t going to bore me to death with sedimentary rock formations.”

Seungcheol stares at him, bewildered “Jihoon—I’m being serious.”

“I’m being serious too—I really hate geography.” Jihoon says, stern-faced, like he doesn’t also have a hand on Seungcheol’s knee, fingers absently sketching over the firm muscle underneath.

Something in Seungcheol’s chest loosens and he can swear it feels a little easier to breathe. He smiles almost broadly enough to flash his teeth. “Doesn’t this—bother you?”

Jihoon looks at him, eyes a bit glazed and more than a bit wary. “No.” he replies curtly, then “Well, a little. None of those jobs are exactly—safe. You could get injured, and that bothers me. As for everything else—I guess it’s kinda—“ he trails off.

“Kinda?” Seungcheol prompts.

There’s silence and Seungcheol’s pulse hammers up his throat and then he can hear the smile in

“I can’t explain it—but the whole idea is really interesting.” He adds, and his touch is relentless as it creeps higher over Seungcheol’s thigh. His voice drops into a register that manages to make a friendly discussion sound like something much dirtier, one of many things Jihoon does without seeming to have a clue how it went over.

Then his face turns serious and he snaps his head to the side to look at Seungcheol. “I just want to know one thing Cheol—answer me honestly.”

Seungcheol swallows, prepared for a heavy question with an even heavier answer, “Okay.”

Jihoon takes a deep breath and says, “Are you a smoker?”

“Excuse me?” is the best retort Seungcheol can conjure up on such short notice.

Jihoon narrows his eyes and stares at him a little too intently for comfort. “Smoking is really bad Seungcheol—it’s a deal breaker if I’m being totally honest. It’s bad for your health, it smells, it stains your teeth and your fingernails. It’s just gross. Have you seen that advertisement where the cut the smokers brain and you see all the clots! Smoking reduces your lifespan considerably and you’re also a danger to others because you promote second hand smoke. Did you know—”

Seungcheol smiles as he listens to Jihoon ramble about the dangers of cigarette smoke in detail. Seungcheol’s never had anyone so concerned about his health and well-being before, which made Jihoon’s little ramble all the more treasurable.

He clears his throat and Jihoon stops mid sermon. “I’m happy to say I’m not a smoker Jellybean, but getting shot at by rival gangs can also reduce your lifespan Jihoonie.”

Jihoon’s hooded eyes go wide, shocked and he chokes on a mouthful of coffee. “Oh my god—You’ve been shot at? With bullets? And survived?” He sounds both accusing and amazed.

Seungcheol nods slowly. “Uhh—yeah.”

“Wow,” Jihoon gasps, slumping back in his seat in awe. He is quiet and contemplative for a moment, then he looks up at Seungcheol through his lashes, almost coy if not for the sly little curve to his mouth. “I’m not gonna lie Cheol—that’s still kinda hot.” he says, so glibly that the remark pierces Seungcheol like shrapnel.

A dry wheeze of a laugh twists in Seungcheol chest “Jesus Christ—I have sorely underestimated you, haven’t I Jellybean.”

Jihoon just shrugs and graces Seungcheol with another of those disconcertingly angelic smiles as he waits for his laughter to die down before continuing. “So, the garage—it’s just a front? How come you know so much about cars?”

Seungcheol gulps down the rest of his coffee and sets the mug down. “I’ve been pretending to be a mechanic for a while now and—I pick up everything I know about cars from owning one. You just happen to know very little about cars, so you were easy to fool.”

“So, the gun,” He pauses, looking over at where Seungcheol’s jacket was draped over an armchair. “That’s not for yelling and threatening people who leave bad yelp reviews.”

It’s a rhetorical question; Seungcheol knows this, but he wants to answer and not answer all at once. “No, it’s not for yelp reviews, but I do use it to threaten people.” Which is a true enough statement,
but a weak one. It left to much room for the imagination.

Jihoon only briefly looks at him, but his eyes are like polished stone, still so sharp, they missing nothing. “That’s a lot of information to take in on one day.”

Seungcheol sighs his reply. “Yeah.”

With a dangerous sort of primness, Jihoon sips the last of his coffee, sets the cup down on the table and draws himself up from the couch. “Let’s go to bed.” He says, giving Seungcheol’s a prim little pat on the knee as he walks past him.

Seungcheol blinks at the invitation, he doesn't know whether to be amused or exasperated “Jihoon—you are so weird.” He laughs. “I really wasn’t expecting this reaction from you.”

Then Jihoon sighs and turns and says in a voice too neutral for the words it carries, “Listen—I heard you loud and clear. You’re a big, bad man. I get it. I’m not ignoring it or denying it. I don’t know why but for one reason or another I just—don’t care. I’m super horny now and I want to go to bed Seungcheol, are you going to leave me hanging?”

Jihoon doesn't quite smile this time, but there's a glint of something in his eyes that Seungcheol can't get enough of and his blood hurtles soutward. It might very well be a liability waiting to happen.

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It starts with their clothes being shed in pieces all down the hallway and into the bedroom. Jihoon’s sure he must have contributed to that, but he can’t make head or tail of how since Seungcheol has him pressed against the wall, knocking pictures askew, and he’s being kissed hard and deep. All he can do is let his eyes slide closed and his hands grip at Seungcheol’s shoulders, his hair, anything to pull him closer.

Seungcheol works a hand up his sweater, making a sound of dismay when Jihoon twists away to pull him into the bedroom and then pulls it over his head himself. And then Seungcheol was kissing him again, warm hands on Jihoon’s face, hot tongue flickering into his mouth as Jihoon’s fingers move to catch in the zipper of his jeans.

Seungcheol helps with the rest, then strips Jihoon and lays him down and just stays there, skin on bare skin.

“You make me want things Jihoonie, things I’ve never wanted before.” He whispers, fingers grazing over Jihoon’s ribs, making his breath catch. Jihoon knows there are things for which Seungcheol’s life doesn’t allow, things that they both forget, each time the two of them end up devouring each other.

Jihoon wants to answer to that, wants to say something equally sentimental but Seungcheol is kissing his mouth and stroking his hair and then sliding down to suck his cock, wet and slow, and Jihoon finds himself without words.

Seungcheol is attentive, he always is, knows how to wind Jihoon up from the inside out, and that frightens Jihoon almost as much as it delights him. He strokes Jihoon, slow and lazy, ducking every now and again to let his mouth purse over the head of Jihoon's cock and suck there, short and sharp, until he can feel his hips straining not to just shove. “Cheol—cheol—please—pll-“ Jihoon's gasp is cut short as the wet pressure around his cock ceases and Seungcheol withdraws his mouth.

“So sweet.” Seungcheol says around a sigh. He hushes Jihoon with kisses, presses his lips slowly over his stomach and chest, mapping every part of his body but his cock.
He slides a hand down, skirting Jihoon’s erection but giving a shrewd amount of attention to the inside of one thigh, pinching and toying with the sensitive skin with his nails, leaving it marked red when he is finished. “Fuck—you have the most amazing thighs Jellybean.” Seungcheol murmurs, lips soft against the inside of Jihoon’s knee, hands sliding up to guide his legs further apart. “So soft and smooth.”

Jihoon squirms at the ticklish caress, fingertips teasing his thighs as Seungcheol’s praise teases his sanity. “Hmmaa—Cheol, pick up the pace.” He trembles. He doesn’t mention how ticklish those caresses are but judging by the hum of laughter over his prick, Seungcheol has already figured as much.

“So eager Jihoonie. Can’t I enjoy playing with your thighs a little more?” Those hands urge his legs open still more and Jihoon cedes to them. “So perfect, so soft and squishy.”

“Seung—ahhh-” Jihoon gasps lightly as a swift dart of teeth nip him along his inner thigh, and he twists. “I always pegged you for an ass man Seungcheol. If you love my thighs so much, why don’t you just fuck them instead.”

Instead of the smug smile Jihoon expects, Seungcheol seems almost pensive. “Would you let me?” He asks before his mouth works its way down to the join of Jihoon’s thigh, tongue lapping a slow trail back to the base of his still-damp cock. Jihoon tries not to buck into his mouth when he wraps his sinful lips over the head.

“Would I—let—you what?” Jihoon chokes out around a moan.

Seungcheol pulls back, casts a meditative look over Jihoon’s face, “Would you let me fuck your thighs? I’ve thought about it a lot,” he says, almost a whisper. “I’ve thought about slipping my dick in here and fucking your thighs raw and pink, then coming all over them.”

Jihoon makes a face. “Okay—seriously? My thighs are not that great.”

Seungcheol laughs and ducks to lick him again, the ripple of muscle and shadows across his shoulders is spellbinding. “You’re so modest. Your thighs are amazing. I could totally get off on fucking your pretty marshmallow thighs for hours.” Seungcheol admits. His mouth is still quirked teasingly, but his voice is low, raw. He takes in the head of Jihoon's cock and sucks hard, the sound of it obscenely audible.

Jihoon is breathless by the time he pauses again. “You’d squeeze them together, hard, so it’s nice and tight for me. You’d rub my dick every time it poked through, begging me to fuck you properly, but I wouldn’t stop.”

Jihoon can hear the languor of Seungcheol’s breathing. Slow and easy and uninhibited, like he thinks nothing of saying the things he says, the things that have Jihoon’s free hand fumbling across his chest, pinching a nipple. Jihoon arches, trying to increase contact. “Ahh-Cheol—that sounds like torture.”

Seungcheol looks at him, slipping a hand up to where Jihoon’s thighs are pressing together, sliding his hand in between the flesh and squeezing briefly. “I’d make it up to you.” Then he moves downward and sets to work sucking Jihoon until he’s soaking wet and flushed deep pink.

He’s so sensitive, so on edge and Seungcheol is too much; he won’t be able to last. It doesn’t take more than a minute or two before Jihoon’s swallowing his pride as Seungcheol swallows him down. “Stop—fuck. Not yet. Cheol—what if I let you.” He’s tugging, struggling to pull Seungcheol off his cock. “Hnn—tell me—how would you make it up to me?”
Seungcheol stops then. He sits back a little, rests on his knees as he strokes Jihoon slowly in a tight, slick fist. “I’ll make it good for you Marshmallow. I’d slick your pretty thighs up and slide my dick between them over and over again. I think you’d get off on it—getting your thighs fucked. You’d be, begging me to stop, to fuck you properly. But I wouldn’t, I’d just keep going, nice and slow. I could make it last for ages.” Seungcheol says. His voice is thick, dripping with arousal and insistence and that impossibly erotic control, and Jihoon has to bite back a scream of pure, unrestrained want.

“Well, to make it up to you, I’d ride down onto your sweet little cock and let you fuck me. I usually don’t, but I could.”

The for you is unspoken and Jihoon’s too far gone to be grateful, just as he’s too far gone to take Seungcheol to task for inappropriate use of the words “little cock.”

Seungcheol lifts Jihoon’s legs up, presses his knees together and holds them against the right side of his chest. “Whaddya say Jellybean?” he says in a husky voice.

Jihoon pouts. It isn’t fair, the way Seungcheol can engulf him and devastate him and still have him gagging for more. “Cheol. Fuck—just do it.” He relents.

And then Seungcheol’s face collapses, his expression twisting into something stunned, wondering, like Jihoon’s given him something he didn’t know he could take. “Really? As hard as I want? As long as I want?” Jihoon doesn’t reply to that. He shifts on the bed to grab a pillow and then places it under his hips, angling them upwards.

When he spares a glance at Seungcheol, the other man is looking at him with something akin to wonderment.

Jihoon rolls his eyes. “Are you going to fuck my thighs—or not?”


Jihoon huffs, then moans at the feel of something warm and slick, dribbling in the cleft of his ass. Lube, sliding down in between his inner thigh like the slippery caress of fingers, followed by Seungcheol’s hands smearing it carefully right under his balls.

“Gonna fuck these pretty thighs till you’re so sore Jihoonie, gonna bruise and mess them up.” he practically croons, pushing Jihoon’s thighs together tightly to create a soft, hot place for him to slide into. Jihoon wraps a hand around his own cock and begins to stroke, moaning when his other hand plays across a nipple, twisting and flicking it into hardness.

“So much talking, so little actual fucking.” Jihoon titters but then a full-body shiver wracks his frame at the feel of Seungcheol’s cock head, hot and throbbing between his thighs. And—fuck. It’s insane that this should feel good, but that sensation alone has him ready to believe whatever Seungcheol tells him.

“You look beautiful.” Seungcheol murmurs, rubbing the head of his cock through the slickness between the tight press of skin. “Always wanted to do this.” He says, grinning down at Jihoon. He presses inside before Jihoon can reply, the sticky-hot slide of it stealing the breath from his lungs.

Jihoon braces his weight on his upper back and shoulders and starts jerking himself off as best he can without losing his balance. Seungcheol begins to move, rolling his hips in slow back and forth motions, cock clamped snugly between Jihoon’s creamy thighs. “So—tight—ahh.” He moans, already breathing hard, little puffs of air escaping his slack mouth as he works up to a steady pace,
thrusting shallowly into the slick, hot space between Jihoon’s thighs.

The sear of skin on skin burns between Jihoon’s thighs, and he clamps his legs closer still to feel as much skin as possible. He watches transfixed as the red tip of Seungcheol’s cock slips in and out, stroking and rubbing, and all the while he can hear Seungcheol’s murmuring over the throb of his pulse in his temples. “So lovely, take it for me, just like that…”

Watching Seungcheol lose himself over his thighs is a captivating sight. Soon enough, Jihoon is wet between his thighs with sweat and precome, and Seungcheol is still slowly, relentlessly rutting between his legs, smearing the heat and slick of his cock over the sensitive skin. Seungcheol is moaning unapologetically too. Gasping out harsh-hot sounds each time the head of his cock slips between Jihoon’s thighs, sliding the foreskin back and forth.

“Fuck—Jellybean—you have no idea how good this feels.” Seungcheol groans, in between uttering small half-muffled noises like he’s consuming something extraordinarily delicious.

Jihoon laughs, low and breathless, before wondering dazedly how he had agreed to this. He never thought his thighs were that special, but Seungcheol seems to be enjoying them and Jihoon makes it a personal mission to goad him into madness any way he can. He can’t resist flexing his thigh muscles and rubbing his legs together just to provide more friction, giggling to himself all the while.

“Ahh—yes—ahhh-ahh, yes—do that again.” Seungcheol pleads, and Jihoon rotates his hips, rubbing snugly the cock at his mercy, smiling like he’s just pulled an ace from his sleeve.

It’s weird. He’s not being penetrated but he can feel every thrust, every brush and rub of Seungcheol’s cock on his skin and it burns him up in the most delicious way. Jihoon can feel the sweat trickling down the back of his neck as Seungcheol picks up the pace, thrusts harder, cock sliding between the pressure of firm flesh just as if he were fucking Jihoon for real.

Jihoon’s fist is still stroking tight and merciless around his own cock, his thighs trembling with the effort of staying clenched and he knows he’s uttering sounds that should be embarrassing. But the look of bliss on Seungcheol’s face is worth it.

“Knew you’d get off on this too marshmallow.” Seungcheol grunts, and Jihoon can tell by the roughness of his voice that he isn’t far off. Jihoon himself is already teetering on the edge just from seeing Seungcheol like this.

Jihoon arches and rolls his thighs together for him, he flexes his thigh muscles again just to hear Seungcheol’s breath hitch and the next time the head pokes between Jihoon’s thighs he brushes his thumb over the slit teasingly. “Yeah—so good—hhnn—fuck—pretty, pretty marshmallow.”

“Rougher,” Jihoon groans, and Seungcheol complies, fucking the firm flesh, slipping his cock in the tight enclosure of skin on skin, until Jihoon’s shame falls by the wayside and he’s asking for obscene things. “Want you to come all over me Cheol—please. Cover me in it! Wanna see you come from this baby, I know you can—such a good fuck for me.”

“Good—fuck—yes—yes—yess.” Seungcheol hisses with each thrust forward, mouth lax even as he’s jarring Jihoon up towards the headboard. Jihoon urges him on with strained entreaties—mmore Cheol—more—you’re doing so well—don’t stop.

Seungcheol smothers a whine and grasps the curves of Jihoon’s knees, throws back his head as he orgasms. Jihoon lifts his head off mattress to watch Seungcheol come and it’s—just—there is no quantifying it, how hot it is. Seungcheol’s body goes rigid, his cock throbs between Jihoon’s thighs, spurting hot and thick come over Jihoon’s stomach and chest.
“Good boy Cheollie.” Jihoon moans in satisfaction, gathering the droplets leaking over his prick in his palm to ease the slick of his own jerking motions.

“Fuck!” Seungcheol grunts, pulling his cock free with the slight wet sound of slick skin.

Jihoon’s so close now he just wants to finish any way he can, but Seungcheol spreads his legs and—just looks at him. Jihoon can only imagine the picture he makes, fresh come on his skin, slick thighs fallen open, cock red and rigid in his fist. Seungcheol is flushed all down his neck and chest, sweat gleaming over his skin. “You sure that’s how you want to finish?”

“No—but I’m so close.” Jihoon whimpers, no sense holding back now, fisting his own cock greedy and desperate. Seungcheol’s eyes flutter and he leans down to flick his tongue over the pools of come on Jihoon’s chest, hungry for it.

Jihoon moans at the feel of Seungcheol’s hot, flat tongue working over his chest and stomach, then up higher, soothing the red skin of his thighs. “Show me how you want it,” directs Seungcheol, and he pushes Jihoon’s hand away from his cock, wraps his own fingers around it, slows the pace.

“Wanted you to ride me—like you promised.” Jihoon pants, thrusting up into his fist.

Seungcheol’s lips curl in a faint smile, cock still mostly erect even though he’s just come. He nods, then leans down and kisses Jihoon, a harsh, quick, claiming thing. Jihoon keens when he pulls away—he can’t help himself.

Seungcheol moves to straddle him, spreading his legs open and bracing his weight on his knees. “You’ll take it easy on me, right Jellybean?” He jokes, grinning at Jihoon even as he sucks in a breath of anticipation as Jihoon reaches for the lube, flips it open and coats his fingers. “I’ve never done this before,” Seungcheol admits, sounding honestly at a loss.

"That’s tragic Cheol. With an ass as fine as yours, you’re denying the world a gift by topping all the time." Jihoon murmurs watching as Seungcheol’s mouth drops, half open as a wet fingertip presses at him without entering.

Seungcheol flushes. Everywhere. “I guess—I never trusted anyone enough to let them.” Jihoon thinks it’s the most vulnerable and revealing thing he’s shared with him yet. And then, before he can start having second thoughts, Jihoon slides one lube-slick finger into him.

Seungcheol hisses when it penetrates him, his body contracting heatedly around it. “Ohhh” he murmurs, drawing the word out to indecent lengths as Jihoon works the digit in carefully. Then Seungcheol is gasping, groaning, swearing softly as Jihoon slips that finger in a little deeper, starts fucking him leisurely with it. “Hmmm.” He whimpers and clenches, working himself down onto the intruding digit with a soft little sound that has Jihoon's eyes crossing.

Jihoon licks his lips hungrily as he watches Seungcheol writhe above him. Seungcheol with legs spread, straddling his thighs, his cock in one loosely curled hand is as striking as Seungcheol dressed head to toe in black leather straddling a motorcycle. Jihoon can see the shift of muscle underneath his skin as he tenses, the strain around his eyes as he encourages himself to relax and the liquid rhythm of each breath as it travels through his body.

All of these images combine into a truly fascinating sight, and Jihoon is sure he can get lost in it, just stay there and stare his fill.

Jihoon adds a second finger, stretching him open skilful, sure, and just grazing up along that spot that he knows makes the edges of his vision go fuzzy. "That’s—ah—that’s good," Seungcheol gasps, a
bit of a waver in his words, his torso arcing in a single long curve of pleasure as Jihoon crooks slender fingers inside him.

Seungcheol’s eyes flutter shut, but his voice is brittle-eager as he urges Jihoon to add another finger, stretching him open still more until he is cursing and whining and slanting his mouth over Jihoon’s so desperately, Jihoon could have come from that alone.

They’re both impatient and gasping for it when Seungcheol sits back on his heels and slicks Jihoon’s cock up quickly.

“Are you ready?” Jihoon tries to sound nonchalant, never mind that he hasn’t ever done this before either, and Seungcheol is hovering over his cock, looking extremely pornographic each time he licks his lips nervously.

“Yeah, I’m a little nervous but—you’ve got such a pretty little cock jellybean, I want to ride it.” Seungcheol laughs. There are so many rebuttals Jihoon could make to that, but then Seungcheol reaches behind himself and guides Jihoon’s cock to his hole and Jihoon can’t do anything but moan and push into him like he’s been dying for it.

Jihoon watches, with attentive eyes and wet-parted lips, as Seungcheol sinks down on him, biting hard at the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out. And, fuck, Seungcheol is hot and wet and perfect inside, back curving deliciously as he takes him in. He doesn’t ride all the way down at first, teasing whether he knows it or not, thighs taut from the strain as Jihoon’s cock nudges and presses in further. Jihoon reaches up to clasp his hips tightly, lower body riding forward in spite of himself.

Jihoon wants to reverse their positions, but by having Seungcheol straddle him and set the pace that way, he gets a spectacular view of his cock disappearing into Seungcheol’s body, little by little. No barrier, nothing but heat enclosing him.

Then Seungcheol is rolling his hips, mouth red-open-wanton, lashes fluttering and hair tousled to just-fucked perfection even though they’ve only just begun. “Ahh—fuck.” He moans, sounding awed as he lifts himself off Jihoon’s cock till only the tip remains inside.

“How do you feel Cheol?” Jihoon asks, after giving a vicious little shove up into him and hearing Seungcheol’s breath hitch wildly. There is something so, so gratifying about the way Seungcheol’s voice catches in his throat and Jihoon repeats the motion, more slowly this time, watching all the while, acutely aware that he’s holding back to the point of aching. “Tell me Cheol, does it feel good?”

Seungcheol’s eyes are squeezed shut, ass rolling down into the cradle of Jihoon’s hips, and the sounds coming from him are beautifully filthy. His eyes only open for the briefest of moments, glittering and black. “Fuck Jihoon—s’good.” He moans, curving his back and spreading his legs even as his muscles jump in resistance.

“Oh—shit.” Jihoon groans, and he pushes himself all the way into Seungcheol again, hard and bare and filling him in one long smooth stroke. He tilts his head back and shudders as Seungcheol slides up and back down his cock, humming his enjoyment. “That’s it,” Jihoon coaxes mildly, gentling him through it. “God, you’re amazing, so hot, move for me, fuck yourself for me, that’s it, good boy, keep going. Fuck.”

"Jihoonie," Seungcheol breathes, and then, "Hmm—yes—fuckaah." Jihoon watches through half-lidded eyes as Seungcheol sinks down on his cock over and over, meeting his thrusts. Seungcheol is hard again, cock leaking beads of wetness against Jihoon’s stomach. Jihoon wraps a hand around it, delighting in the way it flushes and drips, delighting even more in the way Seungcheol’s hips buck
thoughtlessly at the sensation, throat working around wet little sounds that would have been pleas if there had been any words in them.

“Hnnnn,” Seungcheol rumbles, riding down on his cock faster, breath coming in short, heady gasps. “gonna come.” He moans.

Jihoon presses his free hand to the flat of Seungcheol’s back, pushes him down to ride each thrust of his body. “Yeah, let me see you,” Jihoon breaths, thumbing the head of Seungcheol’s cock, fingertip pressing into the slit and Seungcheol arches against him and throws his head back, sobbing his ecstasy to the ceiling as he shivers and spills over Jihoon’s hand in a drawn out moan.

Even though he’s come twice, Seungcheol continues to ride Jihoon, trembling and overstimulated as he rolls his hips down on his shaft. His lips are bitten red raw, wetness and arousal sheening his eyes. It makes him look used, even more vulnerable, and Jihoon shouldn’t find that as captivating as he does, but he’s always been attracted to things unsuitable for polite company.

“So close Cheollie—you’re doing so well.” Jihoon gasps, and levers himself up to catch a nipple in his mouth. Seungcheol shudders against him as he bites and sucks it teasingly. He lays back against the sheets after a few moments and Seungcheol leans down, presses his hands into the mattress space above Jihoon’s shoulders and grinds himself down onto him. Seungcheol’s hair comes loose from its slicked back position, falling forward into his face, thick and black, like a corrupted halo, and Jihoon catches it and pulls him into a kiss.

Seungcheol’s mouth is almost fever-hot on Jihoon’s, tongue pressing inside over and over as he rides it out. Each guttural-desperate sob he utters gets swallowed up by Jihoon’s mouth before having a chance to be properly voiced.

The tension building in Jihoon’s his gut is suddenly too much and it isn’t long before he is shuddering, grunting wordlessly as he fucks up into the pert curve of Seungcheol’s ass. And Seungcheol is tight and responsive around his cock, milking him, hips undulating as he rides out Jihoon’s orgasm.

Jihoon has no concept of how long it takes for him to start seeing straight again. None at all.

Seungcheol’s hand is broad and cool against the skin of his back as he rolls him over, heavy in a sleepy sort of way. Almost possessive, almost domestic. Jihoon dozes in spite of himself and when he wakes up Seungcheol is stroking along his side, innocently.

It would be alarming how well someone like Seungcheol can do innocent, if Jihoon were easily alarmed. “That was awesome Jellybean.” Seungcheol’s words ease against his ear with the surety of a long, slow kiss.”

“Yeah, it sure was.” Jihoon smiles, sticky and sprawled and blissfully spent. “Are you okay? Are you sore?” he asks.

Seungcheol smiles warmly at him and rolls on his back. “I’m a little sore, but it’s all good. Your cock may look small but it doesn’t feel small.” Seungcheol finally teases, sliding their hands together on the ruined bedspread.

Jihoon’s answering hum is non-committal. He makes a mental note that as soon as he's capable of doing anything but breathing, he’s going to slap Seungcheol.
1) Thigh sex!
2) Thigh sex!
3) I love thigh sex.
Hope you enjoyed the update :)
Woah, I just realised most of this was smut XD
Setting an example

Chapter Summary

Seungcheol sets many examples.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I was kinda happy you suggested we stay at yours tonight.” Jihoon whispers.

Seungcheol props himself up on one elbow so he can see Jihoon's face. “Oh yeah?—why’s that?” He smiles. There is a certain amount of whimsical marvel present in his expression. Jihoon giggles.

“Cause, I’ve been thinking about trying something out, and we kinda need to be here to do it properly and safely.” Jihoon says, tucking in close along Seungcheol's side, fingers stroking lazily over his ribs.

Seungcheol absorbs the significance of that, drawing Jihoon close enough to brush a thumb lightly over his lips. Jihoon catches the tip of Seungcheol's thumb playfully between his teeth, soothes the spot with a flick of the tongue, then lays a kiss on the palm of Seungcheol's hand. “It’s kind of a kink I have, something I’ve been thinking about—a lot.”

The grin on Seungcheol’s face is breath-taking. “Oh yeah?!” He nods, starting to sound more excited by the minute. “Is it frowned upon, taboo? Is it—naughty?” Seungcheol asks, vaguely, sliding his thumb across Jihoon’s neck.

“Hmmmm—.” Jihoon hums, trying not to laugh as he pulls away. Seungcheol tugs him closer again, pinning him against the mattress. Jihoon feels a shiver of anticipation as Seungcheol places slow deliberate kisses all the way up his arm, across his collarbone, finally settling near his ear. Jihoon tips his head back. He let his eyes drift shut, feeling all of Seungcheol’s heat bleed into him sweetly. Seungcheol slides their mouths together wetly, rolling so that Jihoon is caged between his arms and pressing down over him hot and slick and velvety as Seungcheol’s mouth slides to his neck and then back to his lips, smiling into the kiss when Jihoon gasps little breaths.

“Naughty marshmallow.” Seungcheol says, voice husky, and Jihoon can feel his cheeks pink.

“I suppose it depends how you look at it. But, it could be considered naughty—ish.” Jihoon offers mysteriously.

“Ohohohoh—alright stop beating around the bush and tell me.” Seungcheol chuckles, drawing the tip of his nose up the line of Jihoon’s neck. Something in his face is wistful, and Jihoon wonders if he’ll always feel like an impressionable young boy under Seungcheol's world-worn eyes.

“I—uhmm okay but, don’t laugh.” Jihoon murmurs, swallowing thickly so he won’t sound so breathless. “But—I was hoping we could-

*BUZZ* Jihoon’s is interrupted mid revelation by the doorbell ringing.

“Dammit!” He huffs, flopping his head back against the pillows.
“Woah—hey, don’t let that stop you. C’mon—tell me!” Seungcheol urges, not making a move to stand.

*BUZZZZ* The doorbell rings again, with more urgency this time

Jihoon rolls his eyes. “Cheol, I can’t. Just, go answer the door first.”

“No. You answer it, I’ll wait here.” Seungcheol says, rolling off and back to his side of the bed.

*BUZZ*

Jihoon snorts, then immediately sobers up. “What? This is your house you moron—why can’t you answer it?”

“Because I have a boner. Wouldn’t look good if I answered my own front door with a raging boner Jellybean.”

“I have a boner too!” Jihoon hisses.

*BUZZ*

“Maybe, but my boner is a lot bigger than yours. Your cute little boner is easy to conceal. Mine is HUGE! Astronauts say they can see the ‘Great Wall of China’ from space, but that’s not true. It’s not the ‘Great Wall of China’ they’re seeing—it’s my boner.”

*BUZZ*

Jihoon scowls at Seungcheol’s smile, then he punches him lightly in the arm. “You know what—you’re full of crap and lazy. I’ll answer your fucking front door and punch however is ringing that doorbell straight in the face!” Jihoon huffs. He throws the bed sheets off, gets up, grabs one of Seungcheol’s shirts of the floor and slips it on.

“Whoever it is—tell them I’m sleeping okay?” Seungcheol calls out to his retreating form.

Jihoon stomps down the corridor, grits his teeth as the doorbell rings again, slips the chain on the door and it opens to a scowling, unfamiliar face.

“About damn time Seung—oh!” A tall, well suited man with shoulder length dark hair stands with his finger hovering over the doorbell. He looks Jihoon over from top to bottom. Slowly. With an emphasis on bottom. So what if he’s just wearing one of Seungcheol’s shirts of the floor and slips it on.

“Whoever it is—tell them I’m sleeping okay?” Seungcheol calls out to his retreating form.

Jihoon stomps down the corridor, grits his teeth as the doorbell rings again, slips the chain on the door and it opens to a scowling, unfamiliar face.

“You ring the doorbell endlessly, late into the night, yet you have nothing to say when somebody answers it?” Jihoon states, falsely cheerful, obstructing the open doorway with his body, “I seriously hope you didn’t bother us to whistle and leer.”

The man looks angrily perplexed, like he wasn’t expecting Jihoon to be so snappy. He manages to swallow before he starts to laugh. “I wasn’t expecting to be greeted by you, now was I. I was expecting Seungcheol. Is he awake?” The man questions, not looking too pleased.

Jihoon crosses his arms defiantly. “I’m answering the door—what do you think?”
With a disbelieving huff, the man pushes past Jihoon into the hallway. “Well, wake him up then. I need to speak to him about some—very urgent business.” He states, enunciating each word as if Jihoon was mentally deficient.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath and reminding himself that Seungcheol probably deals with some very unsavoury characters in his line of work, Jihoon shuts the door behind him and leans back against it. “And—who should I say is waking him at—ten thirty at night?” Jihoon inflects, highlighting the inappropriate visiting hour.

“Oh—you’re right, how rude of me! I didn’t introduce myself.” The man holds his hand out to Jihoon. “Yoon Jeonghan, I’m Seungcheol’s right hand man.” Jeonghan says with such cock-sureness, Jihoon could’ve punched him for it.

When Jihoon doesn’t shakes his hand, he turns away from him, putting his hands on his hips, deliberately letting his side arm come into view.

Jihoon doesn’t have an answer which doesn’t make him look ridiculous and petty. So he says what comes naturally to him—a taunt. “Right hand man? Really? Funny, he never mentioned you.”

Jeonghan sputters and spins around. “Our business is private, not everyone is privy to the finer details. And Seungcheol is a private man, he never mentioned you either at first.”

Jihoon purses his lips thoughtfully. “Oh—I’m—” he begins to say but Jeonghan raises a hand to stop him.

“Don’t bother. I know who you are now. It’s my business to know everything about the important people in Seungcheol’s life.” Jeonghan says. At that moment, Jihoon is sure Jeonghan is looking at him fondly, as if he genuinely likes him, but then he ruins it by saying.

“You’re Lee Jihoon—his twink.” Jeonghan answers, ginning with his teeth—sharp and wolf-like.

There are strange noises coming from the living room. Seungcheol’s waiting patiently for Jihoon to reappear in the doorway but the minutes tick by and the noises in the living room are getting hard to ignore. He slides out of bed and pulls on some sweats, willing away his erection with some unpleasant thoughts.

*Big bob in a bikini—Big bob in a bikini—Big bob in a bikini—huh—it worked.*

He struts down the corridor and into the living room and freezes. He looks around suspiciously. He’s pretty sure this is his house, he’s pretty sure he is wide awake. But the scene that’s presently unfolding in the room is making him doubt his state of consciousness.

Surely that can’t be Jihoon and Jeonghan—wrestling on his living room floor?

Seungcheol can feel his eyebrows lifting in shock. “What the *fuck*?” he gasps bemusedly. Jeonghan is a trained killer—he’s been in the business for a while. Yet, here he is getting his ass handed to him by a kid who doesn’t look like he should be able to stand up in a strong wind, let alone incapacitate someone who outweighs him by two stone.

“How the *fuck*!” Jihoon hollers.

“AHHHHHHH!” Jeonghan squeals.
Seungcheol tries to maintain a placid look. There’s nothing unusual there. If he appears too concerned it will only serve to encourage exactly this kind of melodrama. “Now—now.” He tuts.

“SAY YOU’RE SORRY YOU SHIT!” Jihoon yells, yanking on Jeonghan’s hair with both hands, trying to kick him where it matters with his free leg.

“AHHHH! NEVER, YOU TWINK!” Jeonghan screams as his eyes water, trying to dislodge Jihoon’s grip whilst trying to roll them over at the same time.

Seungcheol throws his hands in the air, tries to look outraged, but the laughter is threatening to take over his face, “C’mon you guys—let’s talk it out.” He says, glancing between them with a sort of wry twist to his mouth.

Jihoon succeeds in yanking a clump of Jeonghan’s hair out with brute force. He examines the fistful of hair winningly, like a kid on Christmas morning. “Ha! Now apologize before I rip some more out —then you won’t have any hair left to flick about!”

Jeonghan pats the top of his scalp, feeling around the small balding patch. “My—hair—my precious—AHHHHHHHHH!” He screams, hurling himself at Jihoon, trying to skin his teeth in Jihoon’s arm.

“ENOUGH!” Seungcheol yells, stooping down to separate the two men flailing on the floor. He yanks them apart, holding them arms width wide by the scruff of their necks. There’s an ow, goddamnit and furious glaring before things settle again.

“So—I’m so thrilled you guys are getting along and all, but, is this how you want to conduct yourselves? Seriously?” Seungcheol asks, sarcastically, though his dimples ruin the attempt at chastisement.

“He punched me!” Jeonghan yells at the same time Jihoon spits “He called me a twink!”

Seungcheol cuts them off with a look. “One person at a time. Jeonghan, what’s your side of the story?”

While Jihoon’s jaw drops in outrage, Jeonghan looks at Seungcheol. “This twink punched me in the face and pulled my hair out.”

“Jeonghan, what did I tell you about using that word?” Seungcheol asks, raising a reprimanding brow. Jeonghan's known for many things—his skill with information retrieval, his lethal aim, his suits—but politeness isn’t one of them.

“I only punched him after he called me a twink! I was defending myself! And why does he get to explain himself first!” Jihoon snaps.

Seungcheol sighs, eyeing the smouldering angry ball of a man. “Jihoo—“

“Because, I’m his right hand man!” Jeonghan interjects, just looking smug, like he’s had his point proven.

Jihoon sticks his tongue out at him and Jeonghan mirrors the gesture. “His right hand—you mean his jerking off hand? His jerk off man? That’s what you are! A jerk off!” Jihoon hisses, staring with a dangerous glint in his eyes. His hands are clenched into tight fists that make his knuckles stand out snowy white.

Jeonghan throws his head back and laughs, short and sharp. “Maybe I do jerk him off! Are you jealous?” He sneers, a challenge in his tone.
Jihoon swallows in surprise, but his hesitation is only slight before he talks back, “What’s there to be jealous off? In the scheme of things, what’s a reach around between friends? Nothing! I regularly jerk all my friends off! There is nothing remotely intimate about it.” Jihoon dismisses. His tone pretends nonchalance, but Seungcheol knows him better than that, and it's almost a relief to realize it. He can see the tension in the set of Jihoon’s shoulders; he's grating his back teeth.

Seungcheol side-eyes him, letting out an indignant sound. “Jeonghan has never jerked me off Jihoon—and I really hope you don-“ he begins to berate before Jihoon continues over him.

“Maybe you jerk him off, but I own his ass—that’s intimacy right there. Have you ever been his ass man? No—I didn’t think so!” Jihoon defends with a pleased little smile, he’s sure the privilege of being Seungcheol’s ass man is singularly his own.

Jeonghan looks vaguely insulted “I could own his ass if I wanted! But I’ve never been interested. Maybe I should though—maybe I will be his ass man, just to prove my point.”

Jihoon’s jaw drops briefly, it’s the only glimpse of shock he allows before his anger takes over, “STAY AWAY FROM HIS ASS!” He yells, trying to lunge forward, millimetres away from throttling Jeonghan with his petite bare hands.

“Oh—why should I? Are you feeling insecure?! Jeonghan taunts.

Jihoon’s face looks angry and then stricken all in the space of a moment, “No!”

“This has got to be the weirdest fight I’ve ever been indirectly involved in.” Seungcheol laughs, then shuts up at the simultaneous glares he receives from Jihoon and Jeonghan. It's clear from the look on their faces that humour will not be appreciated. But this is Seungcheol’s house for fucks sake.

“That’s enough!” Seungcheol snaps, yanking them further apart. “This ends now, it’s the middle of the night! Somebody is going to call the cops and god knows I don’t need that right now. You’re both grown men, you should be embarrassed.” He reprimands so firmly, without a trace of sarcasm or tease that they both stiffen.

Jeonghan has the good grace to look guilty, whereas Jihoon casts his eyes down, almost sheepish. It might be endearing if it wasn't so blatantly fake. Seungcheol sends him a warning - but amused - look.

“What the fuck are you doing here anyway Hannie?” Seungcheol sighs.

Jeonghan opens his mouth to speak. But Jihoon makes an annoyed sound in the back of his throat. “Hannie?” he guffaws. “Did you give him a nickname?” He jerks his head towards Jeonghan.

Seungcheol pinches the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. “We all call him that—‘Jeonghan’ can be a mouthful sometimes.”

Jeonghan, who’s obviously suicidal or numbly fearless, mutters something obscene under his breath that Seungcheol doesn’t quite catch.

Jihoon hears it however, and pelts him with a cushion. Jeonghan doesn’t duck fast enough so it hits him on the side of the head, mussing up his hair further. “Speak up bitch!” Jihoon hisses, face twisting into a sneer.

Jeonghan smiles benignly. “I said—I get a nickname because we’re super best friends! That’s how close we are!” He stage-whispers the last sentence to Jihoon.
Jihoon’s face crumples like he’d been physically struck. “Oh—fuck you, I get a nickname too, I got two nicknames in fact. I’m a marshmallow jellybean!”

Seungcheol shakes his head, glancing between the pair of them. “Do you guys hear your—"

“Jellybean—well, golly!” Jeonghan interrupts. “That’s actually a really fitting nickname. I can see why Cheol has blessed you with it. You do know what a Jellybean is shaped like, don’t you?”

Jihoon’s brows crease in confusion and he shakes his head, prompting a surprised laugh from Jeonghan. “A twink!” Jeonghan whispers, although it’s less a whisper and more a normal-volumed response in a hushed voice, so it carries to where Jihoon is standing anyway and he shoots Jeonghan a feral look.

Jihoon launches himself at Jeonghan, grabbing a fistful of his suit jacket and throwing carefully judged punches. “Aaaaarrggghhh!—LET ME AT HIM!”

Jeonghan’s hand has found its way to the back of Jihoon’s hair and he tugs on it viciously. “HOW DO YOU LIKE HAVING YOUR HAIR PULLED TWINK!” They drop to the floor, kicking and writhing with further abandon.

“That’s it.” Seungcheol returns to the bedroom, seemingly giving up on restraining the squabbling pair. They are too busy trying to bite each other to notice him re-emerge with a number of belts.

“I’m obviously going to have to teach you both some fucking restraint!” Seungcheol grunts, eyes on them and tired of all this bullshit.

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It was a monumental feat, but Seungcheol manages it somehow. Sitting back at the breakfast bar eyeing his handiwork, he casually flips through a magazine and sips his beer.

There is a gentle rap on the door ten minutes later, Mingyu walks in, a goofy grin on his face telling of his amusement at the sight that greets him. He steps around the figures on the floor as he makes his way towards the breakfast bar and Seungcheol. “Hey—uhmm boss?” he says, and Seungcheol lifts an inquisitive eyebrow in response.

“What’s up Mingyu?” Seungcheol says, turning away from his magazine to look at the man sitting across from him.

“Why are Hannie and your boyfriend tied up on the living room floor?” Mingyu asks, lowering his voice conspiringly.

“Because I tied them up.” Seungcheol offers miserably, but his voice has dropped and his mouth seems to have formed a perpetual half-amused smile.

“Oh—okay.” Mingyu accepts this answer. After an exaggerated glance around, as if he was telling some terrible secret no one in the room was fit to hear, Mingyu leans close. “What are we going to do about the Masqueraders?”
Seungcheol jerks his head up roughly, which makes his neck crack. “What about them?” he asks, leaning back with a suspicious look.

Mingyu blinks and shakes his head. “Did Jeonghan not tell you? I thought that’s why he was here?”

“No—he hasn’t said anything.” Seungcheol says, pursing his lips. “I suppose that’s why he came here originally, but then they started fighting and we haven’t had a chance to talk.”

“Oh—well, Vernon was on patrol with one of the rookies when he spotted a Masqueraders blockade entering town. He tailed it, thinking it was just driving through but they parked outside a house and they’re still there. Vernon thinks they’re conducting business.”

Seungcheol flexes his jaw muscles. “What makes Vernon so sure they were Masqueraders?”

“He recognized a few of the guys in the convoy from the ambush a while back. While he was tailing them, he ran their registrations. Also, Masqueraders aren’t exactly—subtle, they have all those gang symbols spray painted on their property—it’s a dead giveaway.”

Seungcheol sits back, bobbing his head thoughtfully. “Yeah, perhaps,” he says, not sounding entirely convinced. He shakes his head, turning back to Mingyu again.

“And why does Vernon think they’re conducting business? Maybe they’re just—visiting their grandma or out shopping?”

Mingyu tilts his head thoughtfully, considering that option for a moment. “He’s been stationed outside the Villa for the last 2 hours—he’s pretty sure. Seriously though, why else would they be here?”

It doesn’t make much sense to Seungcheol, but he relaxes from where he’s tensed up in his seat, nodding. He releases a deep sigh. The thing about Seungcheol is that he doesn’t get mad, he gets even. And maybe that’s the most clichéd line in the book, but it’s the truth nonetheless. “Alright—gather the team.”

“What about Hannie?”

Seungcheol sighs, moving around the bar to stand over the two figures restrained with belts on the floor. “If I untie both of you, are you going to shake hands and make up? Or should I give you guys some more time to reflect?” He reasons with the silent duo.

It’s unclear whether he’s being sarcastic or not, so Jihoon and Jeonghan both shake their heads, muffling their agreement into their gags. He indicates for Mingyu to help him unbuckle Jeonghan while he unbuckles Jihoon’s arms and legs, pulling out the cloth from his mouth.

He grips both of them by the shoulders lightly, tilting them to face each other. “Alright—Jeonghan—don’t you have something you’d like to say to Jihoon?”

Jeonghan is busy dusting off his rumpled suit jacket, but he stands straight and brushes the hair from his face. “I’m sorry I called you a twink.” Jeonghan says with enough of a grin to make it unconvincing.

Seungcheol nods and glances hopefully at Jihoon who inclines his head as if to say, what? Seungcheol prompts him with a quirk of his brows and an encouraging lilt of his head.

Seungcheol sighs, it’s the best he’s going to get.

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There’s a growing sense of anticipation in the air, the smell of the gnashing sea before the sky darkens. It’s like a roll of thunderclouds, a sharp flash of lighting before a quaking storm.

It’s the first gang-related mission Seungcheol’s been directly involved in a while. He’s in the back seat of Vernon’s car, binoculars in hand, looking out of the windscreen through the gap between the front seats. He can’t for the life of him think of why another gang would be stupid enough to drive into his territory and conduct business so brazenly.

There is a group of Masqueraders posted outside the villa with their souped-up vehicles, talking and laughing. Masqueraders are sloppy and careless when attacking, but even then, taking down what looks to be at least twenty of them is no easy feat.

“So oo oo,” Mingyu says slowly. “Any ideas?”

Vernon gestures to the lit-up villa. “We tailed their convoy here a few hours ago. They seem to be waiting for someone. They’re still in there, nobody in or out for the past hour.” He explains from his seat in the front of the vehicle parked a safe distance away from the Villa’s entrance.

“I can’t believe they are this stupid.” Jeonghan wrestles the binoculars away from Seungcheol, earning a light cuff to the head. “We have to set an example, show them how we do business on our turf.” Jeonghan suggests, “Here’s what I think we should do-“

Seungcheol tunes him out, humming and hawing in the appropriate pauses.

Setting an example, he thinks. Perhaps not such a bad idea.

His phone vibrates in his pocket and he quickly fishes it out. It’s a message from Jihoon.

MeanJellybean: I don’t know what you’re doing. But please be careful.

Seungcheol only has time to smile at the message in his inbox, but doesn’t have time to reply before the next shitstorm hits, in the form of an SUV. It pulls up to the gate and is allowed entry almost immediately. He grabs the binoculars back from Jeonghan and examines it.

There’s something off about this. The SUV is heavily modified, for one, the windows entirely tinted black. It’s also too clean for a Masqueraders get up. They’re base is isolated in the desert, where the constant kick up of dirt and dust from wheels means that a vehicle’s paint job is always scuffed and muddied.

It’s a long second before the SUV door swings open. A security guard emerges from the car, head turning swiftly as he scans the area. He seems to be satisfied with what he sees, and turns back to nod at whoever it is that’s waiting inside the car.

The figure that steps out is mostly obscured by the shadows, but Seungcheol can clearly see dress shoes on the ground and a dark grey suit. Also, not typical Masqueraders attire.

The guy with the dark grey suit is doing a good job of keeping his face in the shadows, so Seungcheol can’t even get a decent look at his face. He watches as a beefy man emerges from the house to greet the newcomer, shaking his hand, conversing, before they both head towards the front door of the house and disappear inside.
Seungcheol drops the binoculars on the seat. “Something shady is definitely going on.”

“And on our turf! Without permission! The disrespect!” Jeonghan reiterates.

“Alright— Jun, Hoshi, Mingyu, on me. The rest of you will hold back.” Seungcheol orders.

Before Jeonghan can articulate the reservations that are written all over his face, Seungcheol is communicating with the rest of the crew through his ear piece. When he relays his orders to the others he turns to the occupants of the car and startles, suddenly the sole focus of three pairs of eyes. “What?” He snaps.

Vernon’s gaze is a palpable weight on him. “They’ve got heavy cover on the ground boss. We don’t know how many of them are armed, we should assume all of them are. We can go in with you.” Vernon says, monotone.

Seungcheol shakes his head. “Something doesn’t feel right. I don’t want us all going in.” He states. He catches a glimpse of Jeonghan out of the corner of his eye, incredulity written all over his face, mouth opening to speak. Seungcheol shoots him a hard look, one he can’t miss. “The rest of you will hold back.” He repeats sternly, already moving around to the back of the car and opening the trunk to assess his weapon options.

He looks for anything he can conceal under his leather jacket, nothing too bulky that requires both hands to control. He settles for a holstered Browning, dropping it low around his waist.

…………………………

They cross the road in groups of two, quickly sliding into the safe blanket of darkness around the outskirts of the property. When they reach the wall of the villa, Mingyu tries the gate. It is locked, of course. Nobody would have been stupid enough to leave it open, though; the wall can be scaled easily. After silently gesturing for Mingyu and Jun to follow his lead, Seungcheol boosts himself up to grasp the ledge, pulling his body up and swinging his legs over the edge. He drops down to the gravel silently.

“No movement—you’re clear.” Vernon’s voice speaks in his ear.

Seungcheol slips across the side of the wall, using the surrounding shrubbery to shield his advance. He stops to check his teams position, a hand coming up to brush reassuringly against the Browning tucked in its holster, before making a skilful dash to the side of the building.

Seungcheol takes a few steps back and looks. All the lights in the house are on, and he can’t see anyone in the reception area. He gestures for Mingyu and Jun to take the other side of the house as he creeps around to the back door, keeping low, away from the windows. It was probably nothing spectacular—but on the off-chance something is going on and they’re packing fire-power, he doesn’t want to go through the front door.

When he gets to the back stoop, he puts a hand on his gun—doesn’t draw it, it wouldn’t do to overreact—and opens the door slowly, cautiously.

There is nobody inside. He glances around the kitchen only to see five or so laptops on the kitchen table, wires haphazardly scattered and monitors wide open, displaying some strange kind of loading screen. A generator is tucked into the corner, almost an afterthought.

“There’s nothing hot here—not enough for the number of men positioned to protect it. Something’s not right.” Seungcheol speaks into his mic as he glances around the room. There aren’t bags of cocaine stacked against the wall, no piles of cash, no weapons cache. What the fuck is this?
“Shall we move in?” Jeonghan’s voice echoes in his ear piece. It’s somewhat surreal to hear the nervous edge to Jeonghan’s voice. Seungcheol has never experienced Jeonghan this nervous before and it makes him feel itchy under his own skin.

“No—hold back for now.” Seungcheol advises, tugging the gun from the holster, pulling back the slide and clicking off the safety smoothly. He quickly slips out of the kitchen, backing down the corridor with gun in hand.

The hallway is long and dark, the soft murmur of people laughing and talking draws Seungcheol down the corridor. Coming to a stop before a set of double doors, Seungcheol takes a deep breath, and can’t help but shoot a quick glance behind him.

There are hushed voices coming from inside the room. There’s adrenaline curling underneath his skin now, electric and snapping. He can feel it rolling within his bones, crackling and pulsing with licking fury. It’s a heady feeling.

He kicks the doors in swiftly and he’s got his gun pointed straight at the Grey Suited man without even knowing it. Seungcheol can vaguely hear the guards shouting at him, a multitude of eyes being trained at him in the span of a few seconds and a number of them reach instinctively for their weapons.

“Ah—ah—ah.” He tuts, voice rising with warning, eyebrow quirked. “Let’s keep our hands nice and high where I can see them.” Seungcheol demands. He trains his gun on the Grey Suited man, who is holding everyone’s gaze.

The Grey Suited Man’s hands shake as he raises them above his head and he makes a little whimpering sound of nervous energy when Seungcheol steps closer. Seungcheol’s immediate plan is to get him alone and break his fingers until he tells him what’s going on.

“Easy there, pal,” Seungcheol says. “I’m not going to shoot you.” He almost adds "yet" but chokes it off at the last minute. He has a tendency to overdo it sometimes. Less is more when you need people to cooperate.

Instead, he adopts a tone that is a lot rougher than his own. “I need one of you fellas to explain what’s going on here? Are you guys lost? Take the wrong turn and came here instead of heading out to that dump in the desert where you belong?” He asks, gun unwavering.

He can probably take three down before they know what’s hit them, five if his aim is true and luck is good. Seven, however, is a little out of his skill range, even for him. At least three of the men are armed, side arms glinting unpromisingly where they are fastened to their hips. None of them respond but they all exchange nervous glances.

Their eyes darken almost imperceptibly as he leans forward, his grip on the gun a little tighter. “I asked you a question.”

The Grey Suited man smiles a little, thin lipped and not pleasant at all "Let's calm down, as you can see, I’m unarmed." He says, raising his hands further and trying to look at non-threatening as possible, but everything in Seungcheol knows that this man is dangerous.

Seungcheol smiles, thin lipped and with a tiny thrill of pleased satisfaction. "But your friends are. And nobody conducts business here without my permission." Seungcheol says, clear and cold.

One of the guards snorts and another speaks up. “I think you’re out of your league here kid. Maybe you should walk away—while you still have the chance.”
Suddenly, violently, incandescently livid, Seungcheol shifts his stance, moves his arm, and without looking, fires three shots. Three guards to his left slump to the floor, perfect bullet holes through their heads. He feels his heart rate spike, blood roaring at the base of his skull, but long practice makes his voice come out steady “I hate repeating myself—but I have plenty of bullets and not a lot of patience.” Seungcheol warns.

“Boss—we have movement on this side.” Mingyu’s voice whispers urgently in his earpiece.

Seungcheol unconsciously tightens his grip on his weapon, hears the footfall behind him a second too late, and he's already turning when he's grabbed and an iron-knuckled fist takes him down. His nose breaks, the sound a sharp crack that ricochets in his ears. He feels the pain in the centre of his face, spreading out like a shockwave from the point of impact. Before he can get eyes on his attacker, the world's gone soft at the edges, and he knows he'll pass out if he tries to stand too quickly.

Someone's laughing at him—A beefy, balding man, who kicks his gun out of his reach when Seungcheol scrambles blindly for it, trying to stifle the bleeding and regain his equilibrium.

“Not what you were expectin? Ey kid?” The man laughs. “Shoulda left when ya could, now you ain’t leavin at all. Gonna have fun wit you!” He chuckles.

Seungcheol clicks his ear piece to call for back up, but all that he manages is a whoof as he’s bodily tackled to the ground by one of the henchmen, and then he’s scrabbling to keep out of the way of the couple of brass knuckles being punched his way. He takes a fist to the side of his head at full-speed, an elbow to his abdomen at terminal velocity. His lip is split and his right cheek is bruising rapidly. The pain is fast, swift, savage. It hurts and blooms into intolerable pain on impact, receding into dull throbbing, pulsing in time with his still-beating, rabbiting heart.

He needs to get a handle on the situation quickly, but a kick to his ribs knocks the air out of him and he stumbles to the ground again. The larger of the remaining guards grins like a shark. He pulls a metal bar off the belt at his waist, and raises it above his head.

It seems like the most inappropriate time for it, but suddenly the image of Jihoon flashes in Seungcheol’s mind and before Seungcheol can process the significance of its timing, he manages to dodge the bar that comes crashing down near his face. He grapples with the guard before he can even react, pulling his arm forward, then jerking it to the side. The sound of man’s radius bone snapping is absolutely sickening. The guard screams once, short, sharp, and sags a little more.

Seungcheol propels him forward, using his injured hand to steer him in the direction of a bullet aimed at his torso.

He ducks behind a couch, pulls out the Sig-Sauer strapped to his leg holster and stands up to send a bullet through the nearest attackers forehead, before unloading the clip in four other guards. It’s brutal and fast, sweeping shots that grotesquely deface his assailants across all of their heads.

A bullet grazes his arm and he takes cover to unload his spent clip, fishing a new one out of his jacket pocket and reloading, fingers trembling on the handle, his own incompetency fraying his nerves.

The man in the suit has undoubtedly run off somewhere, with 7 guards dead, that just leaves him and —

The cold tip of a metal barrel presses against Seungcheol’s temple, but rather than fear, a sense of giddy adrenaline rushes through him. He feels like he can breath twice as much air as he needs.
Oily metal flashes in the corner of his eye, he lurches to the side, hitting the ground hard. His defensive squat drops him out of the guns range and a bullet ricochets inches above his head, spewing a thin fan of plaster. Seungcheol lunges in one direction crashing through a table and knocking a lamp to the floor. There are two shots fired, both speeding uselessly through the space he occupied only a moment ago. Seungcheol rolls to his knees and spins on Baldy, who is still caught in that moment of crucial indecision about whether to aim or run.

Seungcheol has his Sig-Sauer in hand, twisting as he aligns the sights to his pursuer and fires just as Baldy swings around to aim at him. The bullet slams through Baldy’s stomach and the man crumples to the ground, a hand over his bleeding entry wound.

Seungcheol rises to his feet liquidly, and despite his shaky vision he keeps the gun trained steadily on the man’s chest. “Who are you and what are you doing in my city?” Seungcheol bites, his teeth are gritted together, blood and adrenaline and fury thrumming through his veins.

“You are not my city? Not fer much longer.” Baldy says to him, spitting out blood. His words sound mangled as he chokes on the blood pooling in his mouth. He squeezes his eyes shut, slipping his hand into his jacket.

“Drop it!” Seungcheol demands, pointing his gun at the man, and Baldy laughs, blood staining his teeth and gums as he coughs. “You asked fer it.” He says, hand slumping out of his jacket and dropping what Seungcheol suspects to be a firearm.

The tell-tale clink—clink—clink on the tiles draws Seungcheol’s gaze downwards and his eyes widen as he catches site of the object. Something clenches in Seungcheol’s stomach, an acute panic lighting up his nerve endings. He has a few seconds to hurl himself through the doorway and shout “GRENADE!”

Seungcheol wakes up on the cold hard ground, blinking hard to chase the starbursts behind his eyelids away. A strange light-headedness, a vicious, raking pain. Distantly, Seungcheol can make out raised voices and harsh tones, and he mentally groans, a cold sweat from the pain already dampening his hair.

It’s about setting an example, he vaguely remembers repeating that sentence.

Some example. This just keeps getting from bad to worse, and then from worse to worst, and then they really need to make up new words for the steaming pile of shit situations he always manages to find himself in.

A hand on his face now.

“Cheol, come on, wake up, don’t do this to me.” A voice, probably Mingyu’s hisses in his ear.

He drifts back towards the light, floating on his high. When he cracks his eyes open, the gang is loosely circled around him, a look of uncertainty and worry in their eyes. And –

And fear.

Wonwoo’s hand comes up to cup his jaw lightly. Seungcheol turns his attention back to him, nodding to indicate that he’s not hurt grievously, he’s fine. He’s lent a boosting hand when he stands, and that’s when he sees the devastation around him.

There’s a hole in the wall of the room he was just in, plaster crumbling to the ground, the doorway
has been obliterated, and Baldy is – everywhere by the looks of it.

Seungcheol swallows hard, fighting back the bile that rises in his throat. “Who the fuck pulls a grenade inside a house?”

“Masqueraders—cowards.” Mingyu offers with a shrug of his shoulders. “We took the rest of the leeches out boss.” He smirks.

Seungcheol nods approvingly. It’s jarring to hear anyone say that with a venomous, satisfied bite to his words. It’s comforting, even if dissonant.

“We need to move out soon—that explosion is bound to attract attention Cheol. Vernon just radioed to say the guy in a grey suit escaped out the back exit with his body guard when we moved in.” Jeonghan says, running down the corridor, his formerly-pristine suit dusty and rumpled.

“Fuck!” Seungcheol hisses.

“You don’t look so good Cheol. Let’s get you patched up,” Wonwoo says, ushering him in the direction of the exit.

“No!” he snaps, shrugging the hand off his shoulder. He staggers away, closing his eyes tightly and gasping as his side throbs. A quick check reveals no bullet wounds, just a graze that’s bleeding lightly. Seungcheol feels wide awake – still high on adrenaline and feeling like he is vibrating in a world much to slow and soft to contain him.

“Search this place—top to bottom, I wanna know what the fuck they were doing here and who that guy in the suit was.”

Jihoon can’t sleep. He was sure he could crawl back into the embrace of bedding that no doubt smells like Seungcheol— but there was an emptiness about the spread-wide comforter and indented pillows that mirror a gaping loss in him. Maybe it’s because he’s in Seungcheol’s house and Seungcheol isn’t there. As much time as Jihoon has spent here over the last few months, it still doesn’t feel natural to be here without Seungcheol.

It’s a good time for Jihoon to do some work, free from interruptions. He tries reading, but his eyes are too tired and his glasses keep slipping off and resting on the bridge of his nose. He wants to call Seungcheol—make sure everything is okay, but it seems kind of pathetic when he thinks about it. Seungcheol will be back in a matter of hours and will tease him for worrying.

He wonders if the ‘job’ Seungcheol and his crew were being all hush-hush over went successfully. They’d headed out around midnight for parts unknown to do something decidedly illegal.

Of course, Seungcheol never said as much. Seungcheol and his crew mostly sat at the kitchen table, looked through their cell phones and talked about things that need ‘fixing’ without any identifying details in Jihoon’s earshot, but come on, he’s not an idiot. Jihoon isn't the most perceptive guy in the world, he has been known to put two and two together on occasion, and Seungcheol’s crew conspiring quietly in the kitchen, then suiting up and heading out is not that difficult an equation.

You don’t carry a gun and a bat around for a nice jaunt in the park. Jihoon can tell that much.

A bat—for fucks sake! Jihoon caught sight of it as Seungcheol pulled the door shut behind him. Jihoon would have a better weapon of choice, but then again, he's not really much of a brawler. He's more of a—researcher, fighting his wars with knowledge and hard-won information; he's not the
sort to expect to get into an actual battle and survive. But that - that's not the point, is it?

Jihoon pushes away from his desk, nudges his laptop shut. He should get to bed. It's three in the morning, pushing four. He's not doing anything productive, just thinking and staring blankly at his computer screen.

He checks his phone: No phone calls, no text messages. Nothing. After he left two messages with no response he gave in and called Seungcheol. But Seungcheol's number went straight to voice mail and there has been no communication since.

He knows Seungcheol is dangerous; it's part of doing what he does, part of the man he's become to survive in this particular field. Bitterness and fury make close bedfellows that nestle themselves behind allegiance and friendship in the corner of his heart. He also knows Seungcheol's perfectly capable of taking care of himself, but worry sits poorly with him. It makes him antsy. Restless.

When his phone buzzes a little after 3:30, Jihoon practically throws himself across the room to check it. It’s not Seungcheol, it’s an unidentified number.

**XXXXXXXXXXX: Stormy weather ahead,** the text reads. **I am safe. But you must seek shelter.**

Jihoon sighs in frustration and tosses the phone aside. He’s been getting a lot of those messages recently and he just blocks the number each time. He thinks about getting a new cell phone altogether.

He feels stupid to go slightly overboard with what should really just be a routine mission for Seungcheol and his crew. But he hasn’t heard from Seungcheol in 3 hours, and considering the grievousness of the expression on his face when he left the house earlier, it’s hard not to consider the worst case scenario. The possibilities weigh heavily on Jihoon’s mind, anxiety spitting and hissing in his gut, a venomous nest of coiled vipers.

They have an arrangement, him and Seungcheol. It’s not written down on paper, nor has it ever been discussed out loud, but things just naturally fell into this rhythm and neither of them are brave enough to break it.

It starts off as a basic set of rules, something simple and uncomplicated away from the craziness of everything else. By far the most applied rule (silently agreed upon and universally respected) has been—no discussion of Seungcheol’s ‘profession’.

Jihoon is really growing to hate that rule. It's his job to identify problems and solve them, and one thing he hates is not knowing what the hell's going on, especially with Seungcheol. He wants to know where Seungcheol is, he wants to know what's happening and he wants Seungcheol to tell him willingly, because he knows he can't exactly shine a light in Seungcheol’s face and interrogate him, no matter how much he might want to.

It’s a sensitive topic and as long as Jihoon doesn’t ask questions, doesn’t pry or ask him to talk about his job, their arrangement works perfectly. They cater to each others needs and desires.

Sometimes, rough is what they need, especially if one of them has to work out their feelings. So more often than not they'll have a round of aggressive sex. Seungcheol fucks him into the mattress, harsh and hard and bruising, and Jihoon takes it like a champ, gives as good as he gets, bites back hard enough to leave angry-red marks on Seungcheol that fades as soon as they’re made.

Maybe it's not standard couples' therapy—not that Jihoon necessarily thinks they need “therapy” in the conventional sense—but it's worked well enough for the two of them.
Correction: It’s worked well for the two of them—so far.

Jihoon now knows they can’t keep dancing around this forever. Seungcheol can’t shoulder everything, he’s only human, and he’s a broken and serrated one at that. Keeping this distance seemed sensible at first. It seemed easy, at least. Not uncomplicated, but it was simple – the sexual attraction between them wasn’t something that needed to be overanalysed or overthought.

Maybe –

Maybe it’s something more, something stirring in the shadow of the quietest, most terrified parts of his heart, but that’s not something Jihoon is ready to reach down and tentatively tug up to examine under the light of day. Or at 3am in the morning.

He’ll leave it like this for now, hushed kisses to mysteriously bruised skin beneath the bedsheets.

Seungcheol feels drained, like vitality has been sapped straight from his veins. He could fall into bed and sleep for a century. His anger is calm now, a gentle ebbing in his blood, appeased and sated. He ran through the nights events in his head—noting how unusual everything had been. So many unanswered questions.

He’s not expecting Jihoon to still be awake when he returns. He expects him to be sound asleep and oblivious enough for Seungcheol to slip into the bathroom, clean the blood from his face, re-tape his nose, and down a half-dozen painkillers before curling up behind him in bed.

He’s not expecting Jihoon to rush into the corridor the moment he hears the keys jingle in the lock.

“Cheol?” Jihoon asks, a distinct nervous shake edging into his voice.

Seungcheol walks towards him slowly—not quite staggering, but not walking steady either—doing his best to block the light from the hallway with his frame. He’s hoping the corridor is sufficiently dark to disguise the worst of the damage to his face but, Jihoon’s eyes go wide and shock, and he’s staring with a kind of fascinated horror. Seungcheol remembers this is all new to Jihoon, who fought his way through the trenches of academia while Seungcheol cut his teeth in gang warfare on the streets.

Seungcheol knows he doesn’t exactly look presentable. His nose is taped, his cheek is swollen, his lip is split and cracked to hell and he’s roughly the shade of year-old gum scraped off the bottom of a shoe. Despite that, Jihoon doesn’t hesitate to close the space between them, wrapping his arms around Seungcheol. Jihoon’s not typically a hugger, and Seungcheol stiffens at the unfamiliar gesture, but he adjusts quickly, one arm coming up to circle Jihoon’s back.

“Oh god Seungcheol.” He whispers, voice full of concern. Jihoon lets go, stepping back to eye him critically and seems to register the extent of his injuries and the wince Seungcheol doesn't bother to hide. His eyes are very dark in the dim light; he is watching Seungcheol so closely, like he’d been starved from the sight of him. But even as he drinks Seungcheol in, his face is twisting into terrible understanding.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.” Seungcheol says.

Jihoon doesn’t say anything at first and Seungcheol is worried for a moment he’s going to faint or something, but suddenly he schools his features into disapproval. “Good—cause it looks awful!” Jihoon says, manhandling Seungcheol towards the couch. Gloves, guns and house keys get discarded on the coffee table, and Jihoon guides him to sit and commands him to stay still.
Seungcheol sits down on the couch heavily. A second later, he’s blinded when the lights flicker on, then they dim again and Jihoon mercifully turns a lamp on instead. Seungcheol blinks in the rapidly changing light. “What are you doing?” he asks Jihoon.

Jihoon’s a few feet away, standing near the fridge-freezer. He looks like he just woke up—or never slept. His eyes flicker across the room to Seungcheol, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead he inclines on his tip toes and starts rooting through the freezer drawer. His pants slide down a little over his hips and the sleep shirt he’s wearing is worn so thin that Seungcheol can see the sinewy curve of his spine outlined through it, the lithe muscles of his back. It is, Seungcheol thinks, letting his head tilt back, one hell of a view.

Jihoon finally speaks up. “I’m looking for something to reduce the swelling on the pretty face of yours. I’m very shallow Seungcheol—I can’t have a bruised nut sack for a boyfriend.” He teases, voice muffled as he digs through the freezer. He pulls a bag of peas out, waving them at Seungcheol and grabs the medical kit from the counter on his way back.

Seungcheol is half out of his jacket, face twisting in pain.

“Here, let me help.” Jihoon rushes to his side. Seungcheol rolls his eyes, but allows Jihoon to untangle the sleeve from his arm.

Jihoon lays a hand on Seungcheol’s forehead. It feels wonderfully cool against his skin. “Do you have a fever, or are you always this hot?”

Seungcheol chuckles, and Jihoon manages a slightly embarrassed grin. “You know what—don’t answer that.” He grumbles.

Seungcheol's bruises are coming in dark and numerous. The tape around his nose hides a lot of the damage, but he can already predict at least a couple of weeks of not being able to blow his nose or wear his bike helmet without his eyes watering.

Jihoon examines the tape over his nose tentatively, obviously determines he is satisfied with Wonwoo’s first aid efforts and leaves it be. Afterwards, he goes to the bathroom to fetch a clean, damp towel, gently cleaning Seungcheol up, long and warm and unrushed. He kisses Seungcheol before he disappears into the kitchen.

Seungcheol doesn’t know what to think. He tries to remember what his life was like before Jihoon, just to test himself. He can’t. Actually—it’s more that he doesn’t want to.

“You don’t have to do this you know. I’ve had worse injuries. Just go to sleep Jellybean.” Seungcheol urges. It's something that used to make him wary, letting himself rely on someone capable of appearing so young and untried. Seungcheol was like that once, before his father died and he traded one life for another.

When Jihoon returns from the kitchen, he’s popping some dihydrocodeine tablets out of a blister seal, his face is pinched and grey, conflicting emotions written in the lines of his mouth. “Shhhh—enough talking Cheollie. Take your pain killers and shut up.” He coos mockingly, pressing two tablets against Seungcheol lips and holding out a glass of water for him to chase them down with.

Seungcheol accepts the tablets and tips his head back, swallowing a mouthful of water, washing down the bitter coating of the pills. When he tips his head down again, Jihoon is staring at his broken nose, the distinctive bruises left behind by someone with rings emerging.

“What happened?” Jihoon murmurs.
“Nothing—just met some unexpected resistance.” Seungcheol’s grin falls flat as he winces with pain. His vision blurs briefly and he pinches the bridge of his nose—which is a bad idea, because it’s painful as fuck.

“Was it a brick wall and did you run straight into it?” Jihoon tries for a joke, trying to lighten the mood.

Seungcheol can’t help the sputter of laughter that spills out. It’s short, and a little bleak, but real. “Something like that.” He tries to kick off his boots, but only succeeds scuffing the carpet.

Jihoon drops to the floor to untie his bootlaces, working them off with some effort. Seungcheol doesn’t have the energy to resist his help. “Well—did you at least win?” Jihoon asks, setting his boots to the side and feeling up his leg for injuries.

“Wasn’t that kind of fight.” Seungcheol says, and something must leak through in his voice, because Jihoon stops his questing touches and stares at him.

Jihoon falls silent, looking up at Seungcheol with a shuttered expression that could be hiding any emotion. “Well—you must have won. I imagine if you had lost—you wouldn’t have made it back at all.”

Seungcheol feels the evocative smile that is creeping onto his face quietly die away and he sighs. Those were wise words from someone who hasn’t seen the battleground, who hasn’t clawed through pain to come out battered and torn on the other side. Worn words to appease troubled souls from someone who hasn’t fought a war—because it is, this is a fucking war, a war of destruction, and price of winning is the same as losing, their lives all forfeiture to a greater good most of them will never get to taste.

Most of his crew have put their youth on the line too early in life and they live like they can’t be rid of it fast enough, and Seungcheol can’t do a damn thing about it now since he was the one who cultivated that mentality in them to begin with.

Whereas Jihoon’s naivete has always worked to his advantage, to shield him from the horrors of the world, Seungcheol’s first exposure to crime occurred at too young an age for him to be anything but awed by it. It’s a strident disconnect.

Had he been introduced to it a little older, a little more prudent, Seungcheol might have found his career choice discouraging or frightening, the way most sensible people did. His mother used to always say that sensibility was obviously a recessive gene in their family. His father was a prime example of that.

Seungcheol thought he could see this through, thought he was strong, with all the certainty he thought his father was strong. There are supposed to be no regrets, since this work is rewarding and exhilarating, but none of that nullifies the question of cost. It all has to tally up to some kind of price in the end. Tonight is probably the closest Seungcheol's ever come to dying, if he's honest. It's a sobering thought.

“It’s not that simple. The job was fucked, Jihoon. It wasn’t what we were expecting, it was nothing actually. We gained nothing from it.” Seungcheol groans. He knows he must look miserable, and more vulnerable than Jihoon is used to seeing, because Jihoon reaches out and cups his chin in his palm, kisses him gently on the mouth, mindful of not bumping his nose.

“I’d make it better if I could.” Jihoon murmurs.
“I know. And you do,” Seungcheol says, leaning forward for another kiss, and Jihoon is happy to oblige. His mouth is gentle on Seungcheol’s, a lingering softness that offers comfort.

“Jellybean, believe it or not, the only thing I was thinking was that I needed to be with you. Most of the time when I feel like crap, I think of you, and somehow, it’s better.”

Jihoon smiles fondly. “Wow—I think the codeine is definitely kicking in.”

Seungcheol guffaws. “Don’t be an ass—I’m trying to be sentimental.” He tries for a smile, but his lips are cracked. They sting when he widens them, the coppery taste of blood bursting like ripe fruit on his tongue.

“Don’t do that,” Jihoon admonishes, fishing around for a tissue.

“Don’t do what?” Seungcheol asks. “Laugh? Smile? Come on Jellybean, you know I can’t help it. I smile all the time. It’s my default setting when I’m with you.”

Jihoon sighs, looks put-upon, slightly more like his normal self. “I know, Cheol. I know. Just don’t go ripping your lip wide open.”

Seungcheol tongues at his split lip before pursing them together in a bid to figure out how to smile without causing his lips further injury. Jihoon chuckles, leans over to place the iced peas on his cheek.

Seungcheol hisses at the contacts. “Why are you still up? I hope you didn’t stay up on my account.”

Jihoon raises an eyebrow as he gently urges Seungcheol to take hold of the pack and pushes him back against the cushions of the sofa. “I was awake anyway—I was doing some work. I’m making you some tea—sick people love tea.” He says, walking back into the kitchen.

“I’d prefer a beer.” Seungcheol shouts in to him.

“No beer—you’re getting tea.”

Seungcheol pulls a face, sticking his bottom lip out a little. “You’re a shit nurse.”

“Shut up—I’m an amazing nurse. Who else is staying up late into the night to care for you?”

“I’ve always managed to patch myself up before without any problems. If it’s real bad—I can always ask Jeonghan to help. He gives me beer to help numb the pain.” Seungcheol says.

“You just had to bring him up—didn’t you.” Jihoon’s voice travels from the kitchen. Seungcheol can’t see his face from his position on the couch, but he knows the sound of Jihoon’s voice when he smiles. “Well—fuck Jeonghan or ‘Hannie’ or whatever you call him. Everyone knows you don’t mix opiates with alcohol, so he was just plain dumb to do that.”

“I love how easy it us to rile you up Jellybean.”

Jihoon pokes his head out of the kitchen briefly, enough to give Seungcheol an incredulous look. It’s not a smile, but it’s a start.

Soon Jihoon returns to the living room with a mug of steaming tea, setting it down on the coffee table. Seungcheol is still sitting with his head pillowed on the armrest. Jihoon sighs and lowers himself to the floor beside Seungcheol, examining the deep cut along his forearm, before reaching for the med kit.
“You want to tell me what happened?” Jihoon asks quietly, gripping Seungcheol’s arm tightly and using a pair of tweezers to pull out a shard of glass.

Seungcheol hisses. “Not really.” He affirms, not meeting Jihoon’s eyes. He reaches for his tea and swallows a mouthful, seeming not to notice how hot it is.

“Why not!” Jihoon snaps. They both tense up at the same time. Jihoon seems shocked to have been so blunt and Seungcheol is shocked to have driven him there.

Seungcheol collects himself first, slowly. “Because I don’t want you involved with that crap Jellybean.”

Jihoon bites his lips as he applies antiseptic to the wound, then wraps it in a crepe bandage. “How can I not be involved? When you come home looking like this—what am I supposed to do, pretend I can’t see it?”

He scrubs a hand over his face tiredly. “Seungcheol, I’m not asking you to take me on a drive along. I’m not asking to be involved with—whatever you are doing. I just want to know why you’re injured.” He sounds faintly hysterical, and Seungcheol has to work at not tossing his cup aside, grabbing Jihoon’s face in his hands, and ordering him to fucking talk already. They have rules about these sorts of things. They can keep secrets if they need to, although over the last few months the need for secrets has grown less and less.

Jihoon sighs wearily and stands. “I can’t sleep next to you and pretend your nose isn’t broken and you don’t have blood on your clothes.” He gets a strange, wide, and sad look in his eyes suddenly and his lower lip is trembling now, and Seungcheol stares at it with a sick sense of realisation.

Seungcheol’s mouth grows dry, his heart suddenly beating out a nervous tattoo. He watches Jihoon carefully, holding his gaze with intent. “What are you saying?” he mutters, sitting up with a wince to avoid the vulnerability of lying so exposed on the couch. Jihoon’s by his side in a second to help him steady his shaky body.

Jihoon looks uncomfortable and he avoids Seungcheol’s eyes. He tugs on the cuff of his t-shirt, before saying, in an almost pained voice. “I’m saying—let me be your right hand man.”

Seungcheol experiences the curious sensation of having his heart broken and remade at the same time. “You’re so cute when you’re jealous.” Seungcheol says automatically, and Jihoon snorts. It’s the first sign of normalcy and Seungcheol’s willing to take it.

Jihoon smiles down at him and blushes, and they stare at each other for an awkward beat before he bustles to change the bandage his nose and apply antiseptic.

It’s almost back to the normal when Jihoon slides his leg over Seungcheol’s lap, taking the mug out of his hand gently and setting it on the table next to them. He shifts his weight down so he is straddling Seungcheol’s hips. Seungcheols’ hands come up automatically to balance them as Jihoon leans forward to rest his head against Seungcheol’s collarbone.

“I just want you to know that you can talk to me about anything, okay? Anything. I don’t care that you’re a criminal and do shady shit. I don’t care that you’ve got blood on your jacket that isn’t yours—I’m just happy that it isn’t yours. I want you to share stuff with me. It’s nice to be able to talk to somebody about stuff and you listen to me all the time. I know we don’t do the sentimental shit often but, I want to be there for you.” Jihoon murmurs, his voice rumbles in his chest shaking through Seungcheol like warmth.
“Oh,” Seungcheol replies, hushed and soft where he speaks against Jihoon’s hair. “Okay.” There’s a ball of emotion lodged in his throat, a suspicious burning behind his eyes. He clears his throat. “Thanks, Jihoon.”

More honest than tactful, Seungcheol tells him everything holding him there on the couch, and he doesn’t let go of him the entire time.

Well, he gives him the scaled-down censored version, gory and painful details cut out but Seungcheol’s heart is still beating fast, and he’s aware the words are a little breathless and his tone is more nasally than usual, but Jihoon listens without interrupting. He rubs a soothing hand down Seungcheol’s arm, and when Seungcheol runs out of words, Jihoon fills in the gaps.

“Poor Cheollie.” Jihoon says, and Seungcheol feels Jihoon's warm breath against his lips a second before Jihoon kisses him. “See, that wasn’t so hard to share.” Another soft kiss. “You don’t have to keep this stuff from me—I wanna know.”

“I’m not keeping you out of the loop cause it’s easy. It’s not. I don’t want you to get hurt.” Seungcheol opens his eyes, not caring that all the things they don’t talk about are right on the tip of his tongue. He'll never forget that surge of panic when he realized he might not see Jihoon again. “When I thought—this is it—It's you I was worried about.” Seungcheol touches Jihoon's cheek reverently.

“You know—I used to think, if I kicked it on a job—I’d be okay with that. That’s how my father died after all, seems fitting, to go out with a bang.” His voice is still quiet but lined with the weight of grief. “And I’ve come so close before and not cared about it, but—that time was different.” Seungcheol closes his eyes and lets out a shaky breath “I really didn’t want to die.” He admits, letting his head fall back against the headrest, his grip on Jihoon finally relaxing a little.

A small part of him knows he can’t keep traversing the world like this, occasionally crossing paths with dangerous, unreliable, sharp-witted people who play hopscotch with other people’s lives and pluck grenades from their pockets like they’re candy.

He gasps a long shaking breath that would have been a sob if he were some other kind of person. “I realised that I can’t be so brazen with my actions. Not when I have so much more to lose.” he mutters, almost sounding awed about the furious heat bubbling up under his skin.

It’s a revelation of sorts, although Seungcheol strongly suspects it shouldn't be after the things he’s been through. “I care about you Jihoon.” Seungcheol says softly, like it is a terrible secret. “I’ve never felt this way before about anyone.” he admits.

Jihoon’s eyes, more black than brown now, snap to his. “I know.” He whispers, pepperling Seungcheol’s face with small kisses, lets himself be gathered close and held. “Me too,” he whispers against Seungcheol’s mouth. Then he cups Seungcheol jaw in both hands, revelling in the unfamiliar prickle of two-day-old stubble against his chin as he leans in to kiss him. Seungcheol is hesitant, but only for a moment, and then his arms are a vice around Jihoon's waist, lips cold and a little desperate when he kisses him back.

“If my face is all messed up after this—and I’m hideous wreck. Are you going to break up with me and find a hotter, sexier boyfriend?” Seungcheol mumbles into Jihoon's skin.

“I’ve already created on online dating profile just in case.” Jihoon teases. Seungcheol pouts and Jihoon decides to take pity on him. “No—you idiot.” he smiles, sliding off Seungcheol’s lap and pulling him to his feet. He snags his wrist lightly between his thumb and index finger. “Bed? I know it's dawn, but you look like you could use some sleep.”
“You know—when I suggested you stay at mine last night, sleep wasn’t originally what I’d planned for.” He aims for flirtatious, but it comes out sounding weary. “And if I recall correctly—you were about to share something really important with me before Jeonghan rang the doorbell?” Seungcheol says, looking sheepish as Jihoon tugs him towards the bedroom.

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot.” Jihoon laughs.

Jihoon pushes Seungcheol on the bed and straddles his broad thighs. Seungcheol does his best to uncouple the buttons on his shirt but his fingers feel too large and clumsy right now for such a delicate task. Jihoon takes over, unbuttoning the damp black shirt until he can slip it from Seungcheol’s shoulders. Shimmying his pants off is a difficult process. With the codeine kicking in, he’s begging to feel a little sleepy—there’s a reason you don’t mix it with alcohol, Seungcheol understands why now.

Moving with inherent grace, Jihoon lies down beside him, heads tipped together against the starched white pillow.

“Tell me Jellybean—what did you want us to do?” Seungcheol hums, sidling closer to Jihoon, the warmth of his body a tangible, comforting thing.

Jihoon hushes him with a finger to his lips, then follows it up with a kiss. “Cheollie, sweety—no offence, but you don’t look so good and you’re half asleep. It can wait.”

“But it was very naughty—yes?” Seungcheol says with a boyish grin.

Jihoon’s eyes close and when he speaks his voice is a soft whisper. “Extremely.”

Jihoon falls asleep with his face tilted against Seungcheol’s shoulder, breathing long, exhausted, even breaths. The sound lulls the tension out of Seungcheol’s spine like other things couldn’t.

Seungcheol eventually falls asleep too, exhausted and numb with pain. When morning comes, he’s still clinging to Jihoon in an embarrassing way, and Seungcheol might feel bad about it if that experience hadn’t made him realize how desperately he wants Jihoon to be safe and happy.

Chapter End Notes

1) Long chapter is loonnggggg
2) Can you see where I was going to leave it at a cliffhanger half way through--then I remembered how much you guys hate cliffhangers and I kept writing. Hence--long ass chapter.
3) I know I tend to balance out hhiseavy shit--with not so heavy stuff....I just cant keep it so miserable. sorry!
4) Anyway--I hope you enjoy this update, feedback is always appreciated!
Mission: Punishment

Chapter Summary

Small amount of plot progress--a lot of smut.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s a buzzing in Jihoon’s ears, loud and disorientating. He fumbles for his phone on the night stand and brings it to his face, blinking blearily as the illuminated screen assaults his eyes. He hasn’t assigned an address book entry to the number but now that he’s awake (sort of), he might as well answer it.

“Hello,” he says, rolling over and checking the digital clock. Two thirty am. “I don’t know who you are but you’re a dick for waking me up!” he croaks, trying to sound menacing whilst keeping his voice low as not to rouse Seungcheol.

There’s no response. The call’s dropped, he thinks—but when he looks it’s still connected. He listens. Faintly, he can hear breathing. His neck prickles. He’s about to hang up—his thumb is over the screen—when he hears his name spoken. He puts the phone back to his ear.

“Who is this?” he snaps. He’s a little afraid, but no sense giving anything away.

There’s a pause—the sound of an indrawn breath, a groan, then the sound of swallowing.

Shit, Jihoon thinks, rifling options. A drunk dialler? (Possible), a stalker? (Maybe), a creepy pervert masturbating to the sound of his sensually sleepy voice over the phone? (Slightly flattering, but highly unlikely). Regardless, none of those options are good, none of them things he particularly wants to consider or be associated with.

“Oh—shit.” The voice curses. It sounds distinctly male—but faint, as if whoever is holding the phone, is holding it too far from their mouth. “I’ll call you back.” He’s biting off his words now, sounding like he’s trying to cut this off before someone overhears.

“Who is this?” Jihoon repeats. There’s a considering pause. Jihoon looks at the clock again. Two thirty-one.

“I think...” The voice swallows again, then there’s a complicated tumbling sound, as if he’s dropped the phone. Jihoon listens with his head tipped, trying to make things out. He can imagine this man crouching, fishing for the phone, fumbling it up. Or maybe it’s the man himself who’s hit the floor. More breathing, a scuffling sound. Then silence.

The call ends.

Jihoon stares at his phone, the ‘call ended’ sign blinking. Then he dials the number back. The phone rings and rings, until at last it goes to a numbered voice mailbox that’s already full.

More than awake now, and more than a little freaked out, Jihoon rolls out from underneath Seungcheol’s arm and stumbles into the bathroom.
He relieves his bladder and is midway through washing when the phone rings again. He fumbles to finish drying his hands quickly before answering it.

“Whoever the fuck this is—stop jerking off to the sound of my voice!” Jihoon says without preamble.

There is silence on the other end, but then, to Jihoon’s surprise, a chuckle, “No offence, but your voice isn’t all that great.” comes a calm reply, and Jihoon damn near drops the phone down the toilet.

“Is that—”Jihoon stutters, realizing abruptly who he’s speaking to. Somebody he knows, somebody unexpected. “Dr Raine, is that—”

“Yes it’s me Jihoon.” He interrupts, before Jihoon can finish his sentence. “I don’t have a lot of time. I have to be quick—somebody is following me.”

“What the-” Jihoon gasps, then cuts himself off quickly as his voice echoes loudly in the bathroom.

“Yanno—you’re a real pain in the ass to get a hold of Jihoon.” Dr Raine tells him. His voice is gravelly and tired. He sounds like he’s getting sick. (Or is sick, or dying, or possibly already dead and contacting Jihoon from beyond the grave)

“Excuse me?”

“My messages—have you been getting them?” His tone is curt, a little peevish, as if Jihoon is the one who’s called him in the middle of the night.

“Uhhh.”

“Obviously not. Otherwise you wouldn’t have accepted that promotion.” Dr Raine says, as though that is in any way an adequate explanation. He places such profound emphasis on the word ‘promotion’ that Jihoon starts to feel a sense of discomfort bordering on panic.

“What messages? And how did you know about my promotion? Are you—following me?” Jihoon demands to know, trying to sound like the epitome of calmness himself and not at all like he was reeling from a double order of what-the-fucks.

“Of course I am.” He replies dryly. Then, more tentatively, “Needed to keep an eye on you.”

“Why?” Jihoon hisses.

The line is quiet for a moment. Dr Raine sighs and Jihoon hears a sudden tapping sound beginning in the background, possibly a keyboard. It’s the first ambient noise he’s noticed and he imagines Dr Raine, holed up in some tech fortress, eating instant ramen and playing countless hours of Overwatch, like the massive nerd that he is.

“Because, I was hoping to stop you from making the same mistake I did. But it’s too late now.” There’s a hint of wariness in his voice, he’s not sure what Dr Raine is driving at. “Do not fret. I have a plan.”

“Are you drunk?” Jihoon asks, perhaps a bit indelicately. It’s possible that he is—more than possible, it’s likely. The man must be drunk and disoriented. But if Dr Raine has ever been in that state, he hasn’t called to share it before. Why would he start now?

“No Jihoon, I’m despairingly sober.” Dr Raine says, with a melodramatic sigh. “Not by choice mind you. It’s just very difficult to avoid incarceration if you’re drunk off your ass.”
“Are—are you okay?” Jihoon stammers stupidly. “Where are you?” He asks instead.

There’s an indrawn breath. Then: “I’m fine,” Raine says, sounding...not normal, exactly. A few shades off normal, but not drunk, or drugged either. ‘I can’t talk for long, they are probably tracing your calls. I’ve tried to secure the line but you can never be sure who they have working for them. I know my daughters apartment has been bugged.”

Jihoon doesn’t really hear much after ‘tracing your calls’. The suggestion seems wildly incongruous to Jihoon, but if it is true, Dr Raine has as good as drawn the feds an annotated map straight to Jihoon’s door. “Wait—what? Who? Can you just stop talking so calmly for a second and explain what’s going on? Why did you disappear?”

There’s a pause. Jihoon has known Dr Raine long enough to know that’s not a good sign. He braces himself to hear something terrible.

“Look, that’s not important right now. There is a bigger game at play here, I was just a pawn. I can’t explain everything right now, but I need you to trust me. Can you trust me Jihoon?” Dr Raine says, too amiably for Jihoon to trust a single word.

Trust from a convict on the run could mean anything at this stage in the game. For all Jihoon knew, he might be leading him into a trap, pinning Jihoon down for his crimes. Or—maybe he is just desperate enough for someone with Jihoon’s skill set to try reaching out to him. Either way, he’s somehow gotten hold of a phone number Jihoon rarely hands out to anyone. So he’s hacked into one database or another—that much is illegal.

“I suppose I tr--?” Jihoon begins to say.

“Atta boy!” Dr Raine interjects again, “Now listen—I need you to do me a favour.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!”

“But—what about yes?”

“How about—no?”

“We’ll go with yes.”

Jihoon doesn’t respond, he grits his teeth, seconds away from cutting the call.

“Jihoon, listen—” Dr Raine says. More sighing. More tapping “You know I would only ask for help if I was desperate.” He adds. He sounds...feeble, if Jihoon has to put a word to it.

“Alright. I’m listening,” Jihoon says with a sigh, tired of arguing.

“I need to prove my innocence. I had to leave in a rush and I left some very critical information behind. Information that can blow this whole thing open wide and clear me.” He explains, sounding desperate, almost strung out, his voice even rougher than usual and tinged with hysteria.

“Okay—“ Jihoon says carefully. He’s kind of winging it at this point, following his instincts.

“I left a hard drive behind in my office—it’s heavily encrypted. They’re probably trying to break the encryption now, but it’s going to take them a very long time. I made sure of that. It has some very
sensitive information.”

“You want me to steal it?” Jihoon squeaks, his voice breaking embarrassingly.

Jihoon hears the sound of the keyboard clicking away in the background. “No, it’s not going to be that easy. I want you to hack into the security network directly from the servers at work, find out who took it from my office and where they are keeping it. You’ll need to access the main security servers first, you should have clearance for the main hub. The security hub is in the next room so you’ll need to hack the access panel to get in. Then go back through the CCTV loop for the last five months and—”

“Dr,” Jihoon says, interrupting Dr Raine’s flow of logistics and directives. There are a number of things he should ask – who’s ‘they’, how much do ‘they’ know, exactly how much force has been authorized to bring him in or take him out – but instead he finds himself clamping down on the absurd urge to ask if all these activities would qualify him as a criminal hacker—and how cool that would look on his resume.

“Jihoon—can you do this?” Dr Raine asks, an edge to his voice like cut glass.

Jihoon thinks there is a distinct possibility he may end up regretting this. “Yes—fine. he says, all the same. “But then what? When I get this information, what do I do?”

“Contact me on this number when you’re clear. I’ll wait for your call.”

A long pause, while Jihoon tries out several different scenarios in his mind. “What’s so important about the hard drive? What does it contain?”

“Leverage!” Raine says, “Times up!” he rushes and hangs up.

Mind still reeling from this revelation, Jihoon takes a moment to just stare at his reflection in the mirror before stumbling out of the bathroom and back into bed.

The moment he wakes up, Jihoon knows he’s agreed to something stupid.

The combination of early morning phone calls, lack of sleep and stress are pounding their vengeful beat behind his eyes, coils of nausea throbbing deep in his gut. He groans, and regrets it immediately as the sound reverberates through his aching skull. It’s getting light outside- a grey, murky light, but bright enough to signal that it’s day, but it’s still far too early for Jihoon to become a functioning, friendly adult.

He practically crawls into the shower, crawls out again and is mostly awake when he finishes dressing. The smell of coffee drifts down the hallway as he nears the lounge.

“You’re up early.” Seungcheol announces.

“Yeah,” Jihoon says. He pauses just beyond the kitchen to take in the sight before him.

He wants to look everywhere at once: Seungcheol’s face, his hooded eyes, the pair of thin grey jogging bottoms that ride low on his hips and cling to the swell of his ass. His T-shirt is pasted to him in damp patches, his muscles clearly outlined; fine cotton clinging to his shoulder, his abs, the generous curve of his biceps.

Jihoon swallows and moves over to his desk, squaring a few pieces of paper and slipping them into
his bag before stepping closer and adding, “So are you.”

“I was feeling restless, thought I’d stop feeling sorry for myself and do something productive.” Seungcheol explains. He is haphazardly reading the paper, going from the news section to the finance seemingly without any kind of pattern, unaware of Jihoon watching him. Or maybe aware, but so used to it now that it is status quo.

Jihoon blinks a few times, watching him; it’s the first time he’s ever seen Seungcheol like this: half-dressed, unguarded, and wholly at ease. He always found it hard to imagine Seungcheol off-duty, watching television, making lunch, perusing *The Financial Times* over orange juice and toast. These were things he hadn’t witnessed about Seungcheol before, and now that he has, everything is different. Before, Seungcheol had been captivating and mysterious and so very dangerous, but now he is merely handsome and real and somehow even more dangerous.

“Don’t overdo it, you’re still healing.” Jihoon comments offhandedly, but then Seungcheol’s posture visibly stiffens and he looks up and dimples at Jihoon, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“Don’t worry nurse Jihoon—I know what I can handle. Thank you kindly for your concern.” Seungcheol snarks and Jihoon wonders if he’s been coming across as an uptight nag about his injuries this whole time.

Jihoon scoffs and flips him the middle finger. Seungcheol laughs easily, folding his paper in a perfect three fold and resting it on the table. He seems to be slowly settling back into his skin. After that disaster of a job, Seungcheol looked drained and unwell for a few days, his normally crisp edges worn soft and ragged. Nothing like the stunning, confident man Jihoon was watching strut around his kitchen.

Still, in the stark, unforgiving glare of the morning light, Jihoon can see the dark smudges under Seungcheol’s eyes, the bruising along the bridge of his nose and cheeks. Jihoon just looks at him for a while, taking him in.

Seungcheol got up early, no doubt to go for a jog. Even from this distance, Jihoon can see the sweat trickling down the side of Seungcheol’s face, the charmingly rebellious way his slicked-back hair is resisting the gel’s hold to curl mutinously over his forehead. Jihoon has long since thought of Seungcheol’s hair as permanently gelled into obedience. He’s learning to appreciate how wanton it can be, curving and wet at the tips, falling down at the edges and softening his whole face, taking easily ten years off Seungcheol’s usually ambiguously adult appearance. It almost made him more gorgeous, if that’s even possible.

“I went for a jog—felt like I needed to let out some steam.” He stretches, rolling his shoulders. Jihoon notices him shaking out his hands, as if awakening deadened nerves. He starts leaning back against the counter, and Jihoon nearly gives himself an aneurysm trying to keep from staring at the long, tight muscles of his thighs.

“That’s good. Did it work?” Jihoon says, looking at his posture, a faint curve at the corner of his lips as he studies Seungcheol’s spread legs and squared shoulders. He watches as Seungcheol chugs back orange juice – straight from the carton, of course, the slovenly twat. Nevertheless, an unexpected burst of affection flares in his chest, and he smothers it ruthlessly, beating it down before he does something ill-advised like pressing Seungcheol up against the counter and biting at his cool wet lips, sucking the bittersweet taste from his tongue.

“Hmmm—not quite. But I needed to get out for a bit.” Seungcheol says, t-shirt riding up his middle when he stretches his arms over his head. Jihoon can almost write it off as happenstance if Seungcheol doesn’t catch him taking in the sight and flashes a devious little grin. “Exercise always
gets my blood pumping though. That’s—always good.”

Jihoon licks his lips, unthinking. He doesn’t intend anything by it, but he also doesn’t miss the way Seungcheol falters mid-sentence, or the way he drops his gaze down to Jihoon’s mouth before quickly glancing away, playing at indifference. “Besides there’s a gorgeous scenic route you can jog along here and I don’t know any of your neighbours. It’s just nice to go outside and walk around when people don’t run to the other side of the road to get away from you.”

Jihoon chuckles and wets his lips again, just barely, for no other reason than to see Seungcheol’s gaze drop down to his mouth. “Hungry? Have you had breakfast yet?”

Seungcheol makes a noncommittal noise and abruptly turns to pull open the fridge door. “Yeah—maybe I am. Maybe I’ll make an omelette. You want one?” He asks, just as he bends over.

Seungcheol is a runway show in motion when he is dressed, even if he happens to be dressed in sweat pants and a t-shirt, and when he isn’t dressed at all he never fails to put on a very different kind of show. This time around it involves bending over slowly to root around the fridge, the perfect slope of his butt distracting Jihoon quite effectively from wondering if Seungcheol is trying to make breakfast or just trying to seduce him.

Jihoon thinks Seungcheol has the sort of body that must have taken ages of commitment, determination, and cautiously applied wizardry to perfect. Jihoon prefers to think this for a variety of reasons, one of them being that he refuses to believe anyone could get an ass that flawless without putting in a phenomenal amount of effort. Another being that every time the two of them had been to the cinema, Jihoon watched Seungcheol practically make love to enormous helpings of butter popcorn, nachos and every clichéd cinema treat imaginable—every single time and the man still hadn’t gained an ounce.

All that muscle clearly came at the expense of hard work and discipline and Jihoon wouldn’t be a very good boyfriend at all if he didn’t show any appreciation for it.

Dr Raine—the servers? Remember why you’re up so early!

Jihoon drags his eyes away from the splendid view, licks his lips a couple of times – only to look up to find Seungcheol watching him like a fucking hawk, head turned, egg carton in hand. “Jellybean—do you want an omelette?” Seungcheol says shortly, his tone suggesting that Jihoon has kept him waiting for ages.

“Nah—I’ll grab something at work later.”

Seungcheol rolls his eyes and pushes the fridge door shut. “Of course you will. Food is important Jellybean, you might consider pencilling that in to your busy day. Oh—and coffee doesn’t count by the way.”

“Hey—I eat, okay. Speaking of which, is that pot fresh?” Jihoon points to the carafe, shooing Seungcheol to the side so he can reach the mugs on the top shelf.

“You didn’t get much sleep last night. You don’t usually get phone calls in the middle of the night.” Seungcheol observes.

Jihoon shakes his head. “Not usually—it was an emergency. Helping out an old friend.” It’s not a completely blatant lie, but it’s not exactly the truth either.

Seungcheol seems to accept that for the answer it is, which Jihoon appreciates. He hums and taps a blunt finger against the skin under Jihoon’s eye, which Jihoon appreciates somewhat less. “Hope it’s
nothing too serious, these suitcases don’t look good on you.” he says, grinning when Jihoon bats his hand away with a dark look.

“If it’s not late night phone calls disturbing me—it’s your snoring.” Jihoon jests.

Seungcheol chuckles. “Then you should head back to sleep. It’s still early, will there even be anyone in your office at this time?”

“Hmm—I got something I need to check out. Can’t do it from here. Need access to the servers.” Jihoon says, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Can’t you just—dial into the servers from here?” Seungcheol asks, clearly bewildered.

For someone supposedly at the top of his crime game, Seungcheol sometimes has an embarrassing amount of trouble grasping just what Jihoon’s work entailed. Once, Jihoon had tried to explain that cracking encrypted software was just a tad more involved than guessing passwords and he’d ended up wanting to hang himself from the ceiling fan. “Not exactly. It’s not something I can access remotely.”

“When will you be back?” Seungcheol asks, pulling his sweat damp t-shirt over his head and balling it up and tossing it the direction of the bedroom (Slovenly, slovenly twat). He leans back against the counter and crosses his arms, lets Jihoon look his fill.

Jihoon feigns a slight yawn, letting his attention drift, carefully not betraying the weird lurch his heart just gave. Normally, a shirtless Seungcheol has a history of distracting Jihoon like a charm.

*The servers? Are you forgetting some—oh—he’s shirtless now.*

And today seems like no exception. The visual torture is doing Jihoon’s head in, the nonchalant way Seungcheol tips his head back and sips his juice whilst ripping apart Jihoon’s line of reasoning, stroking an absentminded hand across his exposed chest and leaving Jihoon gritting his teeth against the raw, over sensitized rub of his cock in his pants.

Despite all of his attempts to stop it, Jihoon smiles. He swallows down a scalding mouthful of coffee to hide the fact. “I’ll be back when I find what I’m looking for—Don’t drink out of the carton you slob!” he hisses.

Seungcheol splutters, choking on his orange juice. He laughs, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. “Guess Nurse Jihoon has left the building huh?” He mutters to himself, and proceeds to drink the rest of Jihoon’s orange juice straight from the carton (anyway) before setting it down. He moves with distracted sensuality, rolling his shoulders in a leisurely stretch, thumbing juice from the corner of his mouth with a precise delicacy that Jihoon sincerely doubts is accidental. “Gonna miss Nurse Jihoon, he was soft. Maybe—a little too soft.”

Jihoon snorts, tucking the last of his papers into his case. “Nothing about me is soft when you’re walking around shirtless.” He mutters grumpily, and then abruptly thinks better of it, a few words too late.

“Is that so?” Seungcheol perks up suddenly, sounding delighted. Jihoon is starting to kind of wish that he has a rewind button for moments such as this—that is until Seungcheol makes a low, almost dirty sound of agreement in his throat and presses up behind him. “I can take care of that for you.” Seungcheol suggests, silky and dangerous.

Jihoon smiles again. He hates how easily Seungcheol can coax those out of him, but he can’t seem to stop himself. He spins around.
Seungcheol starts to lean forward.

Jihoon draws back.

Seungcheol frowns.

“No.” Jihoon says, in a clarifying tone. He skims the back of his fingers over Seungcheol’s cheek as he side steps him, and feels warmth bloom in his stomach at the way Seungcheol leans unconsciously into the touch, like a plant seeking light.

“Why not?” Seungcheol huffs, trying to corner him again.

Jihoon shoves half-heartedly at his shoulder. “Because I just showered and I’m heading to work and you’re all sweaty and—still recovering.” He explains, jerking his head towards the faint line of bruises along Seungcheol’s ribs.

Something changes in Seungcheol’s face then, but he can’t read what it is. "I’m fine—I feel fine—" he begins.

"I still have to get to work," Jihoon interrupts sharply.

Seungcheol just stares at him, a crease starting to form between his brows. “Just a kiss then.” He whispers and leans forward, and kisses him. His lips are soft and taste like oranges. Jihoon's mouth opens under his, and Seungcheol sweeps his tongue in, lightly nipping at Jihoon's lip. He feels Seungcheol's hand slide into his hair as they grind their hips into each other, want curling hotly in Jihoon's abdomen.

Seungcheol makes a throaty little sound, unbelievably gratifying. It goes straight to Jihoon’s cock, and he thinks it's worth being a little late to work.

Work—Dr Raine—the servers—shit.

“Fuck,” Jihoon swears, when Seungcheol pushes him back and he catches an elbow on the edge of the countertop, and then, “fuck,” as Seungcheol sneaks a hand between them, cupping him through his pants. He pins Seungcheol with a severe look. “No—I need to get to work.” he says, pulling away

“You can still go to work—” Seungcheol continues, undeterred. “Just a little later than you intended.” Seungcheol kisses him again, this time with his fingers in Jihoon’s collar.

There’s a part of Jihoon’s brain informing him that this is a bad idea, but he doesn’t listen to it. He lets Seungcheol unbutton his shirt, run a sweat-damp hand down his chest and stomach. “You’re impossible,” Jihoon says, a little out of breath, “I have to get a head start and I want the servers to myself for a while. It’s important Cheol.”

Seungcheol pauses, pulling on Jihoon’s shirt. His eyes are dark and steady. “This is important too—you can’t expect to get any work done with an erection in the way.” He murmurs and gives a quick caress to Jihoon’s nape once his hand is free, a daredevilish touch that sends fire streaking through Jihoon’s veins when it slips down his open collar just long enough for Seungcheol’s fingertips to skim against a nipple.

Jihoon can’t believe he forgot what a fucking tease Seungcheol can be. Perhaps he’s gotten more frustrated cooped up in the house recovering, because he’s infuriating now. Either way, the self-satisfied twist of his lips is making Jihoon’s blood run hot. He inhales, blindly nudging his nose into the crook of Seungcheol’s neck.
Ignoring his better judgment, the way he so often does when Seungcheol is around, Jihoon reciprocates and cups him through his sweats. “You’re such a fucking tease.” He murmurs, rubbing the heel of his hand along the swell of Seungcheol’s cock, pressing a light kiss against the damp skin of his throat.

Seungcheol’s eyes go a little hooded when Jihoon nudges his hand underneath the waistband of his pants. “Knew you couldn’t resist. You can never say no to me Jellybean.” He murmurs, a wry grin twisting his lips.

Jihoon’s hand freezes in its leisurely exploration of his companion’s firm, lengthy cock and he glares. The distracting smug fucker.

“Dammit Seungcheol, how do you do this to me!” Jihoon grunts. He disengages, extracting his errant limbs from where they’re mixed up with Seungcheol’s. He turns, and moves to the table, just to put a bit of space between them. It’s a few thousand kilometers short of being a safe distance, but it’ll have to suffice for the moment. “Not only are you a tease—but you’re a fucking smug one too.”

“I’m just giving you what you want—why are you putting up such a fight?” He says and crosses his arms over his chest, mouth twisting. If it had been anyone else, Jihoon would have said he was whinging. “Are you really going to go to work with a raging boner?” Seungcheol observes, running an agitated hand through his hair.

Jihoon snorts, picking up his mug of coffee. “I’ll manage somehow.”

“Hmm. I suppose it’s easy to ignore your boner with a dick as tiny as yours.” Seungcheol teases. His voice is low, but sharp with challenge.

Jihoon glares with renewed force and slams his mug down on the table with enough force for Seungcheol to jump.

Jihoon wants to answer that challenge, to wrestle Seungcheol to the counter and keep him there, pinned and held fast against Jihoon’s body. To taste the sweat sliding down Seungcheol’s throat, flex his fingers into his hair and mess it. To suck his mark over the throb of Seungcheol’s pulse and feel it falter with the first trembling hint of surrender.

It takes more effort than it should to keep Jihoon from grinding his teeth, to relax his lips into a lazy, self-satisfied smirk. He risks a glance at Seungcheol, who’s watching him with a slightly dopey grin on his face. He can feel the porcelain of the mug in his hand crack. Quickly, he lets go before he can do any lasting damage and starts buttoning up his shirt instead.

Just go to work—hack the servers—whoop his ass when you get back.

“Yanno, I’m almost forgetting what your dick felt like.” Seungcheol continues. He isn’t one to blush but his jaw flickers with something like ruefulness, “I guess that’s expected of things that don’t leave a very big impression.” There’s a teasing lilt to his voice, the diamond-blade edges of his usual mockery blunted with arousal.

Jihoon sighs heavily and glances up at Seungcheol. He’s still leaning against the counter, both hands tucked with deliberate nonchalance into his jogging bottom pockets. It’s not his most convincing performance: he looks too pleased with himself, and the slightest bit tentative, anticipating Jihoon’s reaction to his taunts.

Jihoon hefts the strap of his laptop bag over his shoulder and stands straight, dusting his hands off rather pointlessly on his trousers. “I’m getting real tired of these small dick jokes Seungcheol.” he
He lets his gaze trail down Seungcheol’s body, deliberately provocative. “Now—I could kick your ass, but you’re still recovering from your injuries and I would be taking advantage of your weakened state. That’s hardly fair,” he says, aiming for a detached sort of levity.

“I’m feeling fine actually. Better than fine. So don’t use some old bruises as an excuse for not doling out—punishment. Guess you just don’t have what it takes.” Seungcheol says, scratching the back of his neck and not quite looking at Jihoon. He doesn’t smile, though it’s plain to see he wants to.

“Believe me Cheol, I have what it takes.” Jihoon warns. Seungcheol’s mouth does quirk up then, very slightly, at the corner. “But—I need to go to work now. Don’t worry though—I won’t forget this, so you better be fucking sorry when I get home, cause I’m going to make you scream.”

Seungcheol looks unapologetic. “Hmm. I dunno—” He muses, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s hard to feel threatened by such a tiny dick.” His tone is just right, teasing, a sliver of condescension, light as air.

Just go—leave now. He’s taunting you. You have an important mission!

Jihoon’s resigned himself to the fact that today Seungcheol has, for whatever reason, metamorphosed into the most spiteful cocktease in the history of ill-timed erections; but it’s not as though he hasn’t got a few cards of his own to play.

Jihoon leans past him to fetch a thermos and tips the remainder of his coffee into it. “You know what Seungcheol, keep talking. The more talking you do now, the more screaming I’ll make you do later.” He husks and since he happens to be in such close proximity, he punctuates this advice with an appreciative slap to Seungcheol’s ass.

Seungcheol’s breath hitches, oh so slightly, and he shoots Jihoon a look that borders on withering, possibly to disguise the deeply intriguing hint of darkening color in his already heat-flushed cheeks.

Seungcheol turns his back to him. "Whatever." he says tonelessly.

Jihoon steels himself and strides towards the exit.

Don’t turn around—don’t turn around—don’t turn around.

He lingers in the doorway, glancing up instinctively as he leaves. It’s a rookie mistake: he fixates immediately on the barely decent cut of Seungcheol’s pants, light fabric clinging enticingly to the backs of his thighs as he bends over to root through the cupboards. Jihoon is surely not imagining the subtle sway to Seungcheol’s movements, the trace of invitation in the fluid roll of his hips as he searches. Does he know Jihoon is watching? Does he want him to be?

Jihoon starts his car, reverses out of the drive—then parks it along the curb in front of his house.

After a brief moment of indecision, and a silent battle of wills, he kills the engine and jumps out of the car again. It’s a mistake, he knows it’s a mistake, but he can’t stop himself from abandoning his mission, if only briefly, and tracing his steps back into the house and into the kitchen.

Seungcheol has his back to him, leaning on his elbows over the counter, tapping away on his phone. He must hear Jihoon approaching, but he doesn’t turn around, not even when Jihoon comes to stand directly behind him, close enough to touch. He keeps typing, resolutely ignoring the hairs that must
be rising in warning, the hyperawareness of having somebody at his back. Jihoon has never seen him allow anyone to approach him like this. It’s a contradictory display, trust and stubbornness both, and Jihoon doesn’t bother to fight back the smile tugging at his lips. He’ll never have an easy go of things with Seungcheol, that much is clear. Seungcheol’s always going to fight him (a bit), make him work for it (a lot), demand proof of Jihoon’s authority (always).

That suits Jihoon just fine.

He doesn’t shift until Jihoon steps up closer, trapping him against the counter, pinning him there with his hips. Seungcheol jerks slightly, dropping his phone, but he doesn’t resist the hold. He could get away from Jihoon, easily, he has the weight advantage.

“Jihoon?” Seungcheol gasps, breathless with surprise and something else, something that has his fingers gripping white-knuckled at the bench as if it were the edge of a cliff, one last precarious handhold.

“I changed my mind. I want to hear you scream now.” Jihoon whispers in his ear, rubbing a hand up the seam of Seungcheol’s track pants at the front, pressing his dick against the swell of Seungcheol’s ass at the back. “I think you need a reminder of what my dick feels like.”

“Don’t—don’t you have work?” he says, looking over his shoulder, startled. As if he didn’t invite Jihoon to do exactly this, as if this is some kind of unanticipated invasion.

“Don’t play coy now you cocky shit, you wanted this.” Jihoon snaps, immediately on the defensive. But then he sees Seungcheol break into a smile. A grin, really. The grin of a man whose day has been completely and unexpectedly made.

Seungcheol is looking at him with flushed cheeks and arched brows. It is entirely possible he’s just still flushed from his workout and Jihoon is imagining things, but maybe, just maybe, it is also possible Jihoon has just that much of an effect on him. And that is a very intriguing thought. Jihoon swallows and half-heartedly tries to hold back his smirk when he says “Now—bend over.”

Without batting an eye, Seungcheol bends and braces his hands on the counter. Jihoon sets about working Seungcheol’s sweats off, stroking over the curve of a hip as it is bared. He steps away from Seungcheol’s rear, then circles to his side to take in the planes of his back, the lovely white swell of his ass.

The contrast alone is enough to make Jihoon’s mind blur; he is still completely dressed, while Seungcheol is bare and graceful and whipcord-strong braced against the counter. Jihoon’s cock goes from pressing slightly against his fly to full-on aching in record time. He places a reassuring but firm hand on the small of Seungcheol’s back—knowing full well he will relish seeing his own handprint blooming red and inflamed on that flawless skin.

It feels like the most natural thing in the world to deliver a stinging slap to Seungcheol’s ass. Seungcheol flinches at the touch, plainly startled, but then he’s relaxing into it all at once, eyes sliding closed, tilting his hips back to offer more of his ass.

“You’ve been such a cheeky shit this morning Seungcheollie—I think I should punish you.” Jihoon whispers in his ear, giving his ass one more appreciative stroke before he raises his hand, bringing it down with another ringing smack.

A delicious little sound escapes Seungcheol, half muffled into his forearm. Jihoon grins because —fuck, Seungcheol is now actually blushing, like this punishment is what he needs. Jihoon squeezes Seungcheol’s ass with one hand, hard, letting his fingers fall into the cleft. He rubs a knuckle down
into the crack of his ass, dipping it against his hole, pushing until Seungcheol makes an inarticulate noise and moves back against it.

“Can you—just,” Seungcheol murmurs, then pauses. Whatever else he has to say tapers off rather quickly when Jihoon brings his hand down again, hard enough to rock him forward.

“You don’t get to make demands Cheollie. I’m going to punish you like the bad boy that you are,” Jihoon snaps, instinctive, and then pauses, wondering if Seungcheol is going to object to his choice of words. Jihoon half expects him to pull away with a condescending roll of his eyes, but instead he just sighs a little, drops his chin closer to his sternum. Something hot and feral unfurls in Jihoon’s chest, and his voice feels rough in his throat when he says again: “Such a bad, naughty, boy.” Jihoon punctuates with three more stinging slaps.

Each slap earns a moan, each moan gradually becoming louder to Jihoon’s ears. Jihoon makes a mental note to stop underestimating Seungcheol’s capacity to surprise him. The kinky shit is loving this. Jihoon is loving this. Everything from Seungcheol’s grunts to the tingle and sting of his own palm as it pinks his flawless skin.

Jihoon’s spanks him until his hand is burning and numb. If plans on keeping this up he needs to change tactics. “I don’t see why my hands should hurt when you’re the one who deserves punishment.” He reflects.

Then, with great deliberation, he slips off the belt he is wearing and doubles it up without glancing away from Seungcheol for an instant, draws it taut between both hands with a snap like a gunshot. Seungcheol trembles at the sound. A few pieces of hair are sticking up, having broken away from the control of his hair gel, and a line of sweat slides down Jihoon's back in anticipation.

“I’m starting to think,” Jihoon muses, leaning in until his lips were brushing Seungcheol’s ear, “that maybe you like being told what to do for a change.” He croons, cresting a thumb over his ass, along one of the dimples at the base of his back. “Am I right?”

“Hnnn—no.” Seungcheol groans, breath stuttering as Jihoon’s hand wraps around his waist.

“Liar,” Jihoon whispers. His hand strokes across Seungcheol’s stomach, slow and teasing, savouring the twitch of Seungcheol’s muscles under his fingertips. He curves his fingers around Seungcheol’s cock, a brief familiar touch, before gripping it tightly, almost painfully.

“You’re dying for it, aren’t you,” Jihoon husks. Seungcheol doesn’t speak – good boy, Jihoon thinks, there’s my good boy – but his cock answers for him, twitching in Jihoon’s hand. Want clenches hard in Jihoon’s stomach, fierce and selfish. He presses his mouth to Seungcheol’s ear and says, “You love this.”

Seungcheol tosses his head to the side, breathing hard through his nose. “No, I don’t.” He hisses, eyes screwed shut. Fighting for self-control.

“Oh—I think you do.” Jihoon gives his prick a long, slow stroke and Seungcheol jolts against him, bucking into his hand. Jihoon draws his hand back immediately, shifts his grip to Seungcheol’s back and pins him to counter. He knocks Seungcheol’s head down, praying to god he hasn’t just hit his still healing nose off the marble top.

Jihoon hardens his voice into a command, quiet but unyielding. “You’re going to stand here and take what I give you.” Seungcheol swallows hard, breath shallowing into sharp pants. He’s biting his lip viciously, and Jihoon wonders what he’s holding back. A curse, perhaps. A whimper, or a plea.
“Spread your legs.”

It takes his breath away, watching Seungcheol slide his legs apart, arms folded beneath his head on the counter, his ass in the air. A petty little voice in the most cynical portion of his psyche demands to know how many other lovers have seen him this way, how often Seungcheol has let himself be laid out like this for another. That just wouldn’t do. Jihoon surveys him, hefts the belt, and lays a quick clean blow across his ass before he can overthink anything.

“Motherfucker,” Seungcheol grits. Jihoon pauses to stroke from the nape of his neck down to the crest of his ass again, tracing the redness his belt has left in its wake. Seungcheol hisses, his ass rock into Jihoon’s palm. “Do that again.”

Jihoon obligingly spanks him a second time. Seungcheol gives a shudder and practically groans, his face hot when he presses it into the cool countertop, hand sneaking down greedily to jerk himself off. Jihoon catches his straying hand in a loose grip and guides it up over his head to rest flat on the bench, then squeezes Seungcheol’s fingers, silently letting him know that both hands are to remain exactly where they are until he is told otherwise.

Seungcheol almost whines in frustration. “Again, c’mon.”

Jihoon raises the belt, loving the way Seungcheol tenses in anticipation almost as much as he loves the sob that spills out of him when Jihoon smacks him again. Seungcheol isn’t exactly deathly pale, but his skin takes on color so easily. The leather leaves white prints before they fade, pinkness from earlier now blooming into obscene red stripes, the colour spreading down his thighs where Jihoon isn’t bothering to be precise.

Jihoon hits him again and again.

“Fuck,” gasps Seungcheol. “Jesus.” His voice cracks. Jihoon stops himself on the backswing, listening to the harshness of his own breathing and waiting for Seungcheol to call him off. He doesn’t and Jihoon whips the belt across once more.

“Ahhh—hmmm.”

Something about the pitch of that cry gives Jihoon pause. He pulls back to take a hard look at Seungcheol’s profile, softly outlined in the light from the window: his lidded eyes and flushed cheeks, the agitated way he keeps biting at his lips. He looks drugged, off his head with the need for – what? For Jihoon to touch him, to stop–

“What the fuck,” Seungcheol says calmly, “are you waiting for? I’m not holding this pose all day.”

Jihoon knows a cue when he hears one and he obeys it to the letter, until Seungcheol is rocking forward and crying out with every blow.

“You like that?” he demands after a particularly rough slap, partly for the hell of winding him up and partly to be sure Seungcheol is still with him. “You’re enjoying being punished.”

“No,” Seungcheol pants. Stubborn. If Seungcheol’s attitude is anything to go by, he’s apparently chosen the path of most resistance. Having successfully drawn Jihoon in, Seungcheol now seems to be fighting him off, lashing out in a defensive attempt to reclaim the authority he yielded under Jihoon’s hands—or belt.

Seems to be being the operative phrase. Jihoon is no idiot. Seungcheol wants this. He sees the way Seungcheol jerks back into those hard slaps, he can hear his stifled moans. His little outbursts of hostility are frequent but superficial, aiming not to stop Jihoon, but to provoke him. Seungcheol may
be playing at driving him away, but Jihoon would stake everything on the theory that Seungcheol is waiting to see if he’ll stand his ground and see this through.

“We really need to look into getting you a proper paddle,” Jihoon murmurs, and Seungcheol trembles exquisitely as his belt claps down again.

A few more times and Seungcheol is clutching at the counter with white knuckles. His ass is bright red, all marked up in a way Jihoon’s hand alone would never quite achieve. When Jihoon trails his nails lightly over the welts he’s left behind, Seungcheol shudders and hisses but doesn’t say a word. Jihoon lets his touch trail even lower, ready to tease him open without preparation and maybe lay on a little dirty talk just for the hell of it.

“Hnn—Jihoon.” Seungcheol groans into his arm.

Jihoon smooths a hand down his spine, grips his ass and parts him open, teasing a finger along the crease of it to just feel him squirm. Jihoon feels him jerk forward as if he were trying to rub himself off on the countertop. When he lets his hand wander low enough to tease a finger against his hole, Seungcheol gives a needy little gasp. “Fuck, do it.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Seungcheol says immediately, and Jihoon gives his ass one last good squeeze before landing a sharp slap on one of his cheeks. His back muscles ripple as he shifts to drape more of himself over the counter, head tilting just enough for him to watch Jihoon.

“You’re so stubborn Cheol.” Jihoon says softly. Seungcheol’s breath catches as Jihoon circles his hole, then presses a finer against his opening. Jihoon drops the belt, reaches around Seungcheol’s hip to give his prick a few good hard jerks. “Do you get off on this? Getting spanked and thinking about having a cock in your tight ass?”

Seungcheol turns his head and scowls at him. It is a patently ridiculous expression on him when he’s like this, severe and exaggerated. Seungcheol’s face is not meant to hold such a scowl. The spidery crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the dimples lurking in his cheeks, the flush that creeps along his cheekbones gives him away.

He’s a handsome man, unquestionably, but he could be beautiful, if only he would condescend to allow it. If only he would let himself go. “Admit that you like this.” Jihoon teases, working the tip of his finger inside, dry, snagging on the hypersensitive skin.

Seungcheol chokes, clenching down around Jihoon’s finger. “Mhn—No,” he shoots back.

Jihoon pushes it in all the way, then crooks it.

A traitorous whine vents from Seungcheol’s throat. “Yes—ok. I like it.” He yelps. “Are you just gonna finger me? Is that all you got?”

“Fuck—Cheol!” Jihoon can’t hold back a groan of his own. Just the fact that Seungcheol has been waiting for this, and admitted to it. Jihoon definitely needs to revise his thoughts on Seungcheol’s predictability.

Jihoon’s hands are clumsy with his shirt, clumsier still with his trousers, unzipping all the way and working his pants and boxers down enough to free himself. He resettles his hands on Seungcheol’s hips, eases his cheeks apart then leans in, pressing his tongue against the little clutch of muscle there, and licks into him.
Seungcheol makes a sound that can't be called anything other than a squeak; he does it again as Jihoon moves his tongue in small circles, and it deepens into a loud moan when Jihoon flicks his spit-slick tongue across Seungcheol's hole and then wriggles it in.

"Jihoon, Jihoon." Seungcheol repeats now, his thighs trembling.

Jihoon's tongue slips past the first tight ring of muscle, and Seungcheol's back arches in a beautiful, tight curve. He shoves back into Jihoon's mouth, fucking himself as Jihoon parts his cheeks to keep him open.

Seungcheol moans quietly, tremulous little spasms rocking through his body with each push of Jihoon’s tongue inside. Jihoon could spend hours like this, rimming Seungcheol until he comes undone and his own jaw is throbbing from eating him out, but there is only so much he can do with his mouth at a given time. “How hard do you want it?” Jihoon demands, voice rough.

Seungcheol makes a small sound of loss, then whimpers when Jihoon circles his finger around his rim. "Tell me and maybe I’ll give you what you want."

“Just give it to me,” Seungcheol admits in a rush, and then cries out when Jihoon flits his tongue against him once more. “Quit teasing, just give me your cock, come on."

Jihoon straightens up, his trousers wind up pooled on the floor and Seungcheol winds up bent further over the counter, knees spread, arching and writhing back as Jihoon presses a slicked finger into him unceremoniously. Seungcheol is a furnace inside, indecently slick and hot, opening right up for him.

“Can’t wait to get filled, can you?” Jihoon can’t resist murmuring at him, and Seungcheol’s body gives a delightful spasm as Jihoon slides in a second digit, twisting both at the last knuckle, scissoring his fingers until he pulls out gasps of embarrassing frequency and volume. “You’re so cute when you beg Cheollie”

“I’m not begging. Get moving.” Seungcheol’s moans flicker out as he adjusts his stance, spreading his legs open.

Jihoon takes advantage of the moment to stand a little straighter, pull his fingers out and presses in again with three. “You’ll beg for it,” he shoots back automatically, and presses his fingers in deeper before Seungcheol has a chance to scoff. Seungcheol only moans and obligingly rocks back, legs parted wide, knees pressing into the cabinet on either side of his thighs. “If you don’t beg, you’ll be doing all this by yourself.” Jihoon says, starting to withdraw his digits.

“Wait—I ,” Seungcheol starts, soft and breathless, prone as ever to spouting what Jihoon supposes is his own personal version of begging even though it still sounds more like an order than anything else. “I just need it, come on, put it in, just do it.” His cock rubs obscenely against the counter, smearing precome on the cabinet, hips jolting even as he rolls his hips back onto Jihoon’s fingers.

Jihoon clamps both hands down on his hips, pushing his pelvis up against Seungcheol’s ass, fitting his cock into the cleft and grinding against it just to see Seungcheol gasp and push back into him in answer. His stomach clenches at the wash of sensation, at the anticipation of sinking into that hot, fucking perfect ass.

He surges forward against Seungcheol’s back, his hands fisting in Seungcheol’s hair, nails scraping along his scalp. “Then,” Jihoon whispers into his ear, adjusting his hold until he is spreading him wide, letting his cock head graze the rim of Seungcheol’s slippery hole just for the sake of feeling Seungcheol twitch and try to coax him in, “I suppose you’d better start begging.”
Seungcheol exhales sharply, face averted. “Fuck me Jihoon—fuck me please!”

Jihoon releases his hair, caressing it tenderly as his head slumps forward. “See, that wasn’t so hard.” He coos, pressing a kiss to Seungcheol’s shoulder blade and then pressing inside him.

“Ahh—ahhh.” Seungcheol gasps, then goes very still. His head drops down to hang loosely from his shoulders. He’s breathing hard, but otherwise silent, maybe biting his lip to keep quiet. His body strains against Jihoon’s, hard and uncompromising, muscle and bone, but he’s so soft inside, a tight sucking clutch around Jihoon’s cock.

Jihoon slides out nearly all the way and then sets a steadily rising rhythm. Seungcheol moans, barely anything, a soft little set of exhalations, but his hole tightens convulsively with each thrust, pulling Jihoon deeper into him. The first few thrusts are all jangling nerves at war with the need for some control, and it’s difficult to think at all with Seungcheol’s hot tight hole clenching around him, even more difficult when Seungcheol gasps and shudders and then moans for more.

“Touch me—please.” Seungcheol says after a minute, clawing ineffectually at the counter.

Jihoon curls one hand round the wing of Seungcheol’s hip, and with the other he begins jacking Seungcheol off slowly; he watches as Seungcheol holds onto the edges of the counter like if he lets go he’ll float away, all the while letting out a stream of incoherent curses with Jihoon's name mixed in for good measure.

Jihoon shifts them, aiming for a new angle. He hits it just right, managing to thrum Seungcheol’s prostate with relentless pressure. It’s too much, maybe, but Jihoon loves hearing Seungcheol make those greedy torn-up noises. He picks up his pace to deep lunging thrusts, and Seungcheol moans again, deep and long and Jihoon can’t help but grunt alongside him. The flesh slapping sounds are louder now, Jihoon can’t be sure which of them is making more noise but he’s suddenly thankful for his elderly, hard of hearing neighbours.

He ducks and licks a wet line along Seungcheol’s spine “You’ve been so good Cheollie. Such a good boy now.” Seungcheol's body is warm and pliant now as Jihoon thrusts into him, gripping Jihoon's cock every time he slides back out. “You’re close, aren’t you?”

Seungcheol pushes back against him and begs so sweetly for it, no words required. And when Jihoon pulls out suddenly, Seungcheol gives a full-body shiver and whines, tensing from head to toe to try and keep him from moving. “No, don’t, Jihoon. I’m really close, just a little more.”

“Not yet, baby boy. I want to make you last a little longer. You don’t mind, do you?” Jihoon toys a fingertip against the rim of his hole, then dips three inside him to the second knuckle. Seungcheol tenses and curses and whimpers all at once, beautifully undone. “Look at you. Just a greedy little hole for me to play with.” Jihoon mutters darkly.

Jihoon removes his fingers, then eases his cock smoothly into him again, sliding a finger in alongside it to feel Seungcheol spasm. “Fucking hell, such a good boy, taking it all so well.” Jihoon marvels, half muffled as he mouths the notches of Seungcheol's spine.

Jihoon is going to come any second, he can feel the pressure building. "You feel so amazing," he
breaths into Seungcheol's skin. "Is it good for you?" he whispers as he starts to lose control, shoving himself against Seungcheol, hips kicking up in a series of stammered thrusts, fingers digging into Seungcheol’s hip. "Is this what you wanted? Is this why you’ve been a little cock tease this morning?"

“Yes—yes—yess!” Seungcheol’s reply turns into a whine as Jihoon slips a second finger alongside his cock. “Ahh—fuck—Jihoon!”

And that was what does it, what makes Seungcheol convulse and come all over Jihoon's hand, his ass tightening in almost painful spasms around Jihoon's cock and fingers. Seungcheol’s arms give out and he crashes forward onto the counter, and he probably would have slid to the floor if Jihoon isn't still inside him, fucking into him with short, sharp jerks.

Seungcheol twists his head to look at Jihoon. “Ahn—Jihoon. Please!” His voice is rubbed rough with pleasure, his eyes dark and avid. “Nut in me.”

That plea tips Jihoon over the edge, and he comes, hips snapping and blood rushing in his ears as he spills inside Seungcheol.

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Jihoon feels dazed, drunk with endorphins. He wants to fold himself down over Seungcheol and go to sleep. He leans over Seungcheol’s back, breathing fast, for a few moments, before pulling out.

Seungcheol turns to look at him, and his face is normal, wry little smirk, barely lifted eyebrow, but there’s a blush gathering in the hollow of his throat, a livid pink that sweeps up his throat and over his jaw when he sees Jihoon looking, spreads into his cheeks, and then up to his hairline. “Thanks.”
He whispers.

Jihoon has difficulty controlling his eyebrows. “You’re welcome.”

Seungcheol’s upper body is still flat against the counter. His skin is flushed and damp, his hair is a disaster; a mass of tangles and stubborn clumps of gel, strands springing out here and there with joyful anarchy. Jihoon wants to touch those strands, smooth them down, tuck them behind Seungcheol’s ears; he wants to wind his fingers in them and tug Seungcheol forward until that lopsided smile is close enough to kiss.

But now he’s seriously late to work. Too late to access the servers without somebody noticing anyway. **Fuck.**

“That was good.” Seungcheol says. He sounds tired, but happy.

Jihoon tucks his cock back into his pants and fixes him with a questioning look. “Good? I don’t believe I'm saying this but, don't be modest, Seungcheol. You were begging me to—”

“Sorry—of course” Seungcheol says, jerking himself upright. His ears are bright red. “It was amazing. I wanted to say that but you’re not usually comfortable with praise and I thought I would just do you a favour and mute it down.” Seungcheol stretches, hums out a pleased noise when something cracks.

“What do you mean I’m not comfortable with praise? I love praise! Who doesn’t love praise?” Jihoon huffs incredulously.

“Uhh—**you.** I praise you all the time, sentimental shit and you get all—squirmy.” Seungcheol laughs, managing to sound smug all over again, even when he’s still partially slumped over the
counter, sweat pants caught around his ankles. There’s a sticky, gleaming line of Jihoon’s come dripping down his thigh, just looking at it makes Jihoon’s cock hurt.

“That’s a good thing. The squirminess is me *appreciating* the praise.” Jihoon nips sharply at the small of Seungcheol’s back, and then lower, teeth skidding on the taut, slippery curve of his butt-cheek. There are bruises on him, mauve ones shaped like fingers low on his hips to accompany the others, fading to yellow on his ribs. Jihoon knows which he prefers.

“If I didn’t squirm and just got all smug, then I’d be a *real* asshole—*like you.*” Jihoon punctuates the last two words with another slap, cringing as Seungcheol winces and jerks.

“Sorry—instinct. Uhh—I’ll get you some lotion.” He soothes, rubbing an apologetic hand over Seungcheol’s abused rear.

Seungcheol’s ears darken to crimson. He shakes his head, looking a little amused, and pushes himself up. “Are you going to transform into nurse Jihoon now and kiss me better, clean me up and rub lotion on my sore ass.”

“Jesus. Don’t think I’m cleaning this up. You’re the one who made the mess,” Jihoon points out, wrestling down a smile. He straightens, cracks his neck, grimaces at the dampness of his shirt tails, then wanders over to the bedroom to change again.

“Made you late,” Seungcheol shouts down the corridor to him, sounding far too pleased with himself. Jihoon grins. “Remind me to never underestimate the power of tiny penis.”

“You never learn.” Jihoon mutters under his breath, throwing his soiled and sweaty shirt in the laundry hamper.

Chapter End Notes

1) This is not the kink I mentioned last chapter
2) Sorry about the limited plot development--lol
3) Surprisingly, a lot of fun to write aggressive top Jihoon :D (Top cheol-still me fave :))
4) Feedback is always appreciated!!
Seungcheol’s ass—is on fire. Understandably so. He’s just had the spanking of a lifetime and his rear and the backs of his thighs are a mess of welts and bruises.

Their whole spanking adventure—had materialized out of nowhere really. It’s not something Seungcheol would have ever considered, and he probably would have been embarrassed if he hadn’t felt so fucking satisfied after.

Jihoon had enjoyed it too—he’s never been shy about mixing it up when necessary. It’s one of the things Seungcheol appreciates about him; the buttoned-up exterior is only one part of the man, and it’s usually the part he shows to strangers. Seungcheol knows the real Jihoon is so much more than a bashful kid and a focused mind. He’s not nearly as uptight and reserved as Seungcheol had thought when they’d met. Both of them have had to shift their first impressions over the months to accommodate the truth. It’s not a bad thing.

“Do you need help with that?”

Seungcheol looks up to see Jihoon hovering at the edge of the room, watching as Seungcheol squeezes lotion into the palm of his hand.

“Nah—I got this.” Seungcheol dismisses with a shaky laugh.

“You’re sure? I mean, I could—“ Jihoon trails off, gesturing to the lotion and then Seungcheol’s butt with an all-inclusive gesture.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m fine. You should get to work Jellybean.” Seungcheol assures, trying for his most winning smile. He has a feeling it’s coming out watered and weak.

It’s hard for him to go from fuck me please to can I have a hug? in the space of a few minutes. He can see Jihoon is considering kissing him goodbye, knowing full-well it will only make the situation more awkward.

Jihoon hesitates for a moment, then shrug his shoulders, grabs his bag and walks out.

Seungcheol isn’t exactly surprised by the hot rush of hurt that goes through him, but he’s not impressed with himself for it either. Dammit!—He thinks, the word sinking in his chest like something set to sea. He loathes that little prideful part of him that takes precedence over a lot of his decisions and ruins his fun.

He has a fleeting, wistful thought: It isn’t too late to do something else. To call Jihoon back and say ‘Yes—please for the love of God, rub lotion on my ass and pet my hair. Spoon me maybe?’
As soon as he thinks it, his inner, prideful, intelligent, *boring* thoughts take over, shoving that idea down with the force it deserves. Instead he bites back a groan as he smooths lotion on his flaming rear and when that isn’t soothing enough, he pulls a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer and promptly sits down on it.

“AHH—fuck yes.”

Hesitant, Jihoon leaves Seungcheol at home to head for work, second-guessing himself all the way. He thinks he should have stayed and offered more. More what, he doesn’t know; more something. More touching maybe, or a kiss or two. But then he would be forcing aftercare on Seungcheol who is, after all, an adult who can take care of himself. And even if Seungcheol was acting a little off, a little muddled, he still knows what he needs better than anyone could tell him.

So, still feeling this murky combination of guilt and admittedly vain hurt he makes a valiant effort to focus on his work and, very belatedly, the mission Dr Raine set him.

He arrives at work, settles at his desk and begins a series of routine analysis tasks, but it’s half-hearted at best. He’s understandably distracted, too restless to concentrate. His blood feels too hot in his veins, blistering under his skin, burning his fingertips. He can’t stop thinking about how he’s going to get up to the servers.

One of his team mates has stepped out on some errand or another, and it’s quiet in the office, just him and Seungkwan each working silently at their tables. Or pretending to work, in his case.

When he’s had time to think about it; accessing the security network is not quite as simple as Dr Raine had suggested over the phone. Since the bureau started investigating his disappearance. Security has been cranked up. All colleagues accessing the servers are now required to undergo a routine Polygraph check to ensure their intentions are not self-serving or *malicious*. Everyone in his team has been issued access card for the portal, but once the card has been used to enter, it automatically registers on a database and a polygraph is scheduled for the following week. A polygraph that will no doubt reveal that he is operating outside of the companies policy.

In short, he needs to find a way to access the servers without raising suspicion, then remove all traces of his steps.

From the servers, he *could* hack into the database that schedules polygraph appointments and remove his name from the list— but once he swipes his card to leave the room, another appointment will be triggered.

He *could* learn how to cheat a polygraph—but that’s not something he thinks he can pick up in a week.

Sighing heavily and pivoting in his chair, he glances around the office, wracking his brain for a quick solution. He looks over at Seungkwan, who seems to be immersed in work, surrounded by papers and scrutinizing error logs on his computer. That’s when he spots Seungkwan’s access card slotted in the computer and an idea is born. He can use Seungkwan’s card too access the servers. A polygraph will be scheduled for Seungkwan, and since Seungkwan is operating within the companies polices (hopefully) his answers won’t trigger a fail on the test.

He’s just wondering how much it might cost him to persuade Seungkwan to leave for an hour when,
as if reading Jihoon’s mind, Seungkwan sighs heavily and pushes away from his worktable, wiping his hands on his trousers. He mutters something about needing a coffee under his breath as he trudges off toward the elevator.

Watching him wait for the elevator to ascend, Jihoon categorically retracts every uncharitable thought he has ever had about the man. He’s nothing short of a bloody saint.

Jihoon is on his feet the instant the doors to the elevators shut. By the time the elevator starts counting down the levels—6—5—4—3, Jihoon’s already crossed the room, pulled Seungkwan’s card out of the computer and is halfway down the corridor and into the stairwell.

He sprints up the four flights of stairs to the floor the severs are housed. Taking the stairs isn’t ideal, but Jihoon can’t risk the elevator (too many cameras, too many ways to get trapped).

The server room is busy; the kind of busy that obscures instead of exposes. Jihoon smiles politely but doesn’t engage anyone in conversation; it wouldn’t do to draw their attention to why he is here. If he plans this properly, they may not recall him being here at all. He takes a seat in the computer bay furthest from the doors and uses Seungkwan’s access key to log in to the servers.

After a careful glance around him, Jihoon takes a deep breath; closing his eyes and turning his concentration inward—he starts accessing the mainframe.

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It’s relatively simple to hack into the companies permission network from there. A few alterations here, a quick change of protocols there and Seungkwan’s card now has authority to access the security servers. He just needs to get into the security room to download the footage and find what Dr Raine needs.

Taking another deep breath, Jihoon pushes himself away from the computer and crosses the room, his eyes fixed on the door panel. He swipes the card through the lock, pushes the door open and steps through, cautious.

Nothing happens. No alarms, no sudden burst of security guards—nothing. It is almost anticlimactic. He moves further into the room, smoothing his palms over his thighs, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Before he knows it, he’s taking a seat at one of the workstations and is hacking into one of the computer terminals to override the security systems to access the CCTV cameras.

He pulls up the feed of the camera recording the lobby, to keep one eye on Seungkwan’s location and opens another browser to access CCTV archived footage.

Next, he accesses archived recordings for the camera located inside Dr Raine’s office. He adjusts the time stamp for the camera for the last date Dr Raine worked and speeds through the recording. The angle isn’t great, but scene that plays out is simple—almost.

11:06: Dr Raine arrives in his office.
11:23: Dr Raine starts working on his computer.
13:23: Dr Raine makes a phone call
14:46: Dr Raine disappears.

Jihoon blinks. He scrubs at both eyes with his knuckles. He taps a few keys to zoom in on the image and rewinds. He’s certain the illusion will crumble if he watches closely enough.
14:45: One minute Dr Raine is in his office—the next, 14:46—he vanishes from his seat.

The image doesn't resolve, doesn't rearrange itself the way it should, it refuses to morph into something that makes sense. He taps out of the camera view and switches to another viewpoint, another camera located just outside in the corridor.

At exactly the same time Dr Raine disappears from the office in camera 1—in camera 2, Dr Raine gets up from his chair, grabs a few items and legs it out of the office.

Now things are beginning to make sense. Dr Raine must have hacked the camera in his office to distort his movements, but missed the second camera. Obviously he suspected that somebody was watching him.

Jihoon speeds through the recording.

14:55: A man enters Dr Raine's office, searching for him, then makes a frantic phone call.

15:00: Another man comes into the office, the door to the office closes and they begin tearing through files and turning out drawers.

Something about the second man catches Jihoon’s attention, and he slows down the cursor winding through the CCTV loop and zooms in. The image is blurry, but Jihoon identifies the man, with bone-deep, unshakeable certainty.

It's the CEO.

15:12: The frantic search comes to an end and the CEO leaves the office.

Jihoon switches to another camera.

15:14 The CEO walks at a brisk pace, moving through the maze of tables with something in his hand. He's headed to the elevator, a look of resigned frustration on his familiar face.

There's an ache in Jihoon's chest that amplifies with every rewatch, with every glimpse of the CEO’s blurred shape as he retreats from Dr Raine’s office with an ‘object’ in his hand.

He has the hard-drive.

Jihoon slumps back in his chair, head swimming with information. A chance glance to the live CCTV camera feed reveals Seungkwan emerging from the office canteen, coffee in hand. He doesn’t have the luxury of mulling this over right now. He needs to get back down to the office before Seungkwan returns—before he notices his access card is missing.

Jihoon exits the browsers quickly, he initializes a security dump immediately. Wipes off all temporary data, resets passwords and encryptions, erases all traces of the view logs generated, logs out and exits the room.

Once he enters the stairwell again, he leaps down to his floor, taking the stairs two steps at a time. He makes it back to his office as the elevator counts back up the levels —3—4—5—6. Sprinting into the room, he carefully slots Seungkwan’s card back into the access panel before jumping back into his chair, slumping in the seat just as the elevator doors open.

“Here you go.” Seungkwan smiles, placing a Styrofoam cup of coffee on his desk. He’s looking a little more refreshed than earlier, completely missing the fine sheen of sweat on Jihoon’s forehead as he smiles amiably and returns to his desk.
“Thanks.” Jihoon says, flushing down his guilt with scolding gulp of coffee.

Once his heartbeat has settled, he pulls out his mobile and texts Dr Raine the good news.

**Jihoon: Success.**

Seungcheol’s only just fallen asleep (sitting on his second bag of frozen peas) when he’s roused by a sharp burst of knocking. He jerks upright, immediately apprehensive.

He’s been laying low at Jihoon’s place for a few days now, and in that time, not a single soul has come calling. Why should they? Jihoon doesn’t like people invading his personal space at home. He’s been just amiable enough with the neighbors to keep from seeming mysterious or sinister, not enough to encourage dinner invitations or casual drop-ins. It can’t possibly be for Seungcheol, he’s not scheduled to meet his crew until later and aside from the Jeonghan, no one else knows he’s here.

No one *ought* to know, anyway. Seungcheol retrieves his gun from his jacket and moves quietly toward the front door. He stands just to the side of the door as he turns the deadbolt, behind the relative protection of the wall. The chain stays on, as more of a token gesture than anything; it wouldn’t put up much resistance against anyone with a strong back and sufficient motivation.

He cracks open the door, revealing his visitor in slow increments: dark hair, the angle of an elbow, a goatee and spectacles. The man looks in his mid-fifties: geeky, short and harmless.

Seungcheol relaxes instinctively, and then immediately tenses up again, cross with himself. He knows better than anyone not to underestimate appearances.

“Hi.” Seungcheol greets, loosening the chain on the door, concealing the gun behind it.

“Uhmm—hello.” The look the man’s fixing on him is intense, the expression on his face something Seungcheol can’t quite decipher. Nervousness?

“Can I help you?” Seungcheol says with all the fake pleasantness he can muster,

“I—I was looking for someone, a friend. I though they lived here,” The man explains, looking over Seungcheol’s shoulder less than discreetly. His gaze flickers to look at Seungcheol’s hand, the one curled around the door frame, then to where the other is hiding behind door. His eyes darken a little.

“I think I may have the wrong address, apologies for the disturbance.” He adds quickly, turning to take his leave. His voice is even, but there’s something about his posture that sets alarm bells somewhere within Seungcheol’s mind, long enough for his reflexive and generalized distrust to kick in.

Seungcheol cocks his gun behind the door, slowly, carefully—mindful of the noise it will make. *Careful,* his brain whispers. “Who are you looking for?” he calls out to the man’s retreating back.

The man freezes, then turns back around slowly, pinning him with a searching look. “It’s okay, never mind. I grabbed the bus here and must have gotten off at the wrong stop.”

Seungcheol narrows his gaze suspiciously, but softens the look with another smile. He could very well be reading the man’s body language all wrong. “I’m relatively new to the neighbourhood, but if you tell me the address you’re looking—I could direct you.”
The man swallows visibly. “No, it’s fine. Thank you, but I’ll just call a cab.” He waves Seungcheol off, stepping down from the door and walking down the pavement briskly.

Weird

Seungcheol returns to his blessed bag of peas, hissing as he settles on it once more. He almost drifts off again when he hears somebody clear their throat.

“I feel like I’ve walked in on something private and personal.” says the familiar and worryingly cheerful voice that can only belong to one person. Seungcheol’s eye snap open and he turns his head slowly to the source.

Jeonghan is standing in the doorway, arms crossed. For once, he doesn’t look arrogant, only questioning, arching an eyebrow in wordless inquiry.

Seungcheol does not startle, nor does he spend over-long examining the fact that Jeonghan has been standing there watching him sit on a bag of frozen peas with a blissful look on his face. Instead, he prides himself on the glare he levels at Jeonghan. Perhaps, he hasn’t noticed the peas?

“How long have you been standing there?” Seungcheol asks, feeling irrationally defensive. He ignores the heat in his cheeks and the slight ache in his backside as he sits up quickly.

The answering grin suggests that Jeonghan has, in fact, noticed the peas. “A few minutes. You looked—comfortable, didn’t want to disturb whatever it is you’re doing.” His cavalier tone makes Seungcheol want to put his fist through his jaw. He’s over due for a punch, anyway.

Seungcheol gets to his feet, hating how frantic his pulse is beating in the face of Jeonghan’s cool indifference. “I thought we were meeting at the garage?” He says tightly. It’s a fairly transparent pretence, and Jeonghan makes a skeptical noise, clearly not buying it. But he allows Seungcheol to draw him into the conversation easily enough.

“That was the plan, until Vernon rang something in an hour ago. Masquerader patrol spotted entering the city, I thought we should re-group.” Jeonghan explains.

“So, what is it this time? Where did Vernon spot them?” Seungcheol asks, scratching his cheek thoughtfully.

“Three separate locations actually. He can’t be sure, but he thinks they’re tailing somebody. He lost track of them when they entered the industrial zone. That’s when he called us. I tried to call you, but you didn’t pick up. Figured you were busy playing happy families with Jihoon.” Jeonghan clarifies, a bit grudgingly. His expression is grouchy, but it lacks bite, and Seungcheol suspects it’s out of habit more than any real ire.

“And he’s sure it’s them?” he asks, managing to sound condescending despite his confusion.

Jeonghan tilts his head, considering, “Licence plate match, and he was right about them last time.”

“Twice in the space of a week—something’s not right.” Seungcheol says dubiously. “Masqueraders can’t possibly be this stupid. We wiped out a third of their crew last week, wouldn’t they need more time to re-form?”

Jeonghan shrugs his shoulders. “Maybe business dried up in their area? Maybe they were pushed out. Desperate people do stupid things.” He offers.
“Maybe.” Seungcheol muses, padding over to the kitchen area carefully. He only realizes he’s wincing when he meets Jeonghan’s eyes. It only takes a moment for Jeonghan’s initial curiosity to shift into something wary and calculating.

Seungcheol follows his shifting gaze to the bag of thawing peas still resting on the couch. "Hey, so-- why were you sitting on a bag of peas?"

Seungcheol shifts, lifting a hand to the back of his head, trying to disguise the blush spreading across his nose. Several taunts dance on the tip of his tongue, but he feels too intimately exposed to deal with it at the moment. "None of your business." He snaps. He can’t help replying sharply, he is a profoundly mediocre actor, with no talent for deflecting attention away from vulnerable weak spots.

To his chagrin, Jeonghan doesn't even seem offended. His expression becomes disturbingly cunning -- the look he only gets when he thinks he’s figured something out to someone else’s detriment. Seungcheol is certain he used to be more intimidating than this. He blames Jihoon. Although, it is sort of hard to muster up the proper tone of authority when you can’t stop blushing like a fucking schoolgirl.

“You couldn’t possibly still be injured from last week! I’ve seen you take worse hits that that.” Jeonghan reflects.

“They pulled a grenade on me!” Seungcheol says pointedly, heavy brows draw together in an infamous scowl. The expression clashes with the blush still heating his cheeks.

Jeonghan’s face darkens, lips thinning into a hard line. “You’ve handled grenades before. You’ve handled an RPG before and went back to work the very next day. It’s never taken you this long to recover.” Jeonghan muses, voice low, but needled with suspicion.

Seungcheol offers a weak shrug in response. “Well—maybe I’m getting older.”

Jeonghan hums thoughtfully, in that way of his that would make a lesser man feel vaguely guilty without knowing exactly why. “We’re all getting older Seungcheol. Maybe you’re just into new things that require you to sit on bags of frozen peas after?”

Seungcheol can't miss Jeonghan’s lightly mocking tone. Well, he supposes he earned it this once.

Seungcheol lets out a long sigh, wistfully considering all the ways he could disembowel his intruding friend if he were a lesser person. “Can we not talk about this now.” He replies, face and voice hardening.

“Talk about what?” Jeonghan smiles conspiratorially. Seungcheol gets the distinct impression the guys enjoying himself immensely.

“This---this topic.” he says, with icy ferocity, rolling his shoulders with unhappy tension.

Jeonghan rolls his eyes like Seungcheol is intentionally being difficult. “What—your injuries? Getting older? The masqueraders? Or you getting reamed by your twink?” he says, carefully enunciating each word.

Seungcheol flushes furiously, much to Jeonghan’s increased amusement. But, true to form, he recovers quickly and crosses his arms with another exasperated sigh. He knows Jeonghan well enough to know he’ll wait him out; silence has never been a deterrent for him. “I thought we agreed you wouldn’t call Jihoon a twink anymore? I’m not going to stop him from kicking your ass again.” Seungcheol reprimands with a sour expression on his face.
Jeonghan raises a suggestive eyebrow. “I notice you’re not denying it.” He’s being a shit, but the opportunity is too tempting to ignore.

“Yeah. So? I bottomed—what of it?” Seungcheol says, closed-off and irritable, prickly with the fierce unhappy anger that grows out of embarrassment. He knows that he’s got nothing to be ashamed of. He shouldn’t give a toss what Jeonghan or anyone else thinks of his sex life; he should be comfortable in the knowledge that whatever he gets up to behind closed doors, it’s healthy and rewarding and no one else’s fucking business.

Jeonghan’s answering smile is a veritable punch in the face. "Aw, that’s cute. Letting the little guy have a go for once.” He coos. “I’m just surprised he managed to hurt you that much. He doesn’t look like he is concealing a big weapon.” he adds, eyebrows raised for maximum innuendo.

Rolling his eyes, Seungcheol wonders how the hell he is supposed to keep a healthy front of anger against someone who barely notices the effort. “Okay, first of all,” he says, hating himself for always, always, always giving in and engaging even though he knows better, “Don’t let appearances fool you. Just cause he’s small doesn’t mean that he’s—yanno—small. Secondly, it wasn’t the sex that injured me.”

Fighting desperately against a grin, Jeonghan clears his throat “Oh? Then why are you trying so hard not to limp and failing spectacularly at it?”

And in one of those moments that Seungcheol can't possibly have anticipated and tries to prevent, he suffers a spontaneous, unstoppable burst of honesty, and says: “Because we ‘experimented’ with a belt, okay!”

“Belt?” Jeonghan repeats incredulously. His eyebrows are at his hairline now, and he looks like he’s trying to decide if he’s shocked or deeply, deeply amused.

“Yeah—a belt. He used his belt on me.” Seungcheol wonders if his face is going to be a permanent shade of red when this is all over.

Jeonghan gapes at Seungcheol for a long moment, as if he can’t decide what to comment on first. “Did he tie you up with one or—did he spank you?” He asks, almost like he’s hurt he wasn’t invited

Seungcheol averts his gaze as he moves around the kitchen island, but he feels Jeonghan's eyes on him. He dreads the smug look of superiority he knows twists those features. “Oh my god! Cheol, seriously—you are full of surprises!” Jeonghan cackles.

Seungcheol’s brows lower into a frown. He hadn't expected such easy acceptance. “Can we please talk about something else.” He groans, rubbing a hand over his face.

“I have definitely underestimated Jihoon. If he can reign you in, then reduce you to this blushing, shy mess—he’s a keeper.” He says, almost wistfully.

“Sometimes it’s fun to lose control!” someone says, and Seungcheol is quite shocked to realize it’s him. "I mean," he says, trying to salvage the situation. "It’s fun to switch things up." He's kicking himself as soon as he closes his mouth.

Jeonghan raises one eyebrow, perfectly arched and perfectly disdainful, giving him a few seconds to revise his statement. When Seungcheol doesn’t, he chuckles quietly. “I’m not denying that. What you do in the privacy of your bedroom is completely up to you. Enjoy.”

“We didn’t do it in the bedroom actually!” Seungcheol blurts out. Perhaps, he thinks a second later, that wasn’t the best sort of reply. He hates that Jeonghan always seems to get more information out
of him than he’s willing to give. Somehow, he can’t help saying more than is absolutely necessary Jeonghan simply guffaws.

“You know what—I need to change my clothes.” Seungcheol huffs, pushing past Jeonghan to walk (not limp) to the room.

“Yeah sure, take your time. Wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.” Jeonghan calls out after him. There’s a condescending smile in his voice—Seungcheol doesn’t have to look at him to know it’s there.

He dresses quickly. There isn’t time to reapply lotion and the black jeans he’s slipped on are uncomfortably tight around his ass. Jeonghan gives him a bemused look when they meet up again in the corridor. Despite his amusement, it’s hard to say whether he approves of the revelation. Not that Seungcheol is bothered one way or the other. All things considered, he knows he's got nothing to be ashamed about. Even if he's effectively destroyed his bad-ass-motherfucker reputation and bought a one-way ticket to less that subtle spanking jokes for the rest of his fucking life.

He remembers the way Jihoon’s hands felt against his skin, Jihoon’s mouth whispering filthy promises between achingly sweet kisses, the way Jihoon so clearly wants him as much as he wants Jihoon, like he's never wanted anyone before. Seungcheol can’t bring himself to regret a moment of it —apart from being caught butthurt over a bag of frozen peas.

“I know it’s difficult for you to keep your mouth shut, but I’d appreciate if it we didn’t discuss this again—ever.” Seungcheol mutters under his breath, grabbing his jacket from behind the door.

Jeonghan smirks at him. He mimes a lock and throw away the key gesture across his lips as they walk out of the house, slamming the door behind them.

“What took you guys so long?” Mingyu asks, head poking out of the car window. His frown falls slightly at the sight of Seungcheol gingerly walking down the steps. He tilts his head to one side and studies the two as they walk around the front of the car. “Boss, what’s wrong? Are you limping?” He asks.

“Oh, for fuck's sake!” Seungcheol blushes to the roots of his hair and Jeonghan snorts something between a grunt and a chuckle.

The rest of Jihoon’s day passes in a blur of pointless meetings, analysing outputs, upgrading interfaces, and very black coffee.

Jihoon’s mission is complete. He’s got the information Dr Raine requested—but the revelation has blown the whole thing wide open for him. He can’t just leave it there. Worse, he keeps feeling like something is missing, something important. With his own deadline for a project approaching, he barely has time to think, much less re-read all the intel he’s gathered. He both wants and dreads his next meeting with Dr Raine and what it will reveal.

After the rest of Jihoon’s team retires for the day, he digs a little deeper.

When he’d accepted the promotion, he was given access to all of Dr Raine’s data on the network drives, plus a hefty stack of his handwritten notes, to help him get started. It’s a ton of material, but Jihoon cuts through it cleanly, parsing what’s relevant from what isn’t at a steady clip.

Before, he didn’t know what he was looking for—he was merely trying to reconstruct the algorithm
Dr Raine had designed. Now, it’s almost like working backwards.

He flips through the records, searching for clues in the hastily scrawled notes and papers. On a whim, he hacks into the CEO’s private email server. Scrolling through encrypted emails from multiple accounts, invoices that don’t make sense, data on projects that have never made it into any official report, travel plans that don’t match his location on multiple dates. They’re the kind of things that, in isolation, wouldn’t raise a red flag—one oversight here, one wrong number there—but looking at it all together is like seeing a completed map with all the roads written in.

“Fuck,” Jihoon says. His fingertips blade over the screen, one piece of information to the next, physically connecting the dots.

By 7pm, Jihoon hasn’t exactly cracked the case, but he has figured one thing out. There’s a whole lot of money and power within his reach. Powerful has never been an adjective used to described Jihoon. Power’s never even been a word used in association with him.

To think that with a few basic algorithms he could have access to any number of bank accounts, private servers and classified data, all within reach of his fingertips—is the very definition of power. It’s a heady thought, one that sends susurrations of thrill beneath his skin. Not that he would ever dream of exercise that power—he’s always been and will always will be a law abiding citizen. Seriously.

It’s just cool to think about it. He’d love to explain it to Seungcheol, although he is almost certain Seungcheol would get one of those adoring, wistful looks on his face and say something like: ‘You’re so cute when you’re being nerdy Jellybean.’

He packs his belongings and heads out into the corridor, stealing a glance at his phone whilst waiting for the elevator to arrive. There’s nothing – no calls, no messages. He had messaged Dr Raine well over 3 hours ago but has yet to receive a reply. They never set a deadline, and 7pm is still rather on the chancy side of prudence, but Jihoon knows Dr Raine wouldn’t have missed replying to his message with no good reason, and he feels a twist in his stomach at the implications.

When the elevator dings, he shuffles in mindlessly. He’s still thinking about it, needling the whole thing over in his mind, that’s probably why it takes him a second to notice that the CEO is standing in the elevator—waiting for him.

Well—he’s not waiting for him, precisely, except in the sense that he always seems to be waiting for Jihoon these days, eyeing him behind his back with a furtive mix of wariness and expectation.

Jihoon is surprised to see him. His appearance is oddly fortuitous, the sort of inconvenience that only ever plays out in suspenseful scripted movies. Most of senior management have already left. On any other day, the CEO would have left by now as well. He’s never worked these sort of hours in his life. There’s no reason for him to be here this late, really, except--

“Productive day Jihoon?” The CEO asks suddenly. The sentence manages to derail all of Jihoon’s thoughts. “I see you’re working later than usual tonight.” He quirks a brow to accompany the small tilt of his smile. He has the kind of expression that could look friendly if it wasn’t attached to a psychopath.

Jihoon has to work at keeping his nerves in check, “Yes, Sir—very.” He replies, reflexively straightening his tie once the elevator doors close behind them. He hates feeling the scrutiny of people. He likes to be the observer, not the observed.

The CEO leans closer, managing to raise his upturned eyebrow even further. “I’ve had a productive
day myself—lots of interesting new developments.” Something in the pleased finality of his tone sets off warning bells in Jihoon’s brain.

The CEO looks at him, incisive and sharp, like he can see right to the middle of Jihoon. “Great.” Jihoon says, his tone unaffected, expression carefully genial. He turns to watch the door nervously, biting down hard on his lower lip.

He realises his fists have clenched, and he relaxes them with effort. Calm the fuck down, Jihoon tells himself, forcing his mind to clear and ignoring the cold burn of resentment low in his gut; the small, irrationally angry part of him that wants the CEO to know that Jihoon has seen him, that he knows.

The ride down to the lobby is mercifully quick and they exit the elevator together, Jihoon bowing respectfully, if somewhat begrudgingly, as they part and go their separate ways.

It’s almost dark out, just sliding past dusk when he exits the company building. It’s eerily silent as he crosses the car park.

He’s half-way across, humming a tune quietly under his breath when he registers the echo of more than one set of shoes bouncing off the tarmac. He realises too late, somebody fall into step behind him.

Somebody’s following me. I’ve been caught.

Jihoon shudders out a breath that is lodged in his throat, starts to chuckle neurotically. Just a coincidence, his overactive brain, hyped up on panic and nerves, stress from work. He sucks in a mouthful of air and speeds up, slipping between two cars to shorten his route. The sound of footsteps trail after him. Jihoon tamps down on the rising fear in his chest, keeps walking, ignoring the person on his heels and resisting the childish urge to break into a run.

His car is almost in sight and he pulls his keys out, ready to jump in and lock the door in a rush when the footsteps rush behind him and somebody grabs him by both shoulders and shoves him against the car door.

“AH—hmnn” His scream is muffled by a hand clamped over his mouth, then an object is jammed into his ribs.

Oh fuck—that’s a gun.

The attacker crowds into him, trapping him with the heavy bulk of his body. “Get in the car!” The voice croaks.

“Wh-what?” Jihoon stutters.

“I said get in the car!” The jackers voice sounds strangely flat and toneless. “Unlock it and get in!”

“Oh my god—please don’t hurt me. Just take the keys—take my wallet!” Jihoon clamps his jaw shut as his attacker pushes hard, forcing him against the door. “Ow,” Jihoon says, a sharp little intake of breath, and when the guy grabs his arm and shoves him forward, he lets out an honest-to-goodness whimper.

“Oh—okay, please don’t hurt me.” He cries, shaky hands fumbling with his keys. The man shoves him in, quickly rounding to the other side and settling in the passenger seat. Jihoon’s hands shake uncontrollably, struggling to slot the key into the ignition.

Impatient, the man reaches over and does it for him, twisting the key and starting the engine. “Now
The card dash illuminates the man's profile, but the hood over his head obscures any definable features. Not that Jihoon expects to come out of this alive or coherent enough to describe him to the police. Who jacks a car with its occupant with the intent of releasing him unharmed? Nobody—that’s who!

The windows are rolled down a crack, the wind whistling in as they drive. “Where shall I drive?” Jihoon whimpers, trying to drive steadily despite the tremors wracking his body.

“Anywhere—just keep driving away.” The man replies, fidgeting in his seat.

“Listen, I don’t have much money but I’ll give you anything I have. Please don’t kill me. I have a wife and three kids—and a goldfish!” He lies, but he’s always been under the illusion that a family man who loves animals garners more sympathy.

“I thought you hated goldfish.” The rough, previously harsh voice sounds disturbingly amused. Almost pleasant. Then he starts to laugh.

Jihoon turns at the sound, not understanding what the hell could be so funny. The stranger looks up at him then, pulling the hood off his head with a quick flick of his wrist.

“Dr Raine!” Jihoon eyeballs him, disbelieving. “What the fuck!” Jihoon sits there, a knot in his jaw, fuming soundlessly at the world. “You think this is funny? You scared the shit outta me—is that a banana? Did you just take me hostage with a banana?”

Dr Raine has the good grace to look embarrassed. “Yeah, sorry about that. I could have approached you without the carjacking charade, but I wasn’t sure if we were being watched. Wanna bit of my banana?” Dr Raine offers, with the casual impertinence that comes so naturally whilst holding a man hostage using a banana in his own car.

“No—I don’t want a fucking banana!” Jihoon’s face hardens into an expression that makes him look far older than his age. It’s closer to how old he feels most days.

“You need to eat Jihoon!” Dr Raine says, peeling his banana and taking a bite. “Food is important and you always neglect it—from what I remember. Hey can we turn on the radio?” He deflects suddenly.

Jihoon sighs. It’s Dr Raine alright. Jihoon can’t believe he forgot what a bloody lunatic the man used to be. Perhaps he’s gone madder in the intervening months.

“So—how have you been?” Jihoon offers. Might as well try to make conversation. Now that the initial panic has died down a bit, it was mostly just weird, seeing Dr Raine again. He looks different—harder in some ways, more relaxed in others. More jaded, certainly, or at least playing up that image, but there are little touches of insanity that Jihoon can’t recall ever having seen before.

“I’m alive. That’s enough for now.” He replies. He doesn’t sound hostile or angry, just blank, almost tired. But his refusal to elaborate is suspect enough that Jihoon persists in trying to wheedle the details out of him.

Jihoon nods, then asks what he really wanted to from the start. “Are you going to tell me the whole truth now? Why you needed this information so badly and what’s going on?”
Dr Raine cuts him off with an abrupt shake of his head. “Look—I don’t have a lot of time to explain.” His tone is defensive, but there’s a note of doubt as well.

“Well maybe you should make time!” Jihoon is angry, suddenly. It boils up inside him, white-hot seething resentment—that Dr Raine can treat this so lightly, “I did not just risk my job and reputation, hacking into encrypted security network to find some CCTV footage, for you to blow me off without the details. It’s not fair!”

To his credit, Dr Raine’s face has gone white. He must understand that, at least loosely, because he doesn’t argue the point. “I just need to know, does the CEO have the hard drive?” He asks steadily.

“How—how did you know he was the one who took it?” Jihoon says, his voice calm and matter-of-fact.

The change in the car is subtle, but it’s there. Jihoon can feel it. His gaze travels to the other man, and he see the way Dr Raine’s face goes hard and stony, can see his jaw tense and his breathing pattern change just slightly, less leisurely than before. “Because I was working for him.”

“What? What are you saying?” Jihoon says, his voice a flat line of breath.

The older man looks at him, something heavy settling into the fold of his eyebrows, “Can I light up in here? I know you hate cigarettes but it helps me calm down.”

Mind still reeling from this revelation, Jihoon dips his head in frantic agreement. “Fine whatever—just tell me what the fuck that means, you’re working for the CEO?”

“Look, when Anna got sick—the company insurance didn’t cover her medical bills. I got desperate. I siphoned off funds from the companies account. Nothing huge, just enough to cover her medical expenses, nothing they would miss. I thought I covered my tracks pretty well. But then the CEO called me into the office and confronted me. He said he would have me fired, withdraw all the funding from Anna’s care, throw me in prison. After losing her mother I didn’t want her to go through that crap. So when he offered me another option—I took it.”

“What—what other option?” Jihoon asks, almost afraid of the answer.

“He said he would make the theft disappear,” Dr Raine says, and pauses. He takes a long drag and holds it, coughs around the exhale. “but I would have to freelance for him.” and there’s a fault running through his voice now, the hint of an impending tremor. He shakes his head again. “Me and a group of analysts who’d also been caught with their hands in the company pot were working on a code that would discreetly siphon funds from several bank accounts. We didn’t know where the money was going or who he was working with, but it was pretty shady from the beginning.”

He breaks off, bringing his cigarette quickly to his lips. “He has this private security firm working for him. When he didn’t think we were working hard enough, he had all the analysts dragged to this villa, made us work overtime to design the code. Security was watching over us every minute of the day, dictating when we could eat, sleep—take a shit. One guy had enough and decided to play hard ball. They broke his legs—right in front of us. To teach the rest of us a lesson. That’s when I knew—they were never going to let us leave. After we finished designing that code for them—they were going to kill us.”

Processing his words, Jihoon nods slowly. “But what happened—how did you get away?”

Dr Raine keeps his eyes on the road, letting his cigarette bleed out into the air. “I told the CEO the last part of the code had to be designed with access to the servers. The guy’s so thick—he bought it.”
He laughs. There is nothing warm in it, just a dry rasp of air.

Jihoon waits impatiently for him to continue, knowing if he presses him for details when he isn’t ready, he’ll just clam up on him.

After a minute, he composes himself enough to continue. “They let me leave and return to work to finish constructing the code. I’m pretty sure once I left—the other analysts were killed off.” He murmurs, pressing his forehead into the heel of his palm, like it gives him a headache to remember it.

Jihoon knows that there is always harsh solace to be found in truth, but words of sympathy are a hollow comfort, so he holds them back.

“I made up some excuse about the data taking time to configure. I knew they were watching me so I rigged the CCTV cameras in my office. I encrypted the data on the hard drive, scrambled the code and ran. They’ve been hunting me down ever since but I’ve always been one step ahead of them.” He explains, flicking the stub of his cigarette out the window.

Jihoon believes him. There are few things Dr Raine can’t handle when he knows what he’s dealing with. Hacking databases, neutralizing threats, running down information – with a clear end goal and a sense of the steps required to attain it, he’s virtually unstoppable.

“Why—why didn’t you just leave the country—why are you still here?”

Dr Raine sends him a sharp look. He drops a new cigarette between his teeth and lights it. “Anna’s still in hospital. I can’t leave her. They know that too—they haven’t touched her, but they’re watching her too, dangling her in front of me. They know I won’t leave her behind—but I can’t reach her either.”

Jihoon glances briefly to the side as they stop at another traffic light. He watches Dr Raine inhale another puff, watches the paper curl back from the heat, counts every new line on the man’s face. He looks so tired, exhausted, stressed – it’s a startling thing, when you measure your change by another’s and realize how far they’ve come (been forced to come) in such a short span of time.

“So, the data on the hard-drive, you’re not planning to hand it over to the feds are you? You’re not going to blow this wide open. It’s leverage to get your daughter back.” Jihoon summarises.

Dr Raine smiles faintly, like there is something funny about all this. “Yes. I knew as long as the hard-drive was encrypted, they would need me to hack it. There would be no reason for them to leave Anna alone, a liability to their business if they ever found somebody else to crack my encryption.”

“Somebody else.” Jihoon repeats, then draws in a thick, unsteady breath. “You mean me?”

“Yes.” Dr Raine confirms, a firmness to his tone that has Jihoon ceding to anxiety. He doesn’t need to hear anymore—his panicked thoughts already eating away at his brain.

Dr Raine turns back to the window. His eyes follow the passing cars. “That’s why I was worried when I heard you accepted the promotion.” Dr Raine continues, “They wouldn’t need me anymore. And who says they wouldn’t have turned around and done the same to you. I needed to warn you, before you succeeded without realising.”

Jihoon swallows the ball of bitter emotions that wells low in his throat, because he’d known all along the promotion was too good to be true, and really, he thinks, he must be a complete idiot because he’d known and still rushed headfirst into this. “So, what happens now? Do I keep going back to work and playing dumb? I mean—they’re going to notice something is off if I just stop showing up to work. Couldn’t you have told me this before you sent me to retrieve that information? Do you
realise the danger I was in? What is I had have been caught?” Jihoon prompts.

The accusatory tone only makes Dr Raine pull a persecuted expression and stare at him bleakly. “I did the best I could with the resources I had Jihoon. As for you returning to work—I haven’t planned that far yet. All I know is, somehow you’ve been compromised and we need to find somewhere safe to hold out.”

“Compromised?” Jihoon echoes incredulously. “What are you talking about?” he asks, his voice gripping the words as tightly as his hands are gripping the wheel.

Dr Raine flicks the stub of his cigarette out the window. “There is a hitman waiting for you back at your house. I felt you were taking too long to call me back, so I went to your house to check on you. There was a man there, armed. They’ve hired some muscle to take you out or drag you in. We can’t go back.”

“Oh fuck—wait,” Jihoon pauses, troubled by a sudden epiphany. He looks over at Dr Raine for a long moment, his mouth solemn, “This guy was waiting for me in my house?”

“Yes!”

Jihoon turns to Dr Raine, affixes him with a probing look. “He answered the door?”

“Yeah.”

Jihoon purses his lips, thinking carefully. “Did he have a killer body, dark eyes, full lips and an exceptional ass?”

“Uhhhh.” Dr Raine falters, eyes Jihoon sideways like he’s completely lost the plot. “Are you really this desperate to hook up?” He says, with just a shade too much utterly sincere disdain. Jihoon wants to punch him in the throat.

“Cause, I think that might have been my boyfriend.” Jihoon clarifies.

Dr Raine looks taken aback, but only for a moment. “Oh. Okay. That changes things. I didn’t know you had a boyfriend!”

Jihoon clutches his chest dramatically. “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I was just busy thinking you were dead and you were busy running from the feds—then calling out of the blue and asking me to hack shit and steal stuff—guess I kinda forgot to fill you in on my life story!” He snarks.

When Dr Raine doesn’t hit back with a witty rejoinder, Jihoon turns to face him. His calm has broken somehow. It is subtle, just the slightest pinch between his eyes and his mouth twists into a tight line.

“What’s wrong?” Jihoon asks.

“Don’t be alarmed but—” something in the Dr Raine’s demeanour grows serious and grave. “I think I may have compromised us both now by coming to get you.”

“What—why do you think that?” Jihoon whispers. He waits, sitting as still as he possibly can. Dr Raine is silent long enough for an unfamiliar feeling of alarm to begin clawing its way up his throat.

Then, with his almost-supernatural sixth sense, Dr Raine looks in the rear-view mirror and says: “Because I’m pretty sure the SUV has been behind us for the last three traffic lights.”
Jihoon instantly feels the blood rushing to his head, his heart rate kicking into a higher gear. He flicks his gaze to the rear-view mirror, watching as a blacked out SUV changes lanes to line up behind them. “How can you be sure—maybe we’re just headed in the same direction?”

“Perhaps, but—“

**FUCK!**” They yell in unison. As the SUV rams their tail non-too gently.

“**Yup—they’re definitely following us.**” Dr Raine confirms with a disturbing cheerfulness.

“*Ya think!*” Jihoon bites out, his voice surprisingly level for how shit-scared he is on the inside, but it’s reflexive, this exterior coldness. Stepping on the gas, Jihoon skips the red light, heart thudding wildly as he watches the SUV follow, engine revving menacingly. He starts to think that it’s possible that he is completely and totally out of his depth right now, especially when the SUV accelerates, pulling up beside them, then swerves in to their lane.

“**SHIT! They’re trying to run us off the road!**” Jihoon yells, and Dr Raine braces himself against the car door when they nearly collide with a car in the opposite lane.

Jihoon breathes in and out a few times, until the dizziness and sudden flare of heat recede. He does the only thing he knows how—he takes the panic, folds it up, makes the creases sharp and neat, and shoves it into that dimly lit corner of himself where he puts all the things he needs to forget.

He lets his tiny SMART car feel like armour, hits the gas and swerves into the next lane.

“Jihoon! What are you doing?”

“Shut up! Grab my phone out of my jacket.” Jihoon commands, the sharp bite of acceleration pressing him back into the seat. He watches the speedometer twist higher and higher as the tiny car blows past vehicles in both directions.

“We can’t call the cops Jihoon! They won’t believe me!” Dr Raine protests, the first chord of panic ping in his voice.

“We’re not calling the cops!”

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Jeonghan’s car has just pulled into the garage when Seungcheol’s mobile suddenly vibrates in his hand and Jihoon’s name pops up on the screen.

“Hey Jelllybean, I’m—” Seungcheol answers, before the phone is stealthily swiped from his grasp by Jeonghan.

“Seungcheol! I’m in big trouble!” Jihoon yells over the phone.

“Well, well, well.” Jeonghan drawls.

“Seungcheol?”

“No—it’s his right hand man—*Hannie.*” Jeonghan replies, caustic and sardonic. “Seungcheol is unavailable at the moment. He is too busy soothing is burning ass. Can I take a message?”

“What the fuck—put Seungcheol on the phone! I’m in danger.”

“Not so fast Jihoonie. We need to discuss something very important. A little thing known as—
aftercare.” Jeonghan wisecracks, keeping his tone deliberately light, mordantly tart.

“What?” Jihoon gasps.

“That’s right! Aftercare—it’s important. Seungcheol told me all about your belt escapades and I am shocked—shocked that you would just leave for work without rubbing lotion into his aching butt. He’s a mess, limping and hissing every time we go over a speedbump. If you’re going to go to town on his ass—invest in aloe vera gel. It’s so much more soothing!”

“I need to speak to Seungcheol, somebody is trying to run me off the road!” he shouts into the speaker, the words nearly lost under the blare of a car horn outside.

“Say that again?” Jeonghan asks before Seungcheol wrestles the phone from him just in time to hear:

“PUT SEUNGCHEOL ON THE GODDAMN PHONE YOU IDIOT!” Jihoon starts screeching at him, and he has to hold the phone a foot from his ear while he lets it all out.

“You got me in trouble with Jellybean you dick.” he mouths silently to Jeonghan. “Sorry about that Jellybean. Hannie caught me sitting on a bag of peas and now the insufferable jerk won’t drop it.” He chuckles.

“Shut the fuck up for a second and listen!” Jihoon says, his voice is too high. There's something that sounds like a strong wind rushing over the phone and Seungcheol hears the whap-whap of suppressed gunfire in the background. He presses the phone closer to his ear to take in more of the sound.

It’s a sound Seungcheol’s all too familiar with—and he can feel every muscle in his body straining to do something. “Jihoon! Are you okay? What the fuck was that noise?” Seungcheol asks.

There’s a moment of silence, and Seungcheol wonders if Jihoon can hear his heart pounding over the phone. “There is an SUV chasing us—it’s trying to ram us off the road!”

“What? Why?” Seungcheol blurs. It’s the least important question. He feels like an idiot for asking it.

There’s a recriminating silence from the other end. “I may have done something illegal. I may be harbouring a fugitive! Remember I was telling you about my mentor, Dr Raine?”

“Yeah!”

There’s a sharp intake of breath and then an earful of Jihoon swearing. “Well—there’s a warrant out for his arrest and he might be in my car right now. The feds and a whole bunch of people are looking for him.”

Seungcheol swallows hard as he realizes the implications, “Jihoon! The cops don’t try and shoot people of the road!”

Jeonghan gives him a look as he speaks, one that Seungcheol's pretty sure is echoed in his own eyes—Shit!

There's a sharp crack and a squeal of brakes. “Yeah, I don’t think this is the cops. I think he’s involved with some kinda gang. Which he’s been conveniently been vague about till now!”

“WHAT!” Seungcheol yells.
“Don’t shout out me—I’m scared!” Jihoon says, his voice coming out a little cracked at the edges.

“Fuck—sorry! Where are you?” Seungcheol says, as close to all business as he can given Jihoon's just sounded the alarm and honestly, he doesn't care how Jihoon got into this situation, Seungcheol just needs to get him out of it. Immediately if not sooner.

Suddenly, over the line there's the sound of glass shattering and Seungcheol can hear Jihoon swearing and shouting so loud and up close that Seungcheol has to move the phone away from his ear. “Fuck! Fuck! They’re catching up!”

“WHERE ARE YOU?” Seungcheol yells.

“On the freeway—by the industrial area!” Jihoon answers.

Seungcheol swallows, feeling the air thicken in his throat. He’s almost twenty minutes away from Jihoon's location. “Stay on the freeway and head north, turn off at the docks.” Seungcheol orders. “Try and shake them off in the streets there—I’m coming. I’ll find you!” he promises.

There's another quick burst of gunfire, the distinctive ra-ta-tat of a sub-machine gun, and Jihoon's voice is soft in his ear. “I know you will.”

The line disconnects and Seungcheol bolts out of the car without hesitation.

“What the fuck is going on?” Jeonghan shouts after him.

“No time. Mingyu, Jun—on your bikes, now.” Seungcheol orders, holstering his gun. “Hannie, call the others—we're heading to the docks. If this is as bad as I think it is, we're going to need the cleanup crew.”

Seungcheol picks up the rider’s helmet from the bench and puts it on, tugging the strap snug under his chin. He straddles the bike and kicks the motor twice, maneuvering out of the garage, Mingyu and Jun in tow as Jeonghan reverses his car, yelling orders in his cellphone.

Seungcheol, Jun and Mingyu slice through evening traffic, heading north. The heat is smothering inside the stiff leather of Seungcheol’s jacket. He feels sweat pour down his back, feels his throbbing ass and his bruised ribs and every other injury he’s collected over the last week competing for his attention. He shoves it all down, focuses on the feel of the air speeding past him, cool and swift.

_Faster—got to ride faster!

He nearly loses control on a too-fast corner, and his heart's pounding with adrenaline and fear. Not fear for himself.

Maybe his fear receptors have dulled from repetitive abuse, or maybe his synapses don't fire quite right anymore. Maybe prolonged exposure to danger has permanently fucked with his serotonin levels. Or muscle memory from pulling the trigger has deadened his nerves.

Whatever the reason, there's not a whole lot in this world that Seungcheol's afraid of.

There are some things, however, that remain terrifying.

_Jihoon, injured. Jihoon, dead._

He's got to keep his head in the game. He's no use to Jihoon if he's dead or upside-down in a ditch.
He’s struck by the sudden and obsessive thought that Jihoon may not be alive when he reaches him. The thought of finding Jihoon hurt turns his stomach, drives him mad with a dozen furious and contradictory emotions.

The doubts flood Seungcheol as he rides, blurring on top of one another. He ignores them, thinks instead of the soft feel of Jihoon’s fingers on the back of his neck, gentle like forgiveness. He has to try. He can’t live without Jihoon.

Seungcheol pushes the bike faster, opting for low-traffic areas he can cruise through with little chance of police presence. The last thing he needs is to be pulled over for speeding with several guns on his person, particularly in the middle of a rescue mission.

“Why are we leaving the freeway! Wouldn’t it be wiser to get the fuck out of the city?” Dr Raine yells as Jihoon manoeuvres the tiny vehicle out of the main road. The tires scream against the ground, gripping at the curves Jihoon forces them through. He doesn’t slow, doesn’t hesitate.

“I can’t dodge traffic forever! Seungcheol is driving towards us, he said we can lose them in these narrow roads.”

“How is he going to help?! These guys have guns Jihoon!” Dr Raine screeches.

“So does Seungcheol!” Jihoon replies.

Dr Raine’s mouth flaps open soundlessly, and then shuts again.

Jihoon navigates the interconnected mess of streets and alleyways like he’s lived here all his life, driving them swiftly through the city. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror reveals the SUV still in hot pursuit and he pushes the gas, whips down a thin road between two decaying buildings, driving fast. He hears the SUV thundering behind him, still in pursuit. He cuts down a different road, swerving a little before righting the car. Glancing back to find the SUV careening dangerously into the opposing lane before following them.

He takes another sharp bend down an alleyway, a narrower one this time, hoping to hell it’ll be too thin and sinuous for the SUV to follow. A new crackle of gunfire goes off behind them. The SUV is still on them, navigating the narrow alleyway with ease. He pulls out, scarcely avoiding a car and speeds down the block.

The car is screeching as he turns sharply, the back tires now deflated. “Fuck—fuck, my tires!” The next turn is hard with the friction of the back wheels catching on the road, and before he can right the wheel, the car spins into a lamppost.

“Fuck! Shit! Balls!” Jihoon swears a blue streak, trying to scramble out of his seat, pushing the air bag down and out of his face. “Dr—are you okay?” Jihoon whispers, frantic.

Dr Raine coughs, shaking his head. “Barely! You know, if this was a normal sized car, we could have taken that lamppost.”

“I didn’t buy this car with the intention of partaking in high speed pursuits! It’s the perfect size for me and is fuel efficient so shut the fuck up!” Jihoon says, booting the car door open. He bolts out of the
car as the SUV rounds the corner, he doubles back around the front of the car to Dr Raine’s side, grabbing the man by the arm and ushering him onwards. He spots steps leading down to the subway platform, a perfect escape.

He hears the SUV come to a hard stop on the other side of the road, hears the doors opening.

“Hold it.” A man shouts abruptly, firing a warning shot in the air. Jihoon halts mid-step. He swallows, his throat too tight.

“Hands up high.” After a moment of petrified hesitation, Jihoon lifts his hands in submission. A moment stretches, beats of his pulse loud. The coursing of blood through his veins makes itself known.

“Now turn around slowly.” The barrel of a gun nudges him in the back, right between the shoulder blades; Jihoon complies with the implicit command and begins to turn to face his captor. He doesn’t recognise the man in front of him, but he’s black suited with a scruffy beard.

The silence that settles over the scene is stifling. Jihoon can feel a bead of sweat working its way down his forehead, but he doesn't dare move to wipe it away.

“Thought you’d given us the run did ya?” the other man with a greasy face and even greasier hair laughs. “You pulled some daring moves, but never try and outrun a 4x4 in a—what the fuck even is that car?”

Jihoon recovers just enough to blink, but the single flicker seems to break the spell. The adrenaline must lead to a sizeable crack in Jihoon’s sanity because the words tumble out of him before he can stop himself "It’s a SMART car—and we’re going to have to exchange insurance details because you shot my windows out with your lousy aim."

“Lousy aim?” Greasy’s dark eyes narrow, and a true smirk quirks the harsh mouth. He reaches forward to grab Jihoon’s shoulder.

Finally finding his courage, Jihoon pushes the mans hand away "Don’t fucking touch me you creep."

The surface amusement fades just enough to show the fury lurking deep in those glittering, black eyes. Quite simply, Greasy is pissed. Suddenly, Jihoon wishes he’d just kept his mouth shut, although buying time was crucial at this point. The left hook catches Jihoon square in the jaw, and he lurches backwards, lip split and bleeding. “You’re in way over your head kid. If I was actually trying to shoot you—I wouldn’t have missed.” Greasy taunts.

Just then a van rounds the corner of the road, pulling to a stop near the SUV.

“Just follow my lead, don’t aggravate them and everything will be okay.” Dr Raine whispers under his breath.

Jihoon jerks a quick glance at Dr Raine, who looks just as terrified as he sounds, then at the gun in Greasy’s hand, then briefly and desperately at the steps leading down to the subway. If he could just move fast enough....

It's clear when a third man emerges from the van, that Beard and Greasy are fairly low on the organization's food chain. The third man commands immediate attention; he is tall, narrow, sharp-angled, and has a thick scar across his lip, he's wearing a well-fitted grey suit and black calf-skin gloves. His movements are precise and silent as he screws the suppressor onto his handgun. Professional.
Jihoon thinks he'll call the new guy ‘Ugly’—Just not out loud. Ugly sneers a bit, and his expression chills the air in Jihoon’s lungs.

“What one of em do we want?” Beardy directs a question to Ugly, gesturing at Jihoon and Dr Raine with a wave of his gun. “Boss only said to grab the hacker.”

“This is the guy, I think,” Greasy says, jerking a shoulder towards Dr Raine. “The one they—“

“Shut the fuck up,” Ugly spits, cutting him off with a sharp gesture as he rounds on them. He reminds Jihoon of a snake coiling smoothly just before it strikes. His eyes are on Jihoon, two hard black flints, when he says, “Tie them up, we need them both.”

“This has nothing to do with him, let him go and I will come with you.” Dr Raine tries to reason.

Ugly chambers a round in his gun and slides the safety off. He’s wearing a Bluetooth headset, and appears to be listening for instructions. “Dr—I think it’s in your best interest that you stay quiet. You’ve caused enough problems at is it, but now your little game of hide and seek has ended and this can go one of two ways. You can ride comfortably in the car and be forthcoming with the information we need—or you can ride in the back of the van, tied up with your little friend here.”

“I’ll come with you willingly, just let my friend go.” Dr Raine insists.

Something crackles through Ugly’s headset. He jerks his head and Greasy walks over and shoves Dr Raine roughly down to the ground. He holsters his gun, yanks his hands behind his back, while Beardy draws a zip tie out from his pocket.

“I’ll give you the information you need, let him go!” he continues, and the butt of the gun coming down hard on the side of his head is a brutal pain, but not a blow strong enough to knock him unconscious.

That’s when Jihoon thinks, very evenly—I can’t let these men tie me up.

So, when the men approach to restrain, Jihoon fights. Against his better instincts, against all his judgement, he struggles, gasping his panic, to buy time for Seungcheol to come find him. It’s like fighting a war with sticks and stones; listless, fruitless pounding of fists against his attackers; the futility of action in the face of certain disaster.

A fist connects with the side of his head and he barely manages to stifle his shout of pain when the butt of a gun comes down hard, a glancing blow across his temple. Even though he’s expecting a response, it lands him flat on his back.

“Settle down Pumpkin,” Greasy says, crouching down before Jihoon and gripping his chin hard, “There’s no need for that—now I’m going to have to teach you a lesson.”

Jihoon grinds his molars down against the throbbing pain. Honestly, the cliché of it all pains Jihoon worse than the throb in his cheek.

He tries to lift his head, but Greasy flattens him against the concrete and grips him in a tight chokehold. Jihoon struggles, tries to shake the man off, but Greasy holds him steady by the throat, easing him into unconsciousness. He tastes blood on the back of his tongue before everything goes fuzzy.

“You’re just lucky we need you alive,” one of them sneers. Doesn’t mean we can’t have fun with you. They drag him into the back of the van; strap him arms together.
Jihoon blinks. His eyelids feel heavy, hard to move. He can’t make out any shapes, can’t tell where he is yet, but the light resolves slowly around him. It’s low, strangely dim. Jihoon shifts the muscles in his face, feels the pull where skin tightens near his eye: dried blood. Yes, he’d been hit, he remembers. A man with a solid fist. And a fucking ring. That had done more damage than the fist.

He blinks again. It’s an effort.

He realizes the light is strange because he’s in the van, his head lolls on the cool metal floor with every twist and turn the vehicle takes. He tries to lift his head, but he can’t. He’s not sure if it’s just because he’s dizzy or if someone is holding him down.

Jihoon can’t move, can’t stand, can’t feel anything but the restraints cutting into his wrists. He briefly wonders if this panic building in his body is how Seungcheol feels all the time, fear that translates into jagged emotions bottled up inside, threatening to take over. He takes in the hazy sight of a person next to him. It’s Dr Raine, who’s whispering words of reassurance in between trying to bargain with one of the men holding him down.

That’s when Jihoon remembers it. The SUV, the van, the punch. The memory hits him like hot adrenaline; his entire body draws taut with awareness. They said they needed both him and Dr Raine alive, so Jihoon doesn’t honestly think he’s in danger of dying, but he could definitely be in danger of worse.

He thrashes hard, trying to flip the man off, but he can’t. He can’t move. The guy is too heavy. “Oh good, you’re awake,” says Greasy, a saccharine drag to his voice. Jihoon feels a clammy hand pet his hair. “It’ll be much more fun this way.”

He thrashes again, assessing his bindings. His hands are tied behind his back, chafing the insides of his wrists like early salt on a not-yet-wound. Jihoon tries to break the hold, but he can’t—it’s something strong, cable wiring probably.

‘Get off me you fucking fat freak!’ Jihoon tries to yell, tries to spit a blue streak at Greasy, but there is something lodged in his mouth that keeps him from crying out.

They have gagged him. Jihoon feels a raw red panic burn through him. He thrashes again. He tries to throw an elbow, tries to unbalance the larger man, something. Greasy just laughs at him. He grabs a fistful of Jihoon’s hair and yanks, wrenching his neck back. He leans low, biting the words out against Jihoon’s ear, “Don’t want you screaming too loud, bet you’re a screamer.” He croons, before grabbing Jihoon’s shirt, rucking it up his stomach, exposing him. Dread grips Jihoon everywhere, like a second skin. The man is touching him with intent, dragging rough hands all over him, and Jihoon can’t breathe, he can’t, he—

“Hurry up would ya—I want to go next.” Beardy leers.

Greasy gets impatient, ripping the shirt from Jihoon with rough hands. The buttons make little ping ping ping sounds as they hit the floor, quick as gun cartridges. Fingers prod his bare skin, hands pawing at him, flicking at his exposed nipples. He can feel breath and teeth against the line of his shoulders.

Jihoon struggles, tries to throw him off, but it’s useless. He screams against the rag in his mouth, more out of frustration than anything. He knows no one is going to hear him. He feels helpless, he feels 5 and 8 and 10 years old again, and he wants to put his head between his knees and shake until this stops, until this disappears. He wants Seungcheol’s hands on him, soothing and sure. For the first
time it occurs to him, he might not see Seungcheol again. The thought of Seungcheol finding him like this is somehow even worse than the thought of it happening at all.

Greasy pops open the button on the front of his pants and now he's whispering what a good fuck he thinks Jihoon's going to be.

Taking a deep breath, he prepares himself for a whole new kind of hurt. He inhales. One. Exhales. Two. It's the metronome of his breath to the rhythm of his heart, keeping time for the something he doesn't know yet, something more that has to come his way. This can't be happening.

“It's going to be okay”, Dr Raine tells him. “They need us alive for now. Just don’t fight them and they won’t hurt you much.”

Jihoon doesn't need the condescension, the assurances. Jihoon doesn't need someone to tell him that this is nothing, to belittle his problems. He just wants them to stop.

Greasy leans over him; the hint of a smirk flickers across his sharp features before he licks a lewd wet stripe up his throat. “God, he's definitely a pretty one. Slim. Tight. Just the right amount of pliant. You won’t mind if we get acquainted?” He drawls, tongue feeling around the syllables, mouth quirking at the corners in a gleeful shift.

Jihoon screams against his rag, trying to thrash his hips, twist his arms, anything, anything, to keep Greasy from—

Suddenly Greasy jolts to the side, flailing his arms to regain his balance as the van swerves violently to a stop. “What the fuck!” He growls, bracing his arms over Jihoon to glower through the small window into the front seat of the vehicle.

“What are you stopping for?” He yells, spittle spraying Jihoon full on the face, his features purpled in livid fury.

“It’s not me you dick, it’s the others in the 4x4—they’ve just stopped.” The driver of the van yells back.

Greasy turns to stare disbelievingly at his subordinate. “You said there wasn’t going to be anyone tailing us—” he spits at the other man, his voice sharp as acid.

“There wasn’t supposed to be!” Beardy snaps back, his expression twisted with exasperation.

No one talks for the moment, eyes fixed at the front of the van, before the driver speaks up again. “Somebody is blocking the road. I think Mark is talking to them. I can’t believe this—but it looks like he’s just surrendered his gun!”

Beardy startles, and barks a series of orders into a walkie-talkie in his hand. A reply squawks over, the voice tinny and thin before a slight screech cuts it off mid-sentence, dropping the car back into silence, save for heavy breathing and Jihoon’s blood dripping.

An explosion roars in the distance, the car trembling in answer.

“Oh fuck—the SUV just blew up!” The driver yells, voice tremulous.

“Oh shit! Reverse! Reverse!” The van driver shouts out, then suddenly, everything is too loud.

Within the space of a breath, there is the sound of glass shattering, of bullets bouncing off metal.
There is a scream, Jihoon thinks. It’s hard to tell. He can barely hear it over the churning sound of blood under his skin, his heartbeat kicked like a drum.

Then Greasy’s weight is off of him, and all Jihoon can think is move, move, move. He is struggling violently against his bindings, trying to angle for some kind of leverage, when he feels a set of hands on him again. He flinches, breathing hard into the rag. It’s Dr Raine “Stay down!” he screams.

He hears the rumble and screech of a motorbike slamming to a halt nearby. Another peel of gunfire goes off, shattering the front of the van and denting the sides of the vehicle; the smell of blood and gunpowder, strong in the confined space.

“Shit—shit—shit!” Beardy gasps, fumbling with door latch in the dark as Greasy scrambles to zip himself up. He doesn’t find the door handle—but he jolts back as the van door swings open.

“Freeze!” Two mean dressed completely in black, donning biker helmets and guns are standing at the doors, guns aimed squarely at Beardy’s and Greasy’s heads respectively.

“We got him boss—he’s here, he’s alive.” One of the helmeted men calls out.

A third man walks into Jihoon’s hazy line of vision from where he is still flat on his back and a painfully familiar voice calls out, “What the fuck is going on here?”

Jihoon forgets to breathe. It's a choking, crushing feeling that threatens to overwhelm him - when he thinks he hears Seungcheol’s voice; when he thinks he can smell his leather and aftershave; when he lies bruised and battered on the floor, hands tied behind his back, helpless. He latches onto the familiarity of Seungcheol’s voice as to a lifeline; lifts his head weakly to find that it is indeed— Seungcheol. He made it. He’s here.

Jihoon smiles around the gag. The liberation is crushing, an iron band round his chest. The look of stark relief which flashes across Seungcheol’s face when he sees him does something funny to his stomach.

Seungcheol cuts an imposing figure; every pair of eyes focuses on him as he towers over the only exit, his gun drawn, his jaw tightening as he takes in the scene. His body is tensed in a way that isn’t familiar to Jihoon; anger in every line of his body, tightly coiled and ready to strike. His voice is solid and clear as he instructs: “Guns out, barrels down and slide them over to me—now.”

Both men look furious, but it only takes a few seconds of angry hesitation before they draw their guns out, sit them slowly on the floor of the van and slide them to Seungcheol. Seungcheol collects both guns, holsters one and tucks the other into the back of his pants. “Masqueraders, in my territory—again?” His tone grows disapproving. “How many of you do I have to kill before you get the message?” He says, pointing the gun purposely, a macabre conversational emphasis to his speech.

Beardy sputters something unintelligible and Greasy is so dumbstruck and gaping, he vocalises a strangled noise.

Seungcheol presses on. “You don’t think we’d notice when you start shooting up the place? Are you as stupid as you are ugly?” Seungcheol says, voice level and all the more threatening for it.

Jeonghan steps into view, shaking his head. “This territory shit is getting old, quick. We draw territorial lines for a reason. You conduct business in your dump and stay out of the city. It’s a simple concept the other groups accept, why can’t you freaks get it?” His anger is apparent even though his voice is restrained.
“Hold up—we’re not interfering with business—we’re just driving through.” Greasy stutters, holding up a hand defensively.

Seungcheol laughs. It’s an ugly, split sound. “Oh really? Is that all? Just driving through? Maybe we were mistaken then, maybe we’ve read the entire situation wrong.” Seungcheol says, but the smile on his face is dangerous. It’s charming and sharp and lethal. He balances the shotgun in one hand, the barrel gleams as he taps it against his palm, mock-contemplating their fate. His expression shifts to one of annoyance as he slants a look at Greasy and states, very decisively, “Why then have you got my boyfriend bound and gagged in the back of this van?”

The men freeze, their eyes locked in mutual expressions of frightened shock. Beardy chokes, his adam's apple bobbing as he swallows thickly, eyes glued to the shotgun in Seungcheol’s hand. “We didn’t know—” he’d begins.

“Shut your fucking mouth!” Seungcheol snaps, tone venomous, loaded with fury and rage.

“Jeonghan—,” Seungcheol says, darting a quick glance at Jeonghan, who simply nods at him, as if able to read his mind. It’s obviously an instruction because Jeonghan steps forward to help Jihoon up into an upright position. Jihoon feels the bindings snap away, first at his hands, then at his ankles. As soon as he’s free, he springs up from the van, dragging the wet gag out of his mouth, letting it slop to the floor.

He nearly falls over when he gets to his feet, slammed with a thick wave of dizziness. Jeonghan grabs hold of him. “Easy—easy.” He soothes, guiding Jihoon a little ways away from the van towards his car.

His eyes lock with Seungcheol’s as Jeonghan steers him away and Seungcheol blanches, his body losing all its menacing tension as his eyes catalogue Jihoon’s split lip and chafed wrists. When he catches sight of Jihoon’s torn shirt—there is something else besides anger flashing across his face. Jihoon can’t quite put his finger on it. It's not sadness, exactly, but something harder, something worse.

Jihoon swallows hard, hard enough to distract from the wrench in his chest, the flurry of things he wants to say to assure Seungcheol. But before he can think of anything, Seungcheol’s face changes, wiping itself entirely of that indecipherable emotion. It's replaced with something cool and impenetrable.

Seungcheol turns back to Greasy, cocking his head to one side, as if in deliberation. “Why is his shirt ripped?” Seungcheol continues, voice deathly low, the words sound like churned gravel as they pass his lips. The question is redundant, the answer clear.

“I—I,” Greasy chokes on his response.

“Did you touch my Jellybean?” Seungcheol hisses. His voice hits Jihoon like ice water, cold and drenching and dangerous.

Jihoon would struggle to describe Seungcheol as anything like cold or dangerous or completely fucking terrifying, but that’s exactly what he is right now. There is a deep, practiced chill in his voice, and Jihoon can’t help but wonder how it got there. It makes him realize he doesn’t actually know everything he should about Seungcheol.

Greasy shakes his head emphatically, his face bleeds of all colour as he stutters. “No—no, no—” Nodding, as if arriving at a decision, Seungcheol takes a step back and raises his arm, placing the
snub barrel of a sawn off shotgun against the edge of Greasy’s head. The fury in Seungcheol’s eyes is biting, a cutting cold that takes no prisoners. He cocks the trigger, making Greasy wince.

“No—wait—plea,” Greasy starts, Seungcheol pulls the trigger, cutting off the stream of incoherent pleas that fall from his lips.

Jihoon feels like everything is melting into slow motion: the double round of bullets smashes Greasy’s skull and shreds his face, brain matter splatters gracelessly, coating the interior of the van like the violent flick of a paint brush dipped in red. Greasy’s body slumps to the floor with a sickening thud.

Jihoon stares at the still form for a moment, the mess Greasy’s head has become, feeling strangely numb and hollow. His mouth falls slack at the sight of a dead body that was alive and taunting him only moments ago. He's still pumped on adrenaline, but Jihoon suspects when it wears off and the weight of what’s just happened hits him, he's going to be terrified of what it all means.

“I never touched him!” Beardy cries out as Seungcheol reloads the chamber and cocks the gun with an audible click. “I can give you information. I know stuff!”

“We might want to keep one of the alive at least—ask em some questions?” Mingyu suggests, patting his gloved hand against Beardy’s cheek in a parody of comfort.

“No.” Seungcheol replies immediately, sounding clinical and perfectly dismissive. There are flecks of blood on his face, slaked bloodlust in his eyes, and dark promise written all over him. He raises his gun and presses the still hot muzzle against the man’s forehead.

Beardy makes a sound of distress, a sound that dies when Seungcheol fires at point blank range, deadly focus and pure fury in his eyes. Jihoon watches the man’s face explode, before his body crumples, the stench of gunpowder thick and nauseating.

There’s a buzzing in Jihoon’s ears, staticky and disorientating. He shifts on his feet, looking at the two men ripped apart in the van. He is mesmerized by the blood splattered across the interior.

He blinks, trying to erase the image of the bloody corpse burned into his retinas. He feels like someone has pulled the bottom out of his stomach, feels like he is freefalling. He attempts to slow down his heartbeat, to calm himself, assure himself that this was just a dream, and fails. Reality, then. But a sideways, astonishing reality; reality with the brake lines cut.

Seungcheol turns, lowering the smoking barrel of the shotgun. There is blood spattered on his face and he wipes it away, smearing it, not seeming to care.

He has a sort of banked electricity about him. Jihoon wonders if everyone else can see it, or if it is just something he is noticing after witnessing him murder two people. As it turns out, Seungcheol is the born criminal Jihoon always suspected him to be, suave and smooth and utterly unshakable.

But, Jihoon doesn’t care. He is so in love he can't see straight.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took forever to write
1) I know nothing about hacking....that was a pain to write.
2) Work sucks and I didn't actually get to write as much as I planned.
3) Hope you enjoy--feedback is always appreciated :D
When Mingyu announces Jihoon is alive, relief stings his eyes, and his blood rushes so loudly in his ears that all other sounds are eclipsed.

Jihoon is alive. For a moment nothing else comes close to mattering.

But Mingyu's demeanour doesn't suit the elation flooding Seungcheol's chest. And when he rounds the side of the van and peers in—his relief freezes to fear.

The sight of Jihoon, bound and gagged, cuts at him more fiercely than any physical wound could possibly inflict. The sensation is so potent, it throws him off his guard. And when he glimpses the ripped shirt, his blood ices in his veins. The thought of those inbreeds touching him makes something low and repellent curl in his gut. It makes everything he despises about his profession real in a way he doesn't know how to process.

He knows then, there is only one way this is going to play out.

Jihoon aches in every one of his overstressed muscles. He’s sweat-drenched and faint, his limbs are heavy with exhaustion, and god, god, all he wants to do is pour himself into Seungcheol. He wants Seungcheol to touch him, to kiss his forehead, to make everything simple again.

When Seungcheol turns to him, his first instinct is to run to him. And maybe it really is just instinct, or maybe it's the need to know that this is real, or hell, maybe there's no good reason at all. But in his peripheral vision he sees another carful of Seungcheol’s men pulling up behind the van, so he forces himself to stay rooted.

He watches surreptitiously as Seungcheol converses with a few of his men, all wearing heavy expressions. Seungcheol's is nothing but the barest downward quirk of one eyebrow, but when he glances over at Jihoon, his expression is thick with awkward anticipation.

He instinctively takes a step toward Seungcheol, hoping he'll make a grab at him, will pull Jihoon into his heavy arms the way he does whenever they fight about trivial things.

Except this time, Seungcheol doesn't move to touch. Jihoon's overwhelmed by how much it stings.

“We need to split up right now. Jun—tail back and move Jihoon’s car. Hoshi, DK, Minghao, you’re on clean up. Wonwoo, I need you to run interference with any police that might come our way. Jeonghan—take care of Jihoon will you.” Seungcheol instructs. His voice is all command, and Jihoon really wishes he didn't find that hot right now.

The second he stops talking, everyone moves. They are all doing exactly what he said.

"Jihoon—,” Seungcheol calls out and Jihoon meets his eyes, looking a little lost. “Go wait in the car,” his voice brooks no debate and Jihoon nods, biting his lip; of course they have to split. Of course he has to clean up this mess Jihoon made.

"I'll see you later. I got stuff to take care of." Seungcheol’s tone is mild, but Jihoon feels the sting
nonetheless. He takes that ball that's lodged in his throat, shoves it deep inside him, hides it in the shadow of his heart and his lungs, forcing himself to take even breaths.

He pushes himself forward without replying and walks to the car, Dr Raine following close behind him. Jeonghan holds back to speak to Seungcheol for a minute, but soon he gets in the drivers seat and does his seatbelt.

Jihoon wants to ask where they’re going, but he doesn’t.

Just before the car drives away, Seungcheol's gaze locks with his. The look is too sudden for Jihoon to glance away or pretend he isn't watching. Seungcheol’s eyes flash too intense, still so expressive behind an otherwise impassive face, and the sight kicks the breath right out of Jihoon's chest.

It's not until they are turning a corner that he finally remembers to take his next breath.

His crew doesn’t give him shit for killing the entire convoy, they don’t even mention it. Seungcheol guesses they must have built up a tolerance for his brand of crazy rage, working for Seungcheol as long as they have.

Jihoon is completely frozen, his eyes open wide and dark. There's an almost electric energy in the air that makes Seungcheol want to grab him and pull him close. He wants to reach out, to touch him, to pick him up and carry him out of here if he has to, but he's assuaged by the sudden bizarre image that Jihoon might actually shatter under his hands.

“We need to split up right now,” Seungcheol says, suddenly remembering the situation they’re in. “Jun—tail back and move Jihoon’s car. Hoshi, DK, Minghao, you’re on clean up. Wonwoo, I need you to run interference with any police that might come our way. Jeonghan—take care of Jihoon will you.”

When he turns to regard Jihoon again, the look on his face is something Seungcheol can’t even begin to describe. It’s this gorgeous blur of astonishment and awe and appetite and it makes Seungcheol feel—terrifying.

“Jihoon—go wait in the car. I’ll see you later, I got stuff to take care of.” He urges softly.

He is grateful for the opportunity to get away—away from the dark, considering gaze, away from the questions that surely bubble under the surprisingly calm surface of the usually expressive face. It's not that he's avoiding the issue. Seungcheol is many things, but he's no coward. He's not one to put off until tomorrow the awkward conversation he could get over with today.

When Jeonghan’s car pulls away, his eyes lock with Jihoon’s for several minutes, time stretching by slower than usual. They exchange too long a look, heavy and meaningful and indecipherable all at once.

The fear and hurt on Jihoon's face makes Seungcheol feel the deepest shame and his chest aches all over again. Jihoon is the most precious thing he's ever had—something so real and beautiful it breaks Seungcheol apart every day.

Hoshi, Minghao and DK get to work clearing the debris. Between the three of them, they manage to wrestle all the bodies into the back of the van and clear what’s remaining of the burning SUV wreckage off the road and on to the back of a tow truck. They’re close enough to the docks for a
clean disposal; the van slips neatly under the water, small air bubbles blistering to the surface as it sinks into the darkness.

Seungcheol is thrumming with adrenaline afterward, as they slip out of the darkened harbour and return to their vehicles. His body is still on high alert, hyperaware, and everything seems magnified: the blur of the streetlights, the smell of his own sweat, the quick confident sound of Mingyu’s footsteps behind him on the pavement.

Jun has already gone, taking off to move Jihoon’s Smart car (however the hell he managed to fit into it), and Wonwoo vanished soon after, presumably off to deliver an update to the rest of the group. Seungcheol fully intends to follow their example as quickly as possible. If everyone’s done their job properly, there should be no evidence, nothing to arouse suspicion, much less lead back to them. Still, it’s safer for everyone if they all disappear.

………………

When the car pulls up in the garage, Jeonghan kills the engine, tells them to stay put and jumps out. For a moment, they both simply take in the surreal, bending sight of what just transpired. Dr Raine’s hands are clasped on his lap, his posture stiff, and it’s a long minute before he breaks the silence.

“So.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s your boyfriend huh?” he says, sounding like he doesn’t know whether to be relieved, confused or horrified.

“Yup.”

“He seems nice.” There's no hint of humor in his voice.

“I know—he’s so sweet.” It's not really an attempt to lighten the mood. Jihoon’s halfway serious, and Dr Raine has to be able to read the mix of awe and adoration shining in his eyes. He's not doing a damn thing to hide it.

“Jihoon—I was being sarcastic! Are you insane!?” Dr Raine hisses, his low voice meant only for his ears. “He’s a criminal in a gang! He just blew two people’s heads off with a shotgun! Did that airbag give you a concussion because I very much doubt you missed what just happened!” He snaps. There's no question in the words, or in the piercing grey of his eyes. Disapproval, certainly, and a hint of surprise.

“I didn’t miss anything. Seungcheol took care of a bunch of guys who kidnapped us then tried to molest me. Excuse me If I don’t have a problem with them dying for it.” Jihoon says, keeping his attention straight ahead, hoping futilely that Dr Raine will drop the subject.

“Jihoon, I’m not sure how—“ A barely perceptible pause, and then Dr Raine continues “—how do you even meet somebody like that?”

“Flat tyre on the highway—he stopped to help.”

“That’s convenient.” Dr Raine guffaws.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just a little concerned that I’ve been on the run from a notorious street gang and now,
miraculously I’ve been harboured by another. It’s just too convenient to seem like a coincidence.”

“You can’t be fucking serious? You can’t possibly think he’s after you too?” Jihoon says, instantly offended on Seungcheol’s behalf.

Dr Raine turns to face him, his grey eyes harsh and roiling. “It’s very possible Jihoon! He’s Choi Seungcheol! Maybe I’ve never met him in person before, but everyone knows his name. You can’t possibly be this naïve!” His voice is low and perfectly steady, which Jihoon might find insulting if not for the slight trembling of Dr Raine’s hands.

“You don’t know Seungcheol like I do!” Jihoon snaps, except even as the words leave his mouth he finds himself questioning the truth of them. Granted—this isn’t the best way to meet him, but Seungcheol doesn’t go around killing people all the time—or maybe he does. It’s not exactly the easiest conversation to have—’How was work babe? Kill any interesting new people?’

Dr Raine’s brow snaps to a scowl, “I don’t think you know him as well as you are letting on Jihoon.”

He holds his irritation in check as he says, “He’s never killed anyone in front of me, but I knew he was capable of it. I’m not blind to this.” And it’s true. He has never been one to bury his head in the sand, much as some might accuse him of wilful naïveté.

Yes—Jihoon has seen the quiet violence in Seungcheol, he’s aware of what he’s capable of. He can polish his rougher edges all he likes, disguise him with dimples and lopsided smiles, but Seungcheol’s a fighter at heart, a combat realist – a killer, when necessary. He knows, as few men do, exactly which lines he is willing to cross. Jihoon likes that about him. Always has done.

He should be terrified at the depth of Seungcheol’s abilities. Somehow, he's not. He's never had much use for self-preservation anyway.

“Really?” Dr Raine quirks an eyebrow at him, and Jihoon glares in return. He hates the dry disbelief Dr Raine manages to pack into one word, and he really hates the obvious scepticism flashing in the doctor's eyes. “Jihoon—he’s dangerous.” Dr Raine announces, which is a little more direct than Jihoon was expecting, and he fights not to fidget.

“He would never hurt me.” And then, because it seems like a relevant point, he adds, “He tried to keep me out of his life and away from all this. He gave me a chance to call it off and I wanted to be with him.”

Dr Raine shakes his head. "I think you are misapprehending—"

"No. Pretty sure I apprehend perfectly," Jihoon interrupts stubbornly.

“I mean this life is dangerous, your relationship with-”

“I’m fully aware of the danger, I’ve considered the implications.” Jihoon hisses, feeling greedy suddenly, feeling like Dr Raine’s anger is catching. “Are you seriously lecturing me about breaking the law? About danger?” Jihoon says, taken aback.

Dr Raine meets his questioning look head-on, a curious expression in his eyes. It's an odd mix of warmth and sympathy, bemusement and exasperation, all swirling together behind the overwhelming weight of sadness that shines at the forefront. He stares at Jihoon until apparently he can’t anymore, and then he turns away and clasps his hands together, interlacing his fingers delicately in his lap.

“Jihoon, you’re a smart kid. You can’t possibly think this relationship is going to last?”
Jihoon didn’t know it was possible to be this flabbergasted “Excuse me? **Fuck you!** Seungcheol didn’t make that SUV chase us. Seungcheol isn’t the reason why those guys beat me up and he’s not the reason I was nearly raped either. **You are!**” The statement makes Dr Raine flinch, but Jihoon doesn’t back down.

“You got me in this mess. They were looking for **you!** They followed **you** and they found **me.**” Jihoon is pretty sure Dr Raine gets it then, because the pissy expression starts to look guilty at the edges.

“I’ve been with him for months and I’ve never felt unsafe. So shut the fuck up.” Jihoon says, a fraction too loudly

Dr Raine frowns, and there’s a blend of guilt and anger there, churning together in one expression. “You’re right. You are a grown man who is more than capable of making his own decisions.” says Dr Raine, his voice is aggravatingly neutral. There’s no apology there, it’s just flat honesty. “And I haven’t exactly been a shining beacon of responsibility with my actions of late, so I don’t expect to be a role model here. It doesn’t mean I can’t be concerned about you nonetheless.”

Jeonghan returns at that moment, knocking on the passenger window and opening Dr Raine’s door.

“Seungcheol needs to talk to you.” He announces, a grim little quirk on his lips. Jihoon moves to climb out of the car. “Not you Jihoon—Lord Commander Nerd back here. I have instructions to take **you somewhere safe.**” Jeonghan says testily.

“Uhh—I—uhmm, don’t ahh.” Jihoon’s too stunned to do much more than stutter. Possibly because he hasn’t worked up enough ’what the hell?’ yet. Jihoon reminds himself that of course the two need to talk, and of course it’s none of his business—even as a stubborn, nagging voice in the back of his head points out that yeah, it sort of is.

Dr Raine places a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay Jihoon. I was going to suggest we split up anyway, it’s safer for us both that we use the other as leverage. I can create some dead ends for them to chase and if I need you to know something, I’ll be in contact.”

Dr Raine is half expecting to have a sack forced over his head for his meeting with Seungcheol; it is, after all, the least he deserves after stupidly involving himself in the affairs of not one but two dangerous gangs. Instead, he’s ushered through a large mechanic’s garage by a tall orange haired man, who wastes no time hustling him into an office near the back and pushing him into a seat. The man is wearing a boiler suit, but he’s suspiciously well-armed for a mechanic, and he smiles at him like an absolute maniac.

“Won’t be long now.” The orange haired giant says, cryptically.

Dr Raine assess his options.

1) **Crying:** That’s always a good way of garnering sympathy.

2) **Wetting himself:** Also good for sympathy points, but he doubts Seungcheol would appreciate a puddle in his office/garage/place he tortures his enemies.

3) **Sexual favours:** **Now that’s an interesting thought.**

He’s so swept up in thinking of all the ways he could make himself look more like Jihoon and less like a middle aged nerd that he belatedly registers the tense silence in the room.
Dr Raine goes still. Slowly, he turns and finds that Choi Seungcheol had entered the office when he wasn't looking, probably while he was knee deep in panic and ineffectual thinking strategies.

“Did I interrupt you Dr? Looks like you were planning something I wouldn’t like one bit.”

Seungcheol’s face is stony, and Dr Raine knows he has one chance to talk himself out of this before blood is spilled, or at least before his face is rearranged.

Instead of sitting behind the desk in the large and comfortable looking armchair, Seungcheol rounds his desk and leans against the front edge, crossing his arms and meeting Dr Raine's questioning look head-on.

Dr Raine sits stiffly, clasping his hands atop his knees and regarding Seungcheol with accustomed wariness.

The silence that settles between them is heavy and inevitable; uncomfortable barely covers it. He's ready to have the 'sorry I dragged your boyfriend into this mess—but no harm no foul' conversation, but somehow that doesn't seem like it'll be a helpful get-out-of-jail-card this time. 'You're pretty handy with a shotgun' doesn't seem particularly appropriate either, so he keeps his mouth shut and focuses on looking as neutral and harmless as possible.

Apparently Seungcheol expects him to start this conversation, and Raine tries not to be resentful. “I appreciate your help ba—“

“Why are they looking for you?” He interjects suddenly. “That’s twice I’ve had to deal with those idiots in the space of a week—and I’d be surprised if the incidents were not related.” Seungcheol says, shooting Dr Raine a pointed look.

Dr Raine blinks at him, fear warring with bewilderment. Until the pieces fall together in slow but undeniable clarity. ‘The Villa? That was you?’

Seungcheol wrinkles his nose, and proceeds to ignore the question. “I don’t like being in the dark about things that endanger my boyfriend’s life. Why were the Masqueraders chasing you?”

Dr Raine sighs gustily. “It’s a long story.”

Seungcheol’s expression sharpens to something focused and terrifying, and the way he leans towards Dr Raine then feels intentional—intimidating. “Summarise it.” He bites out, and Dr Raine can feel the way anger and frustration ripple beneath carefully cultivated calm.

“I was caught embezzling funds from the company payroll—“ he begins and Seungcheol arches an eyebrow at him, wordlessly chastising him for his crime—which isn’t exactly fair coming from him.

“Look—It was to fund my daughter’s medical bills. It’s not something I’m proud of.” Seungcheol's eyebrow rises again, higher this time, and Raine scrambles. “When I was caught by the CEO he blackmailed me and a group of other analysts into designing a similar code to siphon off larger sums of money from overseas banking accounts. I didn’t know who the client was, but from some of the comments the other analysts made, I got the distinct impression things wouldn’t end well when we finished and I left before it was completed.” He explains.

Seungcheol blinks very slowly, Dr Raine thinks he's disappointed him. “They broke a guys legs right in front of me! I had to run! They’ve been chasing me since and I like my legs!”

“What’s any of his got to do with Jihoon?” Seungcheol says, voice sharpening with impatience.
“Jihoon unknowingly involved himself by accepting my old job. I tried to contact him to reject it because it was only a matter of time before they tried to arrange another group to create the code. I suspect the night the Villa was ambushed is when they were planning it—but obviously, your actions stalled their plans.”

Seungcheol locks him with a determined look. “Not that I would recommend this course of action but—why didn’t you just go to the police—or the feds?”

“I didn’t have any evidence! And the CEO did a bang up job of making me look completely guilty. They’re using my daughter as leverage, so I asked Jihoon to help me get information so I could bargain with them. But they were following me and that’s when the car chase, kidnapping and—everything else happened. I didn’t think they would be—interested in Jihoon if they had me. I didn’t think they would—hurt him.” Raine knows better than to prod too hard at that particular button; he wouldn’t want to trigger some sort of rage flashback in Seungcheol.

“I tried to reason with them to release Jihoon—but they’re not exactly the most reasonable of people.” Dr Raine says sheepishly, rubbing at the phantom tenderness in the back of his skull.

Seungcheol stares at him. Raine tries to smile encouragingly, but he feels it is perhaps more of a cringe. Whatever his expression is, it makes Seungcheol’s face turn doubtful, and he crosses his arms over his chest, mouth twisting.

“So, the masqueraders are branching out—that’s strangely unsettling.” Says a man from somewhere in the distance.

Another man standing behind him grunts in a disbelieving tone, “I didn’t think any of them were smart enough to use computers let alone pull something like this.”

“The thugs that were supervising us at the villa were not smart.” Dr Raine pipes up. “They’re in partnership with our CEO. I’m not sure who approached whom, but he’s the brains behind it for sure.”

Seungcheol’s eyes are distant, his posture straight. Eventually his attention returns to Raine, and his focus is sharp and piercing. “What was your plan exactly? Once you got Jihoon to go along with you?”

Dr Raine stiffens. He begins to reply, but the orange haired giant does it for him. “Or do you even have one?”

He sighs heavily. “I don’t mean for this to sound rude—but why do you care?” He says it gently, but some of his impatience still bleeds through.

Seungcheol’s expression doesn’t warm an inch, but there’s no violence in Dr Raine’s general direction so he figures he’s been given a free pass. He works his jaw. Finally, he growls, “I don’t. But you’ve involved Jihoon in this now and he’s not going to appreciate being under lock and key until I blow every single one of them out of the fucking water. So the sooner I resolve this, the better for him.”

“I don’t have a plan.” Raine says, leaning back a bit. “Honestly, my main focus was staying ahead of them, staying out of sight. When I saw you at Jihoon’s house I thought he’d been caught accessing the servers and somebody had hired you to take him out. That’s why I went to fetch him at his work and they followed me. It was almost as if they struck gold catching us both. When they realise we’ve both slipped out of their hands—I’m not sure what they’ll do.”

“And you have somewhere to hold out?” Seungcheol says. His tone is guarded.
“Yes, I have a few safe locations I alternate between. I think it’s best me and Jihoon don’t stay in the same place.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Seungcheol concedes, inclining his head in a quick gesture of acknowledgment. “Vernon will take you where you need to go.”

Dr Raine stands slowly. “Thank you. If there’s nothing else—” he starts. He doesn’t get to finish the sentence, startled instead by sudden movement. A strong hand closes tightly around his bicep, jerking him to a stop. He turns and stares at Seungcheol. He finds dark eyes drilling into him, wide and fierce and challenging.

“You seem like you have a lot riding on this. Your daughter, career, life. There might come a point in time where you feel desperate enough to cooperate with them, maybe give in. I don’t have to tell you what I’ll do to you if you drag Jihoon into any kind of trouble.”

Dr Raine swallows, tries to steady his frantic heart. The fear must be painfully obvious in his eyes, considering he’s doing nothing to hide it. He doesn’t know what to say to that. He isn’t sure he’s supposed to say anything to that.

Before he can say a word, let alone conjure up a coherent thought, Seungcheol releases him. A smile replaces his frown, so fast Dr Raine is suddenly dizzy. The two men stare at each other, Dr Raine gaping, Seungcheol inscrutable.

Dr Raine clears his throat, no idea what he’s going to say but curious to find out. “No—you’ve painted a very clear and concise picture of what you’re capable of. And although you may find it hard to believe, I care about Jihoon too.”

Jeonghan doesn’t drive him to Seungcheol’s apartment—they go somewhere else. A sleek building with careful stonework and dull metal, built against the slope of a mountain overlooking the city. It’s clearly reinforced and heavily fortified, with heavy gates and thick walls and structures tunnelling into the ground beneath. It’s perfectly situated for surveying the contours of the city. From here, one could know in an instant if someone is approaching.

A safe-house perhaps? Makes sense. A criminal’s life always has safe houses and contingency plans.

Jeonghan parks the car in an underground garage and flicks the switch to drop the heavy shutters behind them. Jihoon lets Jeonghan walk him through the garage into the house. He tries not to think of what to expect.

The house is deceptively compact on the outside. The inside its spacious, well lit and not the slightest bit claustrophobic, despite the small triple glazed windows and the fact that it’s half buried in the side of a mountain.

It’s obviously built to withstand an assault.

The thick layer of dust settling over ever surface suggests it hasn’t been in use for some time.

“So—here you are,” Jeonghan says, moving aside to give Jihoon room to come in. He shuts the door behind them, locks both deadbolts and secures the chain. “If Seungcheol was here he’d tell you to make yourself at home. So—do that.”

Jihoon drifts into the living room, and he drops heavily into one of the large leather arm chairs while Jeonghan drops into the seat across from him with a sulky sigh. They sit in silence for a graceless
Jihoon wonders where Dr Raine has been taken for a moment, then dismisses it. It’s not what’s at the forefront of Jihoon’s mind. With Seungcheol nowhere in sight, a sense of futility crawls beneath his skin and makes it difficult to determine a next move.

Or perhaps it’s not the futility that’s to blame, but the disjointed way the pieces of Jihoon’s world refuse to reassemble into something he can understand. It’s hard to think clearly about the future when he can’t shut down the chaotic tailspin of thoughts that invariably bring him back to the memory of the gag in his mouth, the wire chafing his wrists and the unwelcome touches on his body.

It's like living in his personal (he won't say hell, because he knows, things could always be worse) purgatory, his very own highwire balancing act for a circus of one.

“Is this a safe house?” Jihoon asks finally, shaking such thoughts from his head.

“Hmm—kind of. It's heavily fortified. It's one of Seungcheol’s houses that he keeps for laying low. He hasn’t had to use it in a very long time but it’s handy to keep.” He explains, getting up from his chair to wander over to the kitchen area. “Can I get you a drink? Water? A beer?”

Jihoon wants a lot of things. He wants to stop feeling like he’s choking, like the pressure in his chest is clawing up into his throat, lead-heavy, too big to fit. He wants to lie down and sleep for a small eternity next to Seungcheol, he wants Seungcheol to be here with him. “Coffee.” Jihoon says.

Jeonghan turns around, quirks a quizzical eyebrow at him. “Perhaps you’d do better with a few hours of real sleep.” He says, settling on the arm of a chair, “You need to rest, Jihoon. Why don’t you lie down for a bit? I’ll keep an eye out.”

“What I need is caffeine,” Jihoon corrects. “And a phone charger. And a laptop.” Jeonghan opens his mouth, clearly ready to protest, so Jihoon talks a little louder. “I don’t need somebody to babysit me.”

Jeonghan studies him for a moment, long enough that Jihoon’s skin starts to itch. It’s the same frank assessment Jihoon remembers so well from the day they met: sizing Jihoon up, taking his measure. “No,” he says finally. “I suppose you don’t.” He looks suspiciously happy for a man who’s just lost an argument. Jihoon resolves to worry about that later, some time when he’s not half-drunk with exhaustion and on the run from trigger-happy thugs.

“I’ll make you a coffee. I’m sure I can find you a charger somewhere in the basement. As for the laptop—I’ll speak to Vernon first chance I get. I think he salvaged a bunch from the last job.” Jeonghan says, with a bright and transparently insincere smile. It grates on Jihoon’s nerves.

“Thanks.”

Jeonghan comes closer and lays a hand on his arm. They’re not friends exactly and the gesture seems out of place, but Jihoon thinks maybe they're all flailing about in unfamiliar territory these days. “Are you going to need a hug or something? I could hug you if you needed it.”

Jihoon's honestly not sure whether to be horrified, flattered, or genuinely disturbed by that offer. He settles for all three, which isn't an entirely comfortable mix. “What?”

Jeonghan raises his hands placatingly, “I’m not hitting on you, okay. I’m only offering because, frankly, you look like shit Jihoon.”

“Thanks. I decided to take a leaf out of your style book. I’ll pass on that offer if it’s all the same to
you.” He trails off with a sigh, scrubs a hand over his face. He probably does look like shit. He
certainly feels like it. He feels sore and lightheaded, feels like he’s a half-breath from screaming and
sobbing and throwing up all at once. His eyes ache in his head, burning-hot, throbbing in their
sockets.

“You might be going into shock.” Jeonghan says quickly, now looking genuinely concerned.

Jihoon realises he’s shivering and he doesn’t know whether it’s relief or anger any more, or maybe
sadness. Because there’s a little of that too, and he doesn’t even know why. “No, I’m not.”

“It’s understandable, you just had a life altering experience. You’re not used to this, going into shock
would be expected.” His eyes soften and warm, a hesitant smile tugging at his lips, and Jihoon smiles
back, stubbornly wide and trying to convey as much confidence as he can.

“I’m fine.”

Jeonghan regards him with a heavy scrutiny, long minutes that stretch even longer as Jihoon fights
the urge to fidget under the mans intense regard.  “Did they—do anything?” He eventually asks, like
he has any right to.

"Nothing," Jihoon says, pressing his hands flat against his thighs to hide the tremors. "Nothing
happened." It was true, technically speaking. Considering what could have happened.

His resolute determination not to talk about it crumbles and drifts away on a nonexistent wind. “He
just touched me up a little but you guys got there in time so please stop looking at me like that.” he
mutters, closing his eyes to shut out the distressing grimace of Jeonghan’s lips. His head is pounding
and he’s so fucking tired but he resists the urge to cross his arms over his chest. Too obvious; too
defensive.

Jeonghan squeezes his shoulder, strong but careful, like he thinks Jihoon might crack apart, “If you
don’t wanna hug it out—do you wanna talk about it?”

“Seriously?” Jihoon says flatly. He considers responding more openly to that, some scathing
rejoinder or possibly (probably) a humiliating adrenaline-fueled admission.

“You might be suffering from post traumatic stress—whatever. Pff—I dunno. I’m just guessing it
was a traumatic day for you. Some creeps touched you up and you saw your boyfriend blow their
heads off, that’s going to mess with your head no matter how you slice it. It at least warrants like a—
bro hug or something.”

“And you’re offering?” Jihoon says, all quiet suspicion and contrariness.

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to be emotionally deprived or anything. Besides—Seungcheol obviously
cares about you, he’d probably hug you if he was here.” Jeonghan says, and his smile feels more
genuine as he drops to the ground and crouches as comfortably as he can.

Jihoon feels inexplicably sad for brief moment, the emotion spiking in him like a struck match. He
sighs self-consciously and slides a hand back through his hair. “Where is Seungcheol?”

“Clean up. Somebodies gotta hide the bodies, dump the van, check for witnesses—silence them.”
Jeonghan says. He’s actually very straightforward, which is amusing when one knows how
duplicitous his profession is. “He’s not avoiding you, if that’s what you’re upset about.” He adds.

Jihoon’s head snaps up so fast his neck twinges. Oh, good. He isn’t just showing his hand, he’s being
completely transparent. He searches for something honest to say that won’t broadcast every confused
feeling in his chest. “I feel like I’ve caused him a lot of problems.” He mumbles, picking at the fabric of his trousers at the knee.

“No, no more so than usual.” Jeonghan says, quickly enough to make Jihoon’s shoulders sag in relief. “Seungcheol just gets—quiet, after he does something like that. He feels like he has to create distance, get it out of his head. This job has its own problems. Nothing he can’t handle. Cause it’s you—he’ll want to make sure everything’s squared away before he relaxes.”

“Because it’s me?” Jihoon murmurs, voice threatening to lodge in his throat.

“Yeah. You’re important to him. He would want to make sure you’re safe and tie up any lose strings.”

Jihoon exhales, loud and noisy. “I really didn’t know anything like this would happen when I agreed to help Dr Raine.”

“Hmm—well, it took us all by surprise. You seem to be very good at doing that.” Jeonghan grins, getting back up on his feet. “Just when I think I’ve figure you out—I realise I’ve underestimated you again. I never expected the twin—the kid who walked into our garage all those months ago, to still be hanging around.” He says it with unexpected weight, grave in a way that narrows Jihoon's eyes and draws his brows tightly together.

“What do you mean?”

Jeonghan sighs, shrugging one shoulder. “It’s just, you seem to be handling this—pretty well. That’s not usually how things work out. Most people, the reasonable ones, would have been scared away a long time ago. Yet, here you are, rolling with the punches and keeping your shit together. Well—almost.”

Jihoon manages a dubious sideways squint, in response to that. “Almost?”

“Hmm, I can tell you’re trying not to freak out. Oh, and you’re super sad Seungcheol’s not here to kiss you better.” Jeonghan snarks.

Loath as he is to admit it, Jeonghan is right. It’s still incredibly unfair, considering how well Jihoon has accepted an awful lot of things lately. His accepting insane things quota has been spilling over for at least a few months. He thinks the fact that he hasn't actually had a breakdown yet deserves some sort of recognition. He doesn’t agree with Jeonghan’s assessment out loud, he lets his middle finger convey his opinion instead.

Jeonghan chuckles, like he was expecting as much. "Look," he says, his expression far too sympathetic. "Far be it from me to stick my nose in other people's business." Jihoon scoffs and rolls his eyes. Jeonghan is the king of Other People's Business, and they both know it.

“But I know what Seungcheol is trying to do. I know he’s trying to shield you from all of this and give you a normal life. It’s frustrating for you, but believe it or not—it’s more difficult for him. I’ve been there.” He says. Suddenly he looks tired, older than his years, in a way Jihoon’s never really noticed before

Jeonghan clear his throat, like he’s opening an uncomfortable topic. “I used to date this guy a few years ago. I met him at a bar one night and we went back to his. It started of casual and for a while—that was all I wanted. In our line of work—you learn not to pick up hitch-hikers, it’s a one way road.” He explains and Jihoon nods in understanding.

“So, we kept meeting up, I was sure it was just for sex, but I was ready to admit that he was good
company, a good distraction. Then one day I found myself elbow deep in cake batter—baking him a birthday cake.”

Jihoon snorts and shakes his head, and for a moment the mood between them is lighter.

Jeonghan’s smile is pointed from every angle. “Yeah—I know. A birthday cake. It was disgustingly domestic.” He sighs. “I think I had a mental breakdown. I realised I had gotten institutionalised in a relationship, even when I promised myself it was casual.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing drastic. I figured—I’ll make this work, he’s worth it.” Jeonghan trails off and blinks hard, and Jihoon’s heart pulses with painful sympathy. He shakes his head then, as if dispelling such thoughts. “But you can’t have a relationship without being completely involved. Naturally, they’re going to want to know more about you—everything you do. I figured I could hide that part of my life away from him—and for a while I was successful.” He says.

Jihoon can hear the venom starting to seep into his words, welling up from something hidden deep and rotten in his chest. “Then one day, we were out on a job and took heavy fire. We fired back—somebody took a hit and some idiot called Emergency response. He was a paramedic—and his unit was first on the scene, even before the firefight had ended. It was like fate I think, for him to see me there, retreating, covered in some other man’s guts.”

“What did he say?” Jihoon whispers, all steadiness gone from his voice.

“He just called out my name. I knew then he’d seen me. I didn’t go home that night—haven’t been back since.” Jeonghan says. His voice is soft, his eyes sad—Jihoon could almost believe him to be mourning the loss.

He dusts himself off, composing himself, registering the open look of awe on Jihoon’s face. He rolls his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“No offence—but that’s pretty cowardly.” Jihoon offers, and honestly that’s the politest way he could have phrased it. “It seems to me like you didn’t even give him a chance. Or a choice. He might have accepted you for who you were. Sounds like you left him hanging on you.” he admonishes softly.

Jeonghan laughs, and it’s a high, desolate sound. The smile that twists across his features is rueful and gut-wrenchingly ironic. “Joshua couldn’t have handled it. He was too pure.” He corrects Jihoon.

“Are you saying I’m not pure?” Jihoon says dryly.

“Didn’t you whoop Seungcheol’s ass with a belt this morning?” Jeonghan says, eyes narrowing teasingly.

“Look at the time—I’m going to bed.” Jihoon stands and takes his leave. He feels the weight of Jeonghan’s curious gaze until he slips around the corner.

Jihoon says he wants to be alone for a while. Jeonghan doesn’t argue it.

He heads to room near the back that seems more lived in and a little less stale than the others, strips out of his suit and takes a lazy, hot shower.

His whole body aches, and he sighs gratefully as the pulsing warmth of the water slowly undoes the
tension in his back. He feels wrecked and exhausted and bruised, and the shower's low hum is a familiar, reassuring drone in his ears. His head is still spinning around the events of the past three hours, and when he glances down his body he feels an odd humiliation at the smattering of bruises across his skin.

He wraps a towel around his waist, rummages through a couple of drawers, looking for something sleep suitable to borrow, and finds a faded grey t-shirt of Seungcheol’s that feels soft under his fingers. Jihoon briefly considers pressing the shirt to his face and getting a rush off the smell of Seungcheol.

With a sudden burst of mortification, he wonders if this is what falling in love with someone feels like.

Jihoon does not smell the t-shirt.

He turns the lights off before he climbs into bed. The darkness is sudden and complete, but he won't be sleeping tonight. The manic whirr of his thoughts is too loud, he is too wound up for calm. It doesn’t help that the safe-house is roughly minus five hundred degrees.

He ends up tossing and turning for twenty minutes, during which time he comes to the conclusion that the bed feels wrong without Seungcheol wrapped around him like a weed. Jihoon never much cared for sharing his bed with anyone before—he re-enacts entire movie action sequences in his sleep, and is ruthlessly selfish with blankets—but he's gotten accustomed to being the small spoon. That and Seungcheol's apparent inability to snuggle without getting an erection, and the way he would always blame it on Jihoon’s ass. *It's not my fault, it's your ass Jellybean! My dick is seeking it out!*

He hopes Seungcheol is safe, wherever he’s avoiding him. Jihoon tries not to think about it too hard, because the thought of him in danger sets unhappy butterflies loose in his stomach.

………………..

He’s still wide awake when he hears footsteps in the corridor, followed by a creaking of the door.

“Jihoon?” It's Seungcheol's voice, quietly careful, as if he doesn't want to make too much noise, but Jihoon thinks he can hear the thready note of panic anyway.

The bedroom door opens, and unmitigated relief floods him at the sight of Seungcheol stepping into the room. God, it's like a missing piece slotting back into place in his chest. His face flushes with warmth, and he hopes the dark does something to conceal it.

He accepts the giddy relief and lets the tension drain from his shoulders, suddenly realizing he should probably say something instead of sitting here staring like an idiot. But Seungcheol hasn’t said anything either, and the silence that settles between them is the sort of stretched and unreadable quiet that Jihoon has never been able to abide for long. Taut and expectant, with an undertone of off-balance uncertainty. It makes him feel like they're both waiting for something.

Seungcheol’s probably being polite, trying to reign his anger in. Shit, this is going to be the worst conversation Jihoon has ever had. He squares his shoulders and braces himself for the inevitable scolding.

Seungcheol drags a hand over his hair, letting it come to rest at the heavy column of his nape. He isn’t looking at Jihoon. “Are you okay?”
He continues to hold himself tense as Seungcheol crosses the small distance separating them. He tries to guard his expression as Seungcheol regards him with dark, serious eyes. The last thing he needs is to let on how desperately he wants Seungcheol to touch him. “Yeah—I’m fine. Are you?” Jihoon asks in a soft, cautious voice.

“Yeah.” Seungcheol says, but he doesn’t move closer, expression still carefully bland. He gives Jihoon nothing, absolutely nothing, and he doesn’t even know why that’s suddenly more than he can handle.

“Okay—Great.” Jihoon says breathlessly. He feels lightheaded. He feels like his heart is going to rattle its way up into his throat and get stuck.

“Awesome.” Seungcheol says as he breaks eye contact, something he damn well never does, and Jihoon stares in open incredulity. “I need to talk to Jeonghan about something, I’ll—let you get some sleep.” He adds, turning his back to Jihoon.

He doesn’t walk particularly slow or particularly fast, just heads toward the door with both hands in his pockets. The door swings closed behind him and Jihoon sits there, feeling stripped to the marrow.

“Cheol.” Jihoon calls out.

The footsteps in the corridor pause. “Yeah?”

“Get your ass back here.” Jihoon says. It's far too quiet. It sounds disturbingly like a plea.

The door swings open again and Seungcheol walks back in, more cautiously than before, gaze lowered to his boots. There's something deliberate in the way he avoids eye contact. Whatever his boots are telling him, it can't be that fascinating. Besides, Seungcheol's shoulders are too tight. His face isn't just blank. It's empty steel, guarded like a fortress. Jihoon can usually read the nuances in Seungcheol's expressions, but suddenly—perhaps for the first time in their entire relationship—Jihoon reads absolutely nothing beneath the calculated neutrality of Seungcheol's face.

It's disconcerting, and seriously unpleasant.

“Why are you acting weird?” It's supposed to sound more irritated than it does. But all the hard edges he intended are missing.

“I’m not—“

“Yes, you are—you’re avoiding me. Why?” He asks, heart thudding messily in his chest.

Seungcheol still doesn't speak as several trudging seconds stretch into a minute and longer, and the lingering silence sets Jihoon on edge. Seungcheol has never been one for unnecessary words, but neither is he this uncommunicative. He sought Jihoon out tonight, presumably with purpose, and his continued quiet doesn't sit right in the space between them.

“I dunno—I figured, you would want some space?” Seungcheol says finally, expression tight with focus.

“Well, I don’t. I wanted to see you.” Jihoon retorts, sounding more petulant than he wants to admit.

“I thought I would make you uncomfortable.” Seungcheol points out, heavy brow knitting unhappily.

“Why the fuck would you think that?” It comes out rougher than he is expecting, harsh in the uneasy
The stiffness is more noticeable in Seungcheol's shoulders, and it's obviously a discomfort that goes beyond the tight delivery of Jihoon’s words. There's a growing tension in the room between them, stubborn and strong, and so intense that Jihoon can feel it at the base of his skull.

"Cheol, what is it?" he asks. The way Seungcheol's eyes dodge around the room is seriously starting to upset his calm. "Seungcheol, come on. You're freaking me out way more by not telling me than you will if you just say what's on your mind." The last time Seungcheol was this reluctant to divulge information was when he was injured…Jihoon needs to not think about that right now. He needs to focus on here and now, because Seungcheol's nervous manner is making him think they're approaching an actual crisis.

"Talk to me," Jihoon orders, pushing off the bed and moving until he's standing right in Seungcheol's line of sight, so close there's nowhere else the man can look. Seungcheol moves closer, their chests touching. He goes from freezing cold to sweltering; the heat Seungcheol emits is astronomical and he places his hands on Seungcheol’s broad shoulders in what he hopes is a grounding gesture.

“What’s wrong?” Jihoon asks, because he goddamn needs to know.

Seungcheol’s face is shuttered, withdrawn. The tendons of his neck where Jihoon’s hand rests have lost every inch of pliancy. Jihoon takes in his expression and thinks he can't be reading it right; that can't be guilt he sees looming in Seungcheol’s eyes.

Suddenly he’s reaching out for Jihoon’s wrist, and doesn't relax until he has hold of it. His fingers are hot and sweaty. “I thought you would be scared of me.” he says in an impossibly soft voice.

His mind temporarily blank, Jihoon can only blink. "What?" he breathes in surprise. He's starting to hate all the nuances of conflicting information that are running circles in his head.

Seungcheol drops his gaze to his boots, touching a hand to the back of his head. “I’m not handling any of this like I wanted to. I never wanted any of this for you.” He whispers. The apology in his voice is stifling, and Jihoon draws an unsteady breath as Seungcheol’s fingers tighten and relax on his wrist.

“Cheol—you can’t be blaming yourself for this. That’s crazy.”

Seungcheol shakes his head, face scrunched and helpless. “When I got injured, you were so afraid. I realised how new all of this was for you and I thought how unfair it was for you to have to deal with it. I’m used to this danger for myself Jihoon, but thinking of you in danger scared me so much I was —immobilized. I was terrified of finding you injured or—dead.” He adds, face scrunching up impossibly further. As if he doesn't even want to roll that thought around in his head.

“I’ve been trying so hard to keep you out of this part of my life. But I couldn’t let them live— knowing what they could have done to you. After, I remembered you’d never seen me kill anyone before. I thought—maybe you’d be afraid of me.” He mumbles, looking slightly lost, cracked open just enough for Jihoon to glimpse at the worry he's bottled up. “I don’t want you to be scared of me. I’d never hurt you Jihoon.” Seungcheol says, raw and low, almost on the edge of a sob.

Jihoon shakes his head, short noise that's not a laugh, even if it sounds like one, breaking out of his throat. “Dammit Cheol. That’s crazy. I thought you were angry with me for creating so many problems. I thought that’s why you were being-distant.”

“What? No—I.” Seungcheol’s guilty face is a thing to be treasured, but this really isn't the time.
Jihoon can still feel the sweaty grip of his hand, the way his fingers are just a fraction too tight. “I wanted to hug you so bad—I just was afraid you wouldn’t want me to. I wanted to give you space—even though that’s the last thing I wanted.”

Jihoon grabs two fistfuls of Seungcheol’s shirt, attempting to gain some measure of control. He inhales the scent of Seungcheol’s neck—the cedarwood and vetiver base notes of his cologne, the traces of motor oil, sweat, gunpowder that cling to his skin—and thinks to himself, dizzy and lightheaded, I’m in love with you, you gorgeous bastard. He doesn’t say it aloud, can’t bring himself to just yet, but it feels amazing to admit it, to form the words inside his head and hear them echo.

"I’m not scared," he announces lamely. "You said once I have no self-preservation instinct and maybe I don’t or it doesn’t work around you, or whatever. But—I haven’t been afraid of you since that time you accidentally pulled your gun on me in the canyon when you were teaching my how to ride. You looked so sorry—it was sorta hilarious. When I think back on it I laugh cause I was screaming my head off and you were even more terrified than I was.” Jihoon giggles quietly, mostly to himself because Seungcheol still looks like he wants to hurl himself out of a window.

“My point is Cheol—you held me after and I felt safe. I always feel safe with you. I’m not scared.” It feels good to repeat the words. It grounds him. Reminds him this is where he needs to be.

Apparently, they’re the right words to say, because the stiffness melts—slowly and almost imperceptibly—from the tight line of Seungcheol’s shoulders. He regards Jihoon with knowing, familiar eyes. They’re dark with so much emotion that Jihoon feels tiny under the weight of his stare.

"Fuck, Jihoon—" Seungcheol says, and in the space of a heartbeat, he’s there, right there, touching Jihoon everywhere, like he’s afraid Jihoon might vanish from under his hands. He buries his head in Jihoon’s neck for a second and draws in a deep breath, and Jihoon grips the fabric of his shirt too tight when he realizes that Seungcheol is taking in the way he smells, is trying to erase the lingering scent of gun powder and death he hasn’t been able to shake. The little groan he makes tears Jihoon’s heart in two.

“Oh god, Cheol! I’m so sorry! I wanted to help Dr Raine but I had no idea it would escalate into this. I didn’t mean to interfere with your work—I didn’t think it would complicate your life.” Jihoon shuts his eyes. He lets his breath out, shuddering under the weight of all those words sprawled out between them.

When Jihoon opens his eyes again, there’s a different intensity in Seungcheol’s gaze now. A heated, wrecked expression that makes Jihoon’s skin feel suddenly too warm. “Do you think I give a shit about my work?” Seungcheol says, his eyes raw with something Jihoon doesn’t know how to name. “Do you think I give a shit about anything other than you?”

“I thought they’d hurt you—I thought—I thought.” Seungcheol falters, eyes dropping away from Jihoon’s. “I thought I’d lost you and I honestly could not have imagined another minute of life without you in it.” He says, and the words come out on such a soft breath that Jihoon almost misses them. He feels his own breath stutter in his chest when Seungcheol turns to regard him with wide, honest eyes.

As tightly wound as Jihoon is, Seungcheol still moves with a speed that catches him off guard. One second Jihoon is standing tense and uncertain, his pulse too loud in his ears. The next he's crushed against Seungcheol's chest, gasping as Seungcheol kisses him with the ragged force of a whirlwind. Seungcheol’s tongue is a furnace of heat and want, his body a hard line of the same, and Jihoon winds his arms around Seungcheol's neck and simply holds on.

He grips his fingers into Seungcheol’s hair, destroying the neatly gelled comb of it. Seungcheol
groans against his mouth, licking over the ridges of his teeth. It’s not a kiss as much as a collision.

“What were you thinking?” Seungcheol pants, between one heavy drag of his lips and another. “Hacking, car chases, fighting thugs? You could’ve gotten yourself killed, you—”

“I don’t know,” Jihoon breathes, chasing Seungcheol’s mouth, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth. “I don’t know, I just knew you would come.”

“Of course I was gonna come.” Seungcheol whispers into the kiss. “I was terrified I was going to be too late.”

“It’s okay, Cheol, I’m fine, I’m here,” Jihoon says, his litany getting lost in Seungcheol’s mouth. “I’m right here.”

Seungcheol rests his hands on Jihoon's hips and kisses him deeply, hungry and completely focused, and Jihoon moans quietly when Seungcheol’s fingers skate over the bruises. It's almost chaste, for all it isn’t--Jihoon lets his hands drift down to cup Seungcheol's face, running his thumbs along his cheekbones, and Seungcheol strokes down Jihoon’s torso with careful, probing fingers.

"Are you checking me for injuries?" Jihoon asks, amused, when Seungcheol's hands slip down and around, skimming lightly across his back.

"No," Seungcheol says, even though that is very much what he's doing.

"I'm in one piece, I promise," Jihoon chuckles. "Just a little battered, that's all."

As if to make certain of it, Seungcheol gathers Jihoon up, gripping bruises into his hips as he lifts him off his feet. Jihoon moans, hooking his legs behind the small of Seungcheol’s back. This time, when their lips meet, neither one of them tries to talk through it.

The smell of bacon and eggs wafts out of the sizzling skillet on the hob. Seungcheol’s been awake long enough to shower, change and go out and buy groceries. He doesn’t know how long Jihoon will need to hide out here, but he’s bought enough food and amenities for a month.

He thinks about letting Jihoon rest some more, maybe bringing the breakfast to him in bed. Before he can make any such arrangements Jihoon comes strolling down the corridor. “Morning gorgeous.” Seungcheol greets.

Jihoon’s hair is sticking out in about a hundred different directions at once and he’s wearing a shirt that is at least four sizes too big. Seungcheol gives him a curious look, before he registers that Jihoon has appropriated one of his shirts. He can tell by how loosely it fits, and by the way the cuffs hang just over his wrists in a way that threatens to be maddening. It's the wrong length, the wrong cut, it's just fucking perfect. He looks good enough to eat (out).

"That’s an interesting look for you." Seungcheol grins as Jihoon drifts closer, almost close enough to touch.

Seungcheol’s eyebrows draw down as he examines him. "It makes you look adorable. I feel more than a little dirty for wanting to take it off you." He reaches out, lazily, fingers brushing the material and then very slowly lifting it. His mind curious, no doubt, to see if Jihoon has retrieved his underwear on his trek to the kitchen. He hasn’t.
"I didn’t exactly pack an overnight bag Cheol." Jihoon huffs, slapping his hand away.

"Do you hear me complaining?" Seungcheol leers. He leans down to peck his cheek, presses in as close as he can. Jihoon relaxes all at once, their bodies melting against each other. Seungcheol touches his hair, the longer pieces that curl over his brow. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

Jihoon smiles. “Smells good. I’m hungry.”

“Yeah? Good, I was worried I was going to have to resort to feeding you like a baby bird to get you to eat something. Sit down, I’ll make you coffee.”

“You didn’t have to make me coffee.” Jihoon says, but it’s in the same voice as when he says, ‘You don’t have to service my car’, and ‘You don’t have to wake me up with a blowjob’. In other words, Seungcheol doesn’t have to, but Jihoon would like it very, very much if he did.

Jihoon perches on one of the kitchen stools just as Seungcheol dishes him out a plate of bacon, sausages, scrambled eggs and large slabs of toast, gleaming with butter.

Seungcheol’s stomach rumbles in anticipation. He hasn’t eaten since early yesterday, and he’s ravenous. He’s willing to bet it’s been longer for Jihoon, who seems to view eating not as a chore, as Seungcheol once thought, but as a rather permissive sort of hobby: enjoyable enough, certainly, but who’s got the time?

He fishes some cutlery out of a drawer and they sit down with their breakfast. Seungcheol tears in immediately, and is oddly gratified to see Jihoon do the same, attacking his food with voracious enthusiasm.

They don’t speak much throughout the meal, Seungcheol too consumed with feeding the cramp in his belly, but he can see Jihoon scrutinize him with heavy, dark eyes. “You’re limping when you walk,” Jihoon observes, with a polite look over the rim of his coffee cup.

Seungcheol shrugs, chews a mouthful of bacon and says, “I’ll live.” Jihoon quirks a wordless eyebrow at him, eyes suddenly anxious, and Seungcheol shakes his head, “It’s nothing honestly.”

They continue to eat in a not-uncomfortable silence. There’s a television on in the far corner, and Seungcheol watches a Korean soap opera with detached interest. A few minutes later, Jihoon says, “Where you injured yesterday?”

Seungcheol blinks, still caught up in the drama unfolding on the television. “Sorry?”

Jihoon’s not even trying to mask the concern in his expression as he regards Seungcheol over a sip of his drink. Jihoon’s worried eyebrows are going to stay that way if the wind shifts—it’s a genuine fear that Seungcheol has. “Is that why you’re limping? Because you got injured yesterday?”

Seungcheol pulls a face. “Yes, I was injured. Brutally. Some maniac whipped my ass with a belt, fucked me then left me to rub lotion all by myself.” He teases, edging the last of his egg onto his fork.

“Oh, yeah, uhm.” Jihoon blushes, trying his best to hide behind his coffee cup. “I did offer to help. I didn’t realise I was being that rough.”

“It was my second time, I was practically a virgin you sex fiend.” Seungcheol says, full of mock affront.

Jihoon damn near chokes on his drink, “I thought my dick was tiny and wasn’t likely to leave a big
Seungcheol purses his lips, “It is small,” he replies, standing up to dump his plate in the sink. “It’s thick as fuck though.” His teasing tone takes away the insult, replaces it with a tentative flirtation. He grins, and enjoys the warmth that spreads through his stomach at Jihoon’s answering smirk.

“Flatterer,” Jihoon says dryly.

When they’ve finished, Jihoon clears the plates and starts to do the washing up. Seungcheol leans against the counter whilst he’s finishing his coffee, and takes the opportunity to imagine the shape of Jihoon’s ass under that shirt.

Jihoon finishes with the plates and dries his hands on a tea towel. “I should get dressed.”

“There’s no rush,” Seungcheol says, grabbing Jihoon’s wrist and pulling him in. Jihoon shifts obligingly closer, draping an arm over Seungcheol’s shoulder, threading fingers through his hair. Seungcheol curls an arm around him to keep him there, tucks his face into Jihoon’s throat and breathes him in.

They fit together like their bodies were designed for this, for just exactly this: Jihoon parading half naked in his kitchen, drowsy and loose-limbed and agreeable, rocking into Seungcheol’s arms and chuckling at his stupid jokes – Seungcheol loves it. He may be a hard man, but he’s only human.

Jihoon is still and quiet for a long while, long enough that Seungcheol thinks he must have fallen asleep in his arms. Seungcheol decides to push his luck, sliding a hand under the hem of Jihoon’s (his) shirt and trailing it upwards; Jihoon’s back is silky smooth under his fingertips. He slides his hand up to curve round his ribs, slotting his fingers between the ridges of bone, steadying himself to the rhythm of Jihoon’s breaths.

Eventually, though, Jihoon shifts with a soft sigh, fingernails scratching lightly against Seungcheol’s scalp. There’s a yawn in his voice when he asks, “Why are you dressed already?”

“I’m heading out soon to sort out some stuff, Jeonghan is coming with me but DK and Hoshi are going to be here to watch over you.”

Jihoon gives his hair a sharp tug. “I don’t need babysitters Cheol.” He pauses, then adds belligerently, “I’m not going to run off and wave down the next masqueraders convoy I see.”

Seungcheol brushes the hair out of Jihoon’s eyes, shakes his head. “They’re not babysitting you Jellybean, they’re—” He hesitates, feeling like he should assure Jihoon that this was a sensible idea, but he’s not quite sure how to phrase it. “They’re just watching you while I am away.”

“That sounds an awful lot like babysitting.” Jihoon drawls but the soft smile he directs Seungcheol’s way didn’t exactly look accusatory.

“I won’t be gone long. I feel better if you’re with people I trust then by yourself.”

Jihoon sighs heavily, a rush of hot breath against Seungcheol’s neck. “Okay,” he mumbles, sulky but decisive. “Be careful. And if you happen to have time to stop by at my place and pick me up some clothes that actually fit—that would be greatly appreciated.” He adds, toying with the hair above Seungcheol’s ear, twisting it gently round his fingers.

“Oh—I don’t know about that Jihoon. I don’t think I could risk it.” Seungcheol replies, and leaves the rest unsaid, disproportionately pleased by the little furrow of consternation that appears in Jihoon’s forehead.
Jihoon pushes him away, gentle but firm. He cups Seungcheol’s jaw in one hand and regards him steadily. “Risk it? Oh my god! Do you think the house is being watched?”

Seungcheol shakes his head ardently. “No. I just like the idea of you wearing my shirts for the rest of your life.”

Jihoon snorts, making it clear just what he thinks of that option, but his eyes brighten with amusement and he kisses Seungcheol chastely on the mouth, soft and lingering.

Seungcheol can’t help it, how hard the kiss turns. For a few perfect, messy seconds, Jihoon kisses him back, thawing into Seungcheol like it’s necessary, like breathing. His ribs move under Seungcheol’s hand, rising and falling.

All too soon, their moment is rudely interrupted by an urgent news bulletin from Jeonghan.

“Isn’t this nice. And here I was thinking I would have to play the middle man between the two of you.” Jeonghan perks up from somewhere in the vicinity of the doorway.

Seungcheol glares into Jihoon’s shoulder, which really isn’t as effective as he wishes it was. But it’s where his face happens to be at the moment. There’s a knock on the door and Jihoon’s gaze shifts away, refocusing over Seungcheol’s shoulder to where Hoshi and DK appear at the doorway.

Seungcheol sighs heavily. “Okay, I better go. I won’t be long.” He says, pulling back and gently separating himself.

He lingers in the doorway as DK and Hoshi makes themselves comfortable on the couch.

Jihoon smiles and crosses his arms. "Bye," he says tonelessly.

“Bye Jellybean.”

They stare at each other.

"Don't hold yourselves back for our sake," DK calls out.

Seungcheol glares in DK’s general direction. He steps forward and gives Jihoon a kiss.

Ten minutes later, Seungcheol is still trying to get out the door; every time he glances over his shoulder and sees Jihoon standing there with that little scowl on his face, he has to kiss him again.

Finally, DK says, "I was wrong. For the love of all that is holy, please, please think of us poor guys sitting here having to watch this disgusting display of cuteness."

“Alright, alright—I’m going.” Seungcheol snaps, turning once more to Jihoon. “Don’t take any shit from them Jellybean. Hoshi has a weak knee and DK’s got poor aim. Use it against them if you have to.”

Jihoon finds he doesn't mind the company. DK and Hoshi are entertaining and even Mingyu pops in for a spell. They take turns patrolling the perimeter, trading jokes and topping up Jihoon’s coffee.

There’s some intelligent conversation, but mostly they simply watch TV and take the piss out of each other.

Jihoon can only do so much sitting around. But it’s not like he can go out for a walk to clear his head—not that he’s the type for long refreshing walks anyway (long refreshing naps, maybe). But
now that he can’t simply walk out the door with this hypothetical bullseye on his back, he itches to roam in the great outdoors.

He decides to do some work, because he likes to be useful, and he figures that will at least burn off some of his pent up energy. Except for the television, his mobile phone and a radio—there isn’t anything remotely technological in the safe house for him to tinker with. That is until he spots the shiny dome on the ceiling in the corner of the kitchen. He’s amazed to realise it’s a security camera. He really should stop being surprised at how protective Seungcheol can be.

“It’s a camera.” DK confirms over his shoulder. “Boss had them installed years ago—when we used this place more often. They’re not hooked up though.”

Jihoon nods, a perplexed wrinkle between his eyes as he surveys the rest of the room, picking out another four cameras. “Is there a panic room where you monitor them from?”

DK tilts his head considerately. “Not exactly. The whole house is technically a panic room.”

The corner of Jihoon’s mouth turns up. “Oh—so why aren’t they hooked up?”

“Don’t quite know. Guess he didn’t need them, what’s he got to panic about these days?” DK says with a wide-eyed sidelong glance.

“More like he didn’t know how to hook them up to the computer.” Hoshi pipes up, turning up at Jihoon’s side, an amused slant to his mouth.

Jihoon regards Hoshi with an amused smile. “Really?”

Hoshi nods with long, emphatic bobs of his head. “Boss isn’t very good with computers. Or technology in general. If he can’t fix it with a wrench or a screwdriver—”

“Or his shotgun.” Mingyu pipes in.

“—or his shotgun, he doesn’t.” Hoshi finishes.

Jihoon’s smile grows broader. “So, where is this computer?”

……………………

The safe house is dark and quiet when Seungcheol returns. He nudges DK and Hoshi awake from where they’re sprawled on the couch (Not spooning, apparently).

“Some bodyguards you are!” He hisses, slapping them upside the head.

“Sorry boss—but he worked us hard.” Hoshi mumbles groggily. “Harder than you! Made us lift things and fix things.”

“He’s tiny but he’s really fucking scary.” DK whispers, still half asleep.

Seungcheol wants to roll his eyes, but he quirks an eyebrow instead. It's less effort, plus it has the advantage of looking more intimidating. He ushers his men out of the house and secures the area before moving down the corridor.

Seungcheol kicks off his shoes and just looks for a while, taking in the familiar sight of Jihoon in his bed. Jihoon is sleeping on his belly in the centre of the bed, lean arms and legs akimbo. He expects Jihoon to tense under his hand, but he just mumbles something incomprehensible and shifts back into the touch, loose and pliant. The curls at his nape are soft and feathery, slightly damp from the sleepy
heat of his skin. Seungcheol strips to his t-shirt and pants and slides in beside him.

Jihoon rouses then. He blinks sleepily as Seungcheol rolls onto his side to face him. "Welcome back."

"Sorry, I was trying to be quiet," Seungcheol whispers.

"Wasn't you," Jihoon says. "I woke up when your car came up the drive. I put in a new security system. It alerted me."

Without moving out of his position, he points behind him to where an old laptop sits on the heavy oak desk in the corner of the room.

"DK said you had the cameras installed ages ago, but never got around to hooking them up and updating software. The laptop is a little ancient but it still works."

"Is this what you did in your spare time?" Seungcheol asks admiringly. He runs a hand down Jihoon's back, enjoying the way the threadbare t-shirt feels against his skin.

"I read every magazine in the house. I made lunch. I listened to Hoshi ramble on about his smoking hot girl. " Jihoon sighs. "It was an hour long discussion. Then I realised he was talking about his car. It was embarrassing."

Seungcheol snorts. "Ah, yes, Hosh, the original ladies man." He chuckles. "I know you’re bored. But I appreciate you being patient and staying inside."

"It’s fine. I understand. I could be useful though. I mean—if you need anything in the software designing or hacking department. Get me a newer laptop and a couple of mini turrets and I could fortify this place like Guantanamo Bay."

Seungcheol’s eyes light up with amusement. "Hmm—should I find it disconcerting that you’re comparing my safe house to a high security prison?"

Jihoon shrugs apologetically, throwing him a quick sideways glance. ‘I’m just saying—prisons are some of the most secure places. I could make this place more defensible.’

“Well lucky for you, there’s a bunch of laptops in the trunk of my car. Jeonghan gave them to me today—said you wanted them. Yanno—he said a lot of nice things about you today. I think he’s grown fond of you.” He says, giving Jihoon a little nudge.

Jihoon rolls his head sideways and frowns at him. “Jeonghan’s a giant dick.” he says, a hint of a smile curling his lip at the corner.

“Do you know this from personal experience? Should I be jealous?” Seungcheol says, raising one eyebrow.

Jihoon rolls his eyes beside him, but fond exasperation softens his expression. “He asked me if I wanted a hug you know!”

Seungcheol recoils theatrically. “Seriously? That settles it. He’s not allowed to babysit you anymore."

That makes Jihoon laugh, one quick, bright noise, it’s the most beautiful thing Seungcheol’s heard in weeks. “Thought you said I wasn’t being babysat?” Jihoon asks.
“Go back to sleep Marshmallow.” Seungcheol quickly shushes him with an embrace and pretends to fall asleep, elated as he feels the soft curve of Jihoon’s smile against his neck.

Jihoon doesn’t drift off to sleep again, despite the comforting warmth of Seungcheol’s body wrapped around his. He’s lazed about most of the day and the itch to do something productive burns under his skin. He slips out from under Seungcheol’s embrace and pads quietly out of the room, grabbing Seungcheol’s keys on the way out.

The garage is even colder than the rest of the house and Jihoon shudders involuntarily as he steps down into the room, hands coming up to rub at his arms.

He’s just going to grab the laptops out of Seungcheol’s car and head into the kitchen to set them up. If they’re anything like the rest of the tech in the house—they’re going to need a reboot and software upgrades before they’re fully functional.

He’s about to unlock the car when he spots Seungcheol’s bike leaning on its kickstands near the wall, looking a little sad and a little lonely.

“Hello.” Jihoon says, gently patting the seat.

Yes—he did just greet an inanimate object. But, Seungcheol’s bike looks almost happy to see him, glinting invitingly in the overhead lights of the garage.

“I know, it has been a while! How have you been?” He whispers, trailing his fingers over the handlebar idly.

“I’ve been good, thanks for asking (it didn’t). My life’s gotten a lot more exciting recently. I’m sure Cheol’s told you all about it. (He probably hasn’t; unlike Jihoon, Seungcheol doesn’t talk to inanimate objects)”

“What’s that?” Jihoon leans in, as if the bike has whispered to him a secret. “Woah!” He gasps, ears burning red, chin ducking and his eyes darting a quick glance over to the door then back to the bike propped beside him. “I couldn’t do that. I’m just here to pick something up—I really shouldn’t meddle with other people’s property!”

“Oh my god—stop. I can’t. Seungcheol will be jealous.” He gasps, eyes twinkling with excitement and curiosity.

He’s very much aware that’s he standing in a garage in the middle of the night—flirting with a motorbike. Seungcheol’s motorbike. Which really is an extension of Seungcheol himself and probably explains why he’s getting shamefully hard.

“Oh—okay! Better make it quick.” Jihoon giggles. He swings a leg over the seat of the bike and settling himself in the seat happily.

“You can’t tell Seungcheol okay. He’ll just laugh at me.” He whispers, hands shaking a little as they run over the bike’s handlebars.

It’s still dark when Seungcheol wakes. The mattress is cool next to him, and it takes him a moment to realize there’s something off about that. He pushes himself up on his elbows and looks at the empty space beside him, taking in the dent in the other pillow, the rucked-up sheets. The fleeting imprint of
Jihoon’s body in his bed.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters.

*Maybe he’s just gone to the bathroom.*

He flips back the covers and clambers to his feet, wincing as his body registers a dozen different pains: overworked muscles, the sharp invisible ache of new bruises, a hint of lingering soreness in his ass.

“Fucking hell,” he says again, feelingly.

He tries not to have a heart attack when he doesn’t find Jihoon in the bathroom. He tries not to panic, but he finds himself moving through the house, frantic, checking each room as he walks down the corridor.

*Oh shit! What if Jihoon’s forgotten everything that’s happened in the last 24 hours? What if he got up—got dressed and went to work!? It’s possible! He really loves computers!*

Okay, so he’s officially at panic stations now. He has to find Jihoon.

He's going to call Jeonghan, going to search the whole damn city, going to call Mingyu and Jun and anyone else with a phone number—but first he needs to arm himself. When he opens the door to the basement garage and steps inside, the panic bleeds sharply, instantly out of him.

Jihoon is there, sitting on his bike, pretending to ride it—*again.*

Chapter End Notes

OHOHOHOHOHOH. I'm so excited about the next chapter. Can you guess why????

1) Need to go back to nice short chapters that don't drain my life away.
2) Hope you enjoy reading! Feedback is always appreciated :)


Seungcheol steps into the garage silently, shaking between fear and anger and relief.

He wants to call out to Jihoon. He wants to startle him and watch him flush from head to toe in embarrassment; he wants to pick him up and take him back to bed and fuck the ever loving shit out of him.

Instead, he finds himself holding back in the darkness instead, breathless and curious.

He watches as Jihoon bounces happily on his motorcycle, making imaginary driving sounds ‘Vroom’ and even some pretend shooting sounds ‘Pew-Pew’—like he’s participating in his own little motorbike chase at—Seungcheol checks his wristwatch—2am in the morning!

Seungcheol’s about to trudge over there, bend him across the bike and spank his ass but then—Jihoon leans in close, close enough that his lips brush against the handle bar and he whispers something to the bike. He’s talking to the fucking bike for fucks sake! This is some cabin fever shit surely.

But he’s distracted from that thought when Jihoon leans back again and starts to circle his hips back and forth on the seat as he traces his fingers along the throttle grip.

Jihoon’s wearing one of Seungcheol’s shirts and from the way it’s hiked up around his thighs splayed on either side of the bike—it’s clear that it's all he’s wearing. Jihoon continues to rolls his hips indolently, head tipped back as he straddles the bike and Seungcheol is seriously wondering where this is going.

Then, just as Seungcheol is considering opening his mouth and asking Jihoon what the hell he’s doing—Jihoon spreads his legs wider and grinds down against the bike seat and oh.

**Oh.**

He moans.

Oh, that's where Jihoon is going with this.

Seungcheol's breath punches out of his chest in a surprised exhale, and bites his lip to stifle a groan as Jihoon releases his grip from the handle to muffle a moan into the palm of his hand. Seungcheol is suddenly aware of how very hard he himself is as he stands and stares at Jihoon—*maybe* having sex with his motorbike?

The part of his brain inclined towards unrealistic fantasy has some pretty pronounced thoughts on what he’s watching, but he doesn’t want to get ahead of himself just yet, despite the desperate surge
of want coursing beneath his skin and the unmistakable erection Jihoon is sporting.

Seungcheol reaches down and strokes himself gently through his pants and damn near bites his lip off when Jihoon spreads his thighs farther, thrusting haltingly into the padding of the seat. Jihoon stops and leans back, stretches an arm behind him and slinks the other hand down lower, fingers disappearing completely beneath the fabric of his oversized shirt. His lips part just slightly and Seungcheol wants to run his tongue along them, to feel the soft pillow of flesh dent underneath a gentle bite. Jihoon darts his tongue out, just a flash of pink raking over his lips before it retreats and then he lets out a soft but excruciatingly obscene moan.

Seungcheol realises he is irrationally jealous that Jihoon is having bike sex—without him—on his fucking bike no less. It's absurd, he knows.

“Jellybean,” Seungcheol says, quiet, trying not to startle him. “What are you doing?”

Jihoon comes to an abrupt stop and blinks at him in surprise, hands hovering uncertainly over the handle bars. His eyes are wide, his cheeks pink, his mouth agape. The sight sends a pulse of filthy, needy heat through Seungcheol’s blood.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Jihoon says automatically. Seungcheol knows better than to buy the practiced look of innocent confusion in his eyes. He can read the mischief on his familiar face, even if he wasn’t intending to be caught tonight—this is something he has been thinking about.

“Oh? So, you’re not getting hot and bothered riding my bike in the middle of the night?” Seungcheol says, stepping forward, locking him in an inescapable, deliberate stare.

There’s a breath of amusement, a laugh, half startled and cut in two. He meets Seungcheol’s eyes steadily and his gaze is warm and tinged dark with lust. “Okay—so it is what it looks like a little. But I didn’t come out here for that reason, I just came out here to grab the laptops from your car and I just thought—”

“Just thought you’d ride my bike in the dead of night and touch yourself a little while I slept alone?” Seungcheol presses, advancing another step.

Jihoon jerks his hand back as if burned. “I’m sorry—I,” His expression is completely wrecked, like he’s committed some awful sin. “It looked lonely—It beckoned me.”

“Did it?” He takes an extra step before he stops and folds his arms, quirking a meaningful eyebrow at Jihoon. “Should I be worried that you’re cheating on me—with my own bike?”

“Oh my god Cheol—I’m not—It’s a nice bike but I’m not—“ Jihoon pauses, ducking his head. He gifts Seungcheol with a tiny smile, bashful around the edges, “It reminds me of you—it’s just I’ve had ideas of you—doing stuff to me on your bike.” He whispers bashfully.

“So—that kink you were planning on sharing with me. It’s a bike kink?” Seungcheol asks. It’s rhetorical, he already knows. He just wants Jihoon to blush a little more.

Jihoon’s eyes flutter shut as he bobs his head in agreement. “Oh—well then. Aren’t you a naughty little thing,” Seungcheol says, low and approving, inching his fingers under Jihoon’s shirt.

Jihoon ducks his head, one cheek creasing with the hint of a dimple. Seungcheol takes a moment to study him – the slope of his nose, the pink pillowy softness of his lips – then reaches over to lightly pinch his jaw until Jihoon obediently tips his head back up.

Seungcheol’s thumb sweeps over Jihoon’s lower lip, tentatively at first, memorizing the give of the
petal softness, his sharp shuddering breath. When Seungcheol stills and presses more firmly, he parts his lips and lets Seungcheol slide the digit into his mouth.

Seungcheol can see the warm blush pinking his face and throat, and he can see Jihoon’s eyelashes flutter as he hollows his cheeks and licks suggestively at the pad of Seungcheol’s thumb. Seungcheol can’t stop staring at the way his mouth looks around his fingertip and promptly loses his command of most of the Korean language. “Uhhh.”

When he retracts his thumb, Jihoon opens his mouth as if to speak, but breaks off as Seungcheol kisses him. It’s a claiming kiss, one where he memorizes the precise shape of Jihoon’s mouth under his, learning the taste and supple give of it, lingering over its curves and corners. It feels like they kiss for hours, though Seungcheol knows in reality it’s been a frantic matter of minutes. He’s impatient, though. There’s too damn much clothing between them, and only one thing to do about it.

His hands are clumsy on Jihoon’s buttons, because he damn well refuses to break the kiss if he doesn’t have to. Seungcheol groans in frustration, ripping apart the fine buttons of the shirt. They scatter across the room, delicate notes of chaos in the silence. He pulls the shirt free from Jihoon’s arms, baring him to the room’s cool air, relishing in the pale skin and heat and the feel of pure, unadulterated Jihoon beneath his hands.

“Are you serious? You want to do this here--now?” Jihoon whispers.

Seungcheol drags their lips together again, a sweet velvety glide, then breaks away to lay down a line of kisses along Jihoon’s jaw. “You’re the one who decided to ride my bike and get horny over it. I’m just joining in the fun Jellybean. Unless you want to be alone with the bike and finish yourself off.” He teases.

“Oh my god I’m not sexually attracted to your bike Cheol! It’s what the bike—represents.” Jihoon defends.

Seungcheol scrapes his teeth over his collar, pulls back slightly to nip at the point of Jihoon’s chin. His free hand strokes up Jihoon’s thigh, slow and teasing, savouring the twitch of Jihoon’s muscles under his fingertips.

“Don’t lie Jihoonie. You were getting off on riding it, getting all excited. God knows what you would have done had I not walked in on you.” He braces one hand round the rubber grip of the handlebar, a familiar touch, and then lets his other hand drift along the smooth leather of the seat around Jihoon’s ass. Palming the soft globes of Jihoon’s ass, his thumb dips inward, rubbing against Jihoon’s hole. “You would have rubbed yourself raw, grinding your sweet little ass on my bike. I should be insulted that you were gonna have all this fun without me.”

“It’s not like that! I wasn’t going to jerk off all over it or anything.” Jihoon flutters.


Jihoon visibly relaxes when Seungcheol moves forward into his space. He goes easily, allowing Seungcheol to nudge him forwards until he can slot in behind him on the seat.

He pulls Seungcheol’s arms around his waist, pressing his ass back into Seungcheol’s crotch. “What do you want me to do?” The question is low, barely a whisper as Jihoon nervously plays with the ignition switch.

Seungcheol tightens his hold and does some grinding of his own. “I want you to keep going.” he breathes against Jihoon’s neck, taking Jihoon’s hand and bringing it slowly but deliberately towards...
his flushed cock. "I want you to touch yourself. Tell me what you’re thinking when you were riding my bike."

“No Cheol—it’s embarrassing.” Jihoon whines.

Seungcheol laughs, breathing in Jihoon’s scent then licking at the shell of his ear. He pulls Jihoon back against his chest so he can get a better look over his shoulder. “Do it. I don’t care. I wanna watch. I wanna see what you were going to do if I hadn’t caught you.”

Despite his protests, Jihoon wraps delicate fingers around his cock, wrist flicking and fingers held loosely at first. Then his grip tightens as he gives a slow, lazy stroke along his stiffened length. Seungcheol can see his stomach flex in and out rapidly with each pull of his cock and he smoothes his hand along the sensitive skin of Jihoon’s thigh in encouragement. “Good boy. So good. Keep going baby, nice and slow. Fuck you look amazing Jihoonie. So pretty.”

Pulling back his foreskin, Jihoon works his fingers over the head, already sensitive and leaking from stimulation. He keeps his eyes closed as he tightens his grip and thumbs the crown, spreading slick from the tip down the shaft as he resumes slow generous strokes.

“What were you thinking of Jellybean?” Seungcheol rasps in Jihoon’s ear. He’s almost surprised to have found his voice. “Were you thinking of me when you were riding this? Were you thinking of me fucking you on my bike? Bending you over the seat and fucking that sweet little ass of yours? Hmm?”

Jihoon smiles as he strokes himself and cocks his head to the side “I was thinking, you would fuck me—on this. Fill me up. Then plug me up and take me for a ride. A really bumpy ride. I could feel every bump on the road, could feel your cum inside me. I’d feel so full with the toy too.”

“Fuck!” Seungcheol finds it remarkably difficult to capture enough air to form words; the mental image exploding across every synapse in his brain. It’s enough to make his cock lengthen to full arousal. Jihoon demonstrates his appreciation for that by bucking his ass back against Seungcheol’s groin.

Seungcheol tightens his grip on Jihoon’s hips to slow him down, but he curls around Jihoon’s back anyway, biting lightly at the lobe of his ear as he admires his handiwork. Watching as Jihoon strokes himself in long smooth arcs, pinching at his own nipple and sucking in his breath at his pleasure. Seungcheol wants to give him everything he desires and more. He wants to press the man into the bike seat and run his tongue along every inch of his skin. He wants to make him shatter under the ministrations of his tongue, only to put him back together and take him apart again. He wants him moaning, bent over and clenching around Seungcheol’s cock, hands gripping the bar for dear life as Seungcheol pounds into him. Seungcheol wants to watching him come undone, spurting come all over the polished metal.

Jihoon is fucking his own hand steadily now, hips twitching up out of the seat and his breath comes in short huffs. One of Jihoon’s nipples is pink and pebbled from being toyed with. Seungcheol pinches and flicks the other one to match like he wants to, smiling gleefully as Jihoon whimpers into the depths of the room. “Ahh—Cheol—fuck!”

It’s mesmerizing, watching Jihoon fuck his fist like this, and Seungcheol becomes lost in the roll of his hips and the flex of his hamstrings. He continues to flick and rub on Jihoon’s nipples until both nubs are bright red and swollen.

Seungcheol can’t help the low whimper that escapes him as a pulse of Jihoon’s precome drips onto
the black leather padding of the bike. Seungcheol watches those silvery drops turn into a small puddle and moans, licking his lips. He presses harder against Jihoon’s ass from behind, rolling his hips forward in time with the smaller man’s strokes.

Time stands still and Seungcheol’s world becomes a tunnel, solely focused on Jihoon’s ministrations. He’s absorbed in it, in Jihoon’s pleasure, in his own, so it’s almost awakening when Jihoon whines out. “Please Cheollie—enough! Fuck me already!” and Seungcheol can feel the words vibrate beneath his lips as he nibbles along the delicate column of his throat.

Jihoon’s head falls back on a moan—so far beyond cognizant control that it would be funny if it weren’t doing such hungry things to Seungcheol’s insides. As it is, he’s long since gone hot and hard, and he needs to be balls deep inside Jihoon’s heat.

Seungcheol grabs Jihoon’s hair, cranes his neck backward for a kiss, feels Jihoon tense and shudder and stutter out some tremulous noise against his mouth. Then Jihoon’s lifting his ass of the seat, digging his thighs into the rubber padding for leverage and grinding back against Seungcheol. They’re both desperate for friction now, still straining to kiss and Seungcheol’s barely managed to pull his cock out into the cool air when Jihoon presses down onto his lap, trying to impale himself onto it.

“Heard up Jellybean. I’m getting there baby, take it easy.” Seungcheol chides. He punctuates that statement by running his fingers along the cleft of Jihoon’s ass.

Jihoon gives him an imploring look over his shoulder. “Please Cheol!” he says through clenched teeth. “Please! Want to ride you and the bike, want it now.” He whimpers, spreading his legs wider and canting his hips back in invitation.

Seungcheol sucks two of his own fingers to wet them, and then reaches down, pushing them into Jihoon all the way to the knuckle. Jihoon arches forward, hands scrambling to find purchase as his body reacts to the harsh, welcome burn as Seungcheol works into him almost dry.

“When this shit storm blows over, I’m going to make good on your ideas Jihoon. Gonna take you for a ride on my bike just like you want. Gonna fuck you out in the open for anyone to see.” Seungcheol says, and then bites hard at the fleshy curve of Jihoon’s throat, pressing Jihoon open with two fingers all at the same time, and it’s still not fast enough, apparently.

“Cheol. Cheol, please. More!”

Jihoon bucks his hips, Seungcheol’s not sure if he’s trying to move away from the pressure or ask for more. It doesn’t matter what he wants, though, because Seungcheol pins him down with a hand splayed across his back and twists three fingers inside him with relentless strokes.

“Dammit Cheol—I’m good, I’m ready baby please!”

Seungcheol snickers darkly, works him open, gentle but insistent. Sometimes grazing his prostate. Sometimes just scissoring his fingers to stretch him wide. Jihoon moans and ruts against the bike, heels digging into the bikes footpeg for leverage.

It takes a few death threats and some unmanly whimpering, but Jihoon manages to persuade Seungcheol to grant him mercy and he finally withdraws his digits. He swiftly swipes the precome from his slit down his shaft and braces his hands on Jihoon’s hips. Just like with all things, he doesn’t hesitate or fumble when he fits the head of his erection against Jihoon’s hole. Uses that determined will to push in with one torturously slow stroke.
Seungcheol's attempt to keep his efforts gentle doesn't last long once he's finally inside Jihoon, but none of the sounds coming from Jihoon's throat register remotely as complaint. Seungcheol's hands are leaving bruises all over Jihoon's hips, mottled imprints in the shape of his own fingertips; the way Jihoon arches back into the touch tells him that's more than okay.

“Ahh—**Seungcheol!**” It's more of a moan that a word.

Jihoon grinds down to meet Seungcheol, matching his pace, deepening his thrusts. It's brutal and reckless and he wants them to fuck like this every time—too hard, all desperate and greedy. The air is a mess of moans and pants and startled, pleasure-tinted curses, and Seungcheol never—goddamn ever—wants to stop.

Saying that, he withdraws his cock abruptly, shushing Jihoon’s little whine of need.

“Shh, s’okay. Just a little longer, I promise.” He steadies himself in the bike seat, hoisting Jihoon up and back to sit on his cock, groaning as re-enters with the aid of gravity. He slaps Jihoon’s thigh encouragingly and grins as the smaller man takes his cue and begins bouncing on his cock.

“Ah—ahh—cheool—fuck—ahh—hnn—yes.”

Seungcheol takes hold of Jihoon’s slim waist and clings desperately, guiding him down on his cock again and again. Each slide is smooth and long, like a steady wave pushing him higher and higher up that peak of pleasure. Seungcheol lets it wash over him, filling his senses with the feel of the lean body riding down on his lap, the sounds of his own heavy breaths and Jihoon’s needy cries.

Jihoon’s grace and control vanish as he moves faster, harder, rougher. Seungcheol is too fried to do more than lie there blissfully and enjoy the view as Jihoon squeals and bounces his way to orgasm.

The world explodes. Jihoon screams into the back of his hand and comes, cock spurting come all over the dash. Seungcheol fucks and fists him through the climax, wringing every last drop from his oversensitive cock, pushing him to the boundaries of lucidity.

Suddenly, Seungcheol finds himself with an armful of sweaty, quivering limbs as Jihoon rather inelegantly collapses on top of him. Seungcheol rests his face against Jihoon’s nape, wraps both arms around his hips and grinds in, hips bucking hard, thighs slapping against Jihoon’s ass as he strives to bury every inch of himself inside Jihoon’s gripping channel. “Fuck—yes, yes! So—good—Jihoon, fuck.”

Then Seungcheol comes so hard the world goes blank and silent for a minute. It’s only after, when he feels how raw his throat is, that he realizes he must have screamed his way through it.

He can feel Jihoon clenching around him, an aftershock of his orgasm and feels a corresponding twitch from his still-hard cock pressed deep inside him.

“Christ, Jellybean, don’t do that.” Seungcheol groans, hips undulating.

Jihoon gives a wrecked, breathy little laugh. “Can’t help it. You feel too good Cheollie.”

Seungcheol rolls his hips in gentle waves, milking the last bits of pleasure before withdrawing.

………..

The morning light is coming in through the small window, bright and clear. Seungcheol is there, half on top of Jihoon and half spread out next to him, breathing evenly. There is something bewitching about it, about Seungcheol in bed with him, quiet and unguarded.
Jihoon reaches out, spreading his fingers over Seungcheol’s forehead. He traces the shell of his ear, the stud and the crucifix embedded in his lobe, learning their shape.

Seungcheol has very few scars considering his occupation. Some are easy to understand—a serrated blade, a bullet graze. Others are a complete mystery to Jihoon. There is a cluster of pigmentation over one shoulder, neatly healed. There is a small burn mark under his rib.

Jihoon catalogues them, commits them to memory. There is a story spilled out across Seungcheol’s skin and he wants to learn it; he wants to touch each scar and ask Seungcheol where he got them from, wants to know if he remembers them, how bad it hurt. He considers waking Seungcheol up, right then, to explain the riddle of shapes and keratin lines to him.

He doesn’t wake Seungcheol up. He lets the man rest and slips out from under his weight to start his day. He has work to do.

Seungcheol wakes up to an empty bed. From the pleasant soreness in his cock, he recalls the events of last night.

A hot shower and half an hour later, he’s stumbling towards the promise of caffeine and a greasy breakfast. His watery eyes only want to focus on the three feet of space immediately in front of him, so he fails to notice Jihoon balancing two laptops as he approaches the kitchen table.

Seungcheol pulls up short, seconds away from collision and Jihoon’s undoubtedly violent retribution. “Sorry baby, so—what the fuck.” He drags a hand through his damp hair, taking in the sight of half a dozen laptops sitting open on the kitchen table and in the corner, half a dozen mini turrets.

He blinks blearily at the sight in front of him. Jihoon, in contrast, looks like he’s been awake and overthrowing all his rival gangs for hours.

“What the hell Jellybean? What are you doing with those mini turrets?” Seungcheol asks.

“What?” Jihoon flicks a glance over his laptop and frowns. “Oh—this? I designed a simple program to operate these mini turrets remotely from a laptop. That way, you can kill your enemies—but from a safe distance.” Jihoon explains, almost bouncing with joy in his seat.

Seungcheol just gapes like a dying fish, for once no response at the ready.

It’s quite nice having Jihoon about. He’s very considerate, as prisoners confined in a safe-house go, and not nearly as prone to cabin fever like tendencies as Seungcheol might have expected. For the most part, he stays out of the Seungcheol’s way, aside from the occasional burst of disapproval (pepsi max and diet coke are not the same thing, apparently), and the relatively more frequent invitations to strip down and join him on the nearest flat surface, with which Seungcheol is always happy to comply.

Seungcheol takes to staring while Jihoon goes about his routine.

He spends a lot of time on his laptop—or laptop(s), staring intently at the screen in between bursts of furious typing. Seungcheol hasn’t the faintest idea of whether he’s hacking the feds servers, ordering a pizza or playing something undoubtedly nerdy online. It’s probably best not to ask. Seungcheol’s not one for technology himself, but Jihoon squints at the laptop screen like he’s learning the meaning of life.
He drinks coffee, rearranges Seungcheol’s fridge, plays on his mobile, does their laundry. He does the children’s puzzle on the back of the cereal packet, scowls at Hoshi when he cheats and gives him the answers. He advises Mingyu to dye his hair a colour that doesn’t make him a walking high visual target, then proceeds to actually help Mingyu dye his hair.

He takes to wearing Seungcheol’s shirts, rolling up the sleeves and even then they come loose and slip down—it’s very adorable. He frequently pours himself a coffee and proceeds to forget about it until it’s gone stone-cold, at which point he dumps it down the sink and starts over. He teaches Vernon and Wonwoo how to format a laptop to control the mini turrets—then pouts when Seungcheol puts his foot down and says they can’t have live mini turrets in the house.

He placidly makes dinner for everyone and Seungcheol immediately crowds him against the hard ledge of the counter, mouth hot and wet against his neck. “You don’t have to feed these losers. They’ll get used to it, don’t spoil them.”

“I was cooking for you—they happened to smell it.” Jihoon defends. “Besides, they spend all day watching me—they watch your ass! The least I could do was feed them. Vernon says he’s eaten pizza every night this week Cheol! Every night! That can’t be good. As his employer, you should be concerned for his health.”

He watches Jihoon slap DK’s hand away from the plate of freshly fried dumplings. “Ahh—why!”

“Dinner’s not ready yet and have you even washed your hands DK?” Jihoon’s glare is so derisive that DK turns to look at Seungcheol for backup and just sort of shrinks in on himself.

Seungcheol stares back and shrugs in sympathy. “Uhm—I’m sorry.” DK murmurs and shuffles off to wash his hands.

It’s surreal, watching them all mill around the safe-house, preparing food, laughing together. Fuck—dare he think it—It’s like—a family?

His own foundations are rotted, pitted with bitter scorn, and as baseless as the many deceptions he’s played throughout his life. Growing up with only his brother, all other relatives either dead or discarded, taught him that family might as well be a four-lettered word.

Family is a nice idea, but that’s just it. It’s always been more of an idea than a reality, seeing as how his mother had died when Seungcheol was still too young to remember her and his younger brother had left for parts unknown to pursue an actual chance at life. He likes to tell himself he’s not angry at him for leaving because—who would have wanted to stay.

At times like this, he wishes his brother had cared enough to at least keep in contact. Maybe if he had at least one other person in the world that he could point to and say—‘That’s my family’, maybe then he wouldn’t feel this growing chasm between what he wants and what he has.

Seungcheol could wallow in the rush of self pity curling in his gut, roll himself up in the feelings of hurt and never come out. But the sight of Jihoon, in the house, sharing space with his crew and caring for them unconditionally, cracks his heart open and fills it with so much happiness that he doesn’t quite know how to balance the feeling.

He’s pretty sure he can deal with the impossible if he gets to have this.

Because now things matter in a way they didn’t before. There’s new consequences that go beyond ‘Will this get my team killed’ and ‘Does this risk my territorial influence?’. Real, potentially
damaging consequences like ‘Could Jihoon get hurt?’ and ‘Will Jihoon leave me?’

And that’s the real problem, right there. Because Seungcheol will never let him go. Is unable of letting Jihoon out of his life, now that they’ve gotten this far. So it’s imperative that he gets this right. That he protects Jihoon any way he can—even if it means sending him away.

“How long will you be gone for?” Jihoon asks, stepping away from one of the laptops he’s reformatting.

“Just a few hours. I’m meeting with an old ‘contact’ of mine. Should be back tonight.” Seungcheol explains, wiping down the solvent powder remover from his Sig Sauer.

Jihoon bats his eyes and affects a moue of dissatisfaction, “Contact? Sounds—vague. Sound dangerous even.”

Seungcheol flounders for a few blinks before visibly shrugging off Jihoon’s words “Nah. Namjoon is an old friend. We go way back. He’s only tried to kill me once and that was a misunderstanding.” Seungcheol says jokingly, except that is enough to make Jihoon a lot more worried than he was a minute ago.

“I hope the safety or—whatever—is on that thing.” Jihoon asks, watching Seungcheol’s long fingers disassembling the gun with a deft, practiced touch that borders on pornographic.

Seungcheol levels a look up at him that he correctly interprets as ‘duh.’

“Shouldn’t you be wearing like—a bullet proof vest to clean that thing?” Jihoon asks pointedly. “When I’m finished reformatting these laptops. I might design you a robot with arms that can clean the gun for you.” He ponders out loud.

“The magazine is on the other end of the table Jihoon—it’s not even loaded.” Seungcheol snarks. “I know how to clean a gun mom.” He adds, grinning slyly.

“Hey—none of your condescending shit please.” Jihoon cries out, trying to maintain a front of indignation even though he has to work to not giggle like a preteen.

He can’t help being a incy wincy bit protective over Seungcheol. Somebody needs to look out for the guy while he’s not getting shot at.

Jihoon has worked diligently to make the safe-house fit for habitation. It was already stuffed to the eaves with hidden weaponry, but now it’s buttoned up with a security system of Jihoon’s own devising. In a weird way, it’s all been very… domestic. Setting up house with Seungcheol, arguing over gun cleaning practices, how to wash blood out of fabrics and setting up surveillance cameras.

Okay—so it’s not your standard domesticity, but Jihoon accepts that they will never be a standard couple. He still likes the feeling—maybe more than he should—and wonders how long he should wait before casually mentioning the lack curtains and cushions and candles.

So what if he wants to deck the place out in IKEA—shut the fuck up!

He watches Seungcheol stare down the muzzle of his gun and tries not to wince. “Please—can you not be so brazen about totting that around. I’m really worried you’ll hurt yourself. I watched this episode of CSI and somebody shot themselves cleaning their gun. I watched the whole episode. It was like 45 minutes long. That makes me an expert now.”
Seungcheol scoffs, but humours Jihoon by holding the gun further away from himself as he polishes off the slide. “What are you planning on doing with all those laptops?” He asks, jerking his head towards the computers monopolizing the kitchen table.

“Several things. Two of them I’ll use for the security cameras. Two for the turrets project you refused to give me the greenlight on—that I will secretly go ahead with behind you back.” Jihoon mumbles under his breath.

Seungcheol’s head whips around and he stares at Jihoon hard. “Jihoon—**don’t.** It’s dangerous.”

“Oh—okay—man who’s perched precariously on a kitchen stool while he cleans his gun that may or may not have the safety switched on.” Jihoon says sardonically.

“You’re freaking out about me cleaning a gun, but you’ll happily rig up a bunch of mini turrets in a confined space and drill machine gun holes into the walls? Do you hear yourself?” Seungcheol says, reassembling his gun with practiced efficiency, snapping the slide up the rail frame.

Jihoon gives an exaggerated sigh, “Fine! I guess I can use two for the laptops for fun or something. I could set one up for your own personal use?—They’re quality laptops.” He says, patting the laptop admirably.

Seungcheol’s pinched expression of disapproval instantly morphs into disinterest. “I dunno Jellybean. I wouldn’t really have a use for it.”

Jihoon waves him off. “Sure you would! You could play games, watch movies, shop online, skype with your super shady pal Namjoon, check your emails. There is *always* a use for a good laptop.”

Seungcheol shrugs his shoulders. “I wouldn’t even know how to do half of those things. I don’t have an email.”

“Ww-*what*?” Jihoon splutters. He thinks he might actually be experiencing the mental equivalent of the blue screen of death. It certainly explains why he just stares at Seungcheol, who stares back, and since staring at each other is something like 50% of their vocabulary, Seungcheol doesn’t seem to think there’s anything unusual about this—he just *smiles* and begins to wipe down the outside of the pistol with lubricant.

Jihoon feels weak—*faint.* He’s dating a guy that doesn’t possess an email address.

“I think—I think I need to lie down.” Jihoon murmurs.

Seungcheol reveals other things as he helps Jihoon lie down on the couch, shocking things like: he’s never watched porn online, he’s never shopped online, he’s never watched that YouTube Video of the cat playing the piano. Jihoon thinks he’s going to be sick.

“I don’t even know where to start. You’re a blank slate—I’ve never been with a technological blank slate before. Every guy in the world has watched porn online Seungcheol. Everyone—*except you.*” He says it slowly, hoping to imbue his disappointment.

Seungcheol rolls his eyes. “I don’t get the big deal. If I wanted to watch porn I could just walk into an adult film shop and—”

“And get judged for your choices!” Jihoon interjects. “You can’t do that! That’s weird! What if the creepy overweight man behind the counter keeps a record of what you buy? Do you really want other people to know that you have a thing for mechanic shop sex?”
“Mechanic shop sex?” Seungcheol all but leers.

“I’m just giving you an example, there is probably no such thing.” Jihoon hedges. It’s not exactly a smooth recovery, but seriously. There’s not much more he can contribute without getting into embarrassing details. Which Seungcheol might enjoy, but he himself doesn’t feel particularly inclined to share.

Seungcheol chuckles softly. “I think it’s hilarious your reaction is more severe than when you found out what I did for a living.”

“We have to get you an email address. That’s the first step.” Jihoon says, feeling less faint now that he’s determined an appropriate course of action. He jumps up to grab one of the laptops from the kitchen table and settles in next to Seungcheol on the couch.

It turns out Seungcheol isn’t a complete lost cause. He knows how to search for things online, he’s just never had the urge to explore further than the Google search bar. Jihoon opens a gmail tab and starts to register an email address for him.

“Okay, so—pick an email address you want, in the format of blank@gmail.com”

“Seungcheol at gmail dot com.” Seungcheol requests instantly.

Jihoon can’t resist rolling his eyes. “No—that’s already taken.”

“It is?”

“Of course it is! Get creative Seungcheol. Do you think my email address is: Jihoon at gmail dot com! Nobody is lucky enough to get their first name as an email.”

Seungcheol nods thoughtfully. “Ok, I guess it’s a reasonably popular name. What about—Choi Seungcheol at gmail dot com?”

“Taken.”

Seungcheol’s brows furrow. “Seungcheol is awesome?”

“Taken.”

His brow furrows deeper. “Choi Seungcheol is the best?”

“Taken.”

Seungcheol almost seems pleased with that revelation. “What about—Seungcheol sucks ass?”

“Unsurprisingly—also taken.” Jihoon laughs.

He sighs heavily. “Jesus Christ!”

“Taken.”

“No—I meant—never mind. Seungcheol has the biggest dick?”

Jihoon snorts. The guy always was one for the direct route. Whatever the polar opposite of ‘shy’ is, that’s Seungcheol. “Smug much? And—taken.”

“I hate my life.” Seungcheol groans.
“Taken.”

“Seriously?” Seungcheol gasps, looking over to check the screen.

“Okay then. How about—Seungcheol loves jellybean?” He says it suddenly, in one decisive plunge, like somebody jumping off a cliff. When Jihoon cuts his gaze to him, Seungcheol doesn't quite smile but his mouth is softer, less straight and it's almost like they're talking about something else entirely. That there's a whole conversation under the words that Jihoon's missed.

Jihoon doesn't know what to make of that, so he is careful to keep the emotion out of his voice until he is sure where this is going. “I'll check.” He says, typing in the suggested email.

Seungcheol shifts in his seat, a movement Jihoon catches in his peripheral vision, and when he slouches more comfortably into the couch, the back of his hand makes the barest contact with Jihoon’s neck.

The email address is available for the taking it's just—what does he mean?

It isn't that he doubts the truth of Seungcheol’s affections, per se. More that he questions how deep those affections go. No matter how close they get physically—which is very close, indeed—there’s an unspoken distance in Seungcheol’s eyes. Sometimes, when they’re lingering over coffee (several strong cups of the stuff in Jihoon’s case) he sees a smiling mask across the table. And that scares him.

“Well?” Seungcheol prompts, startling Jihoon out of his reverie. “Don’t tell me that email’s taken too Jellybean? It can’t be possible that there is another Seungcheol out there who loves his Jellybean more than I.” Seungcheol says bluntly, and, yeah, that's about as honest as it gets and there's no way to mistake that for anything else.

“Uhm.” Jihoon hesitates, hands frozen over the keyboard. He feels embarrassingly squishy inside at hearing the words.

Seungcheol is watching him—smiling. And his expression is the strangest combination of a self-satisfied smirk and a warm, glowing grin. It's also completely inimitable—not to mention alluring—and Jihoon's chest feels suddenly tight with how badly he wants to throw himself across the couch to protest (whimper/plead/pronounce his undying love) but it’s hard to articulate complex ideas with his heart trying to climb out of his chest and lay itself at Seungcheol’s feet. “I—uhh—hn.”

“I mean, if it’s not available, I guess I could settle for Seungcheol loves marshmallow jellybean at gmail dot com. It’s a little long but I’ll never forget it.” Seungcheol says, brushing his fingers deliberately across the warm skin of Jihoon’s nape. Jihoon doesn't startle at the teasing caress, but he flushes a thousand different shades of pink.

Seungcheol's expression softens into surprise, something that's searching in a new way. Like he’s not quite sure what he did to merit the blush on Jihoon’s face. But he’s enjoying Jihoon’s stupefaction over the whole thing and maybe that's awkward in a way Jihoon should be worried about, should be steering the conversation away from. But he doesn't.

“Are you sure that’s what you wanna go with? That’s the email you’ll be—handing out to people you want to contact you—Seungcheol-loves-Jellybean@gmail.com.”

"Yes—I’m sure. I'd like that," Seungcheol says quietly, and it's so sincere Jihoon has to look away, has to rub at the back of his neck and focus on the faraway clatter of Mingyu entering the house.

He drags himself, forcibly, back to the matter of the email. “Okay—I’ll set it up for you then.”
“Great, thanks Jellybean. I better get going now that Mingyu’s here,” Seungcheol says, pocketing his phone and grabbing his jacket.

Seungcheol cups his cheek as he’s slipping out the front door and Jihoon turns to acknowledge him, and then Seungcheol is—

Jihoon forgot just how soft his lips are.

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Mingyu doesn’t try to chat with him during the drive between the safe house and the outskirts of his city. Or maybe he does, and Seungcheol is just too checked out to notice. He can’t seem to focus on anything through the nervous anticipation swirling in his stomach. The passing scenery outside the car window is so familiar it doesn’t seem real. He hasn’t had to venture down this road in years; he hasn’t had to ask for favours from Namjoon in years.

The trouble is, Namjoon is notorious for dealing in favours. He trades information and assistance as it suits him, hoarding his debts, only to call them in at invariably inconvenient moments. Seungcheol is glad enough of the help now, but God only knows how Namjoon will leverage this against him later.

It’s a deal with the devil, he knows. Still, better the devil you know – and he’ll choose Jihoon’s survival over his pride any day.

Seungcheol takes out his cell phone the second his car enters Bangtan territory.

He briefly considered simply turning up on Namjoon’s doorstep—he’s never needed any warning to stop by before. But this visit isn’t like anything that’s come before, and there are the possibilities of warring factions and diplomatic relations to consider.

He doesn’t call. Just sends a perfunctory text message. *I’m coming to see you,* is all it says.

The only reply he gets back is a sparse text: ‘*Come*.’

Seungcheol is surprised to get a reply so quickly. They haven’t exactly stayed in touch—though of course Seungcheol’s been well aware that Namjoon hasn’t strayed far from his home base since he’s consolidated power. The man has his own area to care for and he’s grown deeply paranoid about his power and how far it stretches. Nothing in their brief telephone interactions since then has dissuaded his assumptions.

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When they arrive at Namjoon’s HQ, a small building cleverly disguised as a restaurant (that serves surprisingly good Pho) they round the block and park the car a short distance away—doesn’t hurt to be safe.

The guys who usually cover Namjoon’s security rotation out back look the same, but something feels different this time. They tense up as soon as Seungcheol approaches the back entrance.

Mingyu stands implacably to his left, and it’s not until Seungcheol turns and catches sight of Yoongi coming out of the bar towards them that he wonders if they might not be in trouble after all. Yoongi isn’t usually in charge of Namjoon’s security—he specialises in inhumane methods of extraction. Torture basically.

“I’m going to have to ask you to hand over your weapons Seungcheol.” Yoongi drawls. There’s dangerous intent flashing behind his eyes when he steps in close, and Seungcheol expects Yoongi to
try and shoot him.
He doesn't.

"Namjoon knows I'm coming." Seungcheol says, resisting the urge to step back and away. There's no advantage to be gained by letting them see how off-balance his presence is throwing him.

“And Namjoon told me to take your weapons.” Yoongi repeats, hand fluttering over his holstered gun in a way that feels a little too much like unspoken promise.

Seungcheol can feel Mingyu's eyes on him—on them—and discomfort settles low in his gut. If Yoongi's in a roguish mood, he needs to tread carefully. Seungcheol's a better shooter and Yoongi isn't exactly built for hand to hand combat, but there are four other men waiting at the door. They won't be able to ditch them easily; the alleyway behind them is too wide and open for a tactical retreat.

Fight or flight instinct murmurs beneath his skin in response. Taking a bullet is the only alternative, and it's no alternative at all. Seungcheol can see from the fresh darkening of Mingyu's expression that his partner has reached the same conclusion.

“Alright—“ Seungcheol relents, raising his arms carefully.

Three of the men stay put, unwavering, while the fourth tucks his sidearm away and strides forward to pat Seungcheol and Mingyu down for weapons. He finds all three of Seungcheol's concealed firearms, and the one weapon he misses—the small knife hidden discreetly in Seungcheol's boot—won't be much help if things get nasty inside. He wonders why Namjoon's security is tighter than usual. Maybe he too is suffering from upheavals in his territory. It would certainly explain why he hasn't seen the man in a while.

“You'll get them back when he's finished with you.” Yoongi says, waving for Seungcheol to head inside.

He nods to acknowledge the point but as soon as he takes one step, Yoongi rests the barrel of his gun beneath his jaw and clicks the safety off, and Seungcheol honestly thinks he means to shoot him—is bracing himself for the confounding flash of pain and whatever comes next—but instead of a gunshot he hears his voice, soft and contrite say, “No hard feelings yeah? Just doing my job. The boss is a little on edge.”

Seungcheol just blinks at him because Yoongi looks almost—nervous? Which is new. He didn’t know Yoongi had any other mode besides *Ice-cold Bastard* and *Scary Ice-cold Bastard*. It throws his perceptions out of whack. Like watching rainfall on a sunny day, something puts you on edge despite the mild view.

When they finally step inside, Seungcheol notices the men filling the bar area belong to Namjoon too. There are definitely a few new faces from what Seungcheol can remember, but they're all going about their business pleasantly, undisturbed, and obviously not minding having Seungcheol in their midst.

When he catches sight of Namjoon coming down the steps towards him, Seungcheol quirks an eyebrow. The man’s arm is in a sling, and by the looks of it, he’s recovering from a gunshot wound to the shoulder.

"Been a while Cheol—I’d apologise for the security but these thinks can’t be helped." Namjoon says after shaking Seungcheol's hand. “Shall we speak in private?”
“Boss, I don’t think-” Mingyu begins to object but Seungcheol jerks his head for him to leave. Mingyu sends him one last worried look before agreeing, following Yoongi out into the main reception area.

It’s just Namjoon and him now, and Namjoon is watching him, jerking his head towards the back of the room with a deliberately neutral expression on his face. Expectant.

Seungcheol doesn't waste another moment before stepping into the room. Namjoon keeps watching him. Outwardly he looks as calm and collected as ever. Hell, maybe more so. He looks cool and stress-free, like all they're about to do is go over the groundwork for a relatively straightforward job they’re collaborating on.

He thinks he should maybe say something clever. 'Yoongi’s as friendly as ever I see' Or maybe, 'I like what you’ve done with the place'. Something trite and clichéd and easy—to lighten things up, to recall their comfortable camaraderie from wherever it's hiding.

“How’s business?” Namjoon asks him, gesturing for Seungcheol to sit in one of the armchairs wedged into his tiny office. Seungcheol wonders why the man hasn’t invested in better real estate by now—after consolidating power with minimal competition, Namjoon certainly has the funds to afford a nicer place.

“Fine.” says Seungcheol, taking a seat. “You’ve been shot?” he says, curious enough to ask.

Namjoon meets his scrutiny head-on and gives a grim little smile “Yes, and I couldn’t help but notice that you seem—genuinely surprised by that. So, it wasn’t you then?”

Seungcheol realizes it’s not an idle question, Namjoon actually suspects him. “I think we both know if I tried to kill you—I wouldn’t have just grazed your shoulder.” He almost takes back the quip when Namjoon’s easy demeanour evaporates.

His face stays neutral, but he leans back a little, contemplative. “You’re right. That’s not your style. Shooting people point blank in the face, now that’s your style.”

“It’s effective and they don’t get back up.”

Namjoon smiles bigger, like he just said something clever. “Ahh yes—no prisoners. How’s that philosophy turning out for you?”

Seungcheol chews on his response before admitting the truth, “Worked for me so far. After all—I’m not the one with a bullet wound and extra security.” he teases.

Namjoon seems to relax a little, even going as far as to offer him a drink. “Beer?” He asks, pulling out a cold one from a small fridge behind his desk.

Seungcheol eyes the drink dubiously, then shakes his head. They may have worked together in the past, but alliances shift at the speed of wire transfer in their world. He should know better than most that Namjoon is not someone to be underestimated.

Namjoon seems to follow his train of thought and rolls his eyes. “Gosh you’re paranoid, suit yourself.”

“Coming from the guy who stripped me of my weapons.” Seungcheol prompts with a raised brow.

“Like you need a gun to kill somebody.” Namjoon says, slouching back in his chair, a slight smile on his lips, but his gaze is full of familiar old taunts. “Besides—I know you always keep that knife in
your boot. It’s not like I’ve lost faith in everyone.”

“So, you don’t know who took a shot at you. That’s explains why I haven’t seen your face in a while.” Seungcheol muses.

Namjoon makes a noise of acknowledgement. Or disagreement. It’s hard to say as the two have always sounded the same to Seungcheol. “I’ve been laying low. Had to really, while I recovered. Gave me a lot of time to think and I realised I was far too trusting of my own crew, too lax. So, I had a little re-shuffle. Some people made the cut and the others—weren’t quite so lucky.” Namjoon quips as only a veteran criminal can.

Seungcheol leans back in his chair, quietly horrified. He searches Namjoon’s face for a sign that the suggestion he took out some of his own crew is just a distasteful joke. A nasty bit of overemphasis. The two of them are masters of their art, after all. Veterans of the field, and all that rot. But this isn’t the kind of thing they’ve ever had to resort to before. Seungcheol’s never had anyone—betray him. He imagines if he did—all allowances must be made for ethical ambiguity.

Except Namjoon gives nothing of his thoughts or feelings away, the calm lines of his body language projecting quiet gameness.

“Shit. And I thought I had problems.” Seungcheol says, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably.

Namjoon chuckles. “But you do have problems. I suppose that’s why you are here?”

Seungcheol has to smile at the knowledgeable tone in Namjoon’s voice. “Not really. In comparison —my problem is small fry, but I do need a favour though.”

The expression of blank curiosity turns to a wry, humoring smile, and Namjoon waits a long moment before responding. “That so?”

“Safe passage, new documents.” He’s being deliberately vague. There are too many variables, and he doesn’t want to risk giving too much away.

“Are the police or feds looking for this person? You’ll appreciate I’m not really in a position to harbour high profile fugitives. I’m trying to keep low myself while things settle down.”

“No, he’s not got a rap sheet. He’s clean.” Seungcheol pauses, reluctant to tip his hand without a sense of how this is going to play out, but the silence between them draws out until he finally says, “I just need to keep him out of the way while I take care of things and having him in the city while I do it is—distracting.”

“You mean you need to keep him safe?” Namjoon chimes in, cutting through the fluff. “Somebody important to you then. Not like you at all Seungcheol.” His tone is all oily condescension.

"I need to keep him safe because he’s an investment." Seungcheol hedges.

People like to think they have him all figured out. Mob bosses especially, because they’re a bunch of cocky assholes. They look at his cold, premeditated commitment to getting shit done the right way and the indifference he wears like armor, and they figure he’s the unfeeling, ruthless motherfucker type, emotionally repressed at best. He doesn’t bother trying to correct them; being seen as the kind of hardass capable of breaking kneecaps without flinching has its advantages in his line of work.

The thing is, though: he’s kind of a sap. He’s just selective about who gets to find out that he likes Disney movies, that he holds back tears every time he re-watches Bambi, and that he has a soft place in his heart for small, shy Jellybeans. His is a dark world, after all, and even if Seungcheol wasn’t
such a tightly wound stickler for distrust, the potential for his enemies discovering Jihoon and using him against him is very real.

Namjoon tips his head, like he doesn't entirely believe the words, but something in Seungcheol's face seems to be honest for once, or honest enough. As long as it isn't too honest he doesn't care. "Are you paying for this assistance?" Namjoon asks. He’s not going to say yes if there's nothing in it for them. He doesn't owe Seungcheol any favours.

“Of course.”

They've just re-entered Seungcheol’s territory when he gets a call from Jeonghan.

"I heard you were in the area," Jeonghan says casually. "I thought maybe you'd like to stop in to our usual place and catch up. It's been some time since we’ve had a drink."

"What are you up to, Hannie?" Seungcheol asks, genuinely curious. He knows the invitation is anything but social.

"Just something I wanted to talk to you about" Jeonghan says. "I'd be so grateful if you spared a few moments of your time."

"Something you don’t want to discuss in front of Jihoon." Seungcheol translates aloud.

"Yes, I doubt he’d appreciate it." Jeonghan concedes easily. "It’s nothing sinister. Just a few questions I have that I’d rather look you in the face for the answer. Consider it a drink between old friends."

Seungcheol has half a mind to refuse; he doesn’t want to be gone from the safe house long. It's got nothing to do with the fact that Jihoon is waiting for him—probably anxiously—and everything to do with the fact that, no matter how long he stays away, Jihoon is still all Seungcheol can think about.

"I'll be there in 20 minutes," Seungcheol promises. “But you better be buying me something good. I’m not driving out there for a cheap beer.”

"Of course," Jeonghan promises.

Seungcheol ends the call without bothering to say goodbye.

They meet in their usual dive, one of the many businesses Seungcheol owns that don’t shit a brick when one of his men gets a little tipsy and starts waving a gun around.

Jeonghan has the charm dialled all the way up, steering the conversation with light banter and spry smiles. But Seungcheol knows it’s all a defence mechanism, knows Jeonghan isn’t nearly as relaxed as he appears. He chews on his lower lip, looking increasingly agitated by the second. “So, I hear somebody took a hit out at Namjoon? Care to verify that?"

Seungcheol nods, knocking back the rest of his whiskey. “Yeah—got him in the shoulder. He wanted to ask if it was me. Nice of him to ask and not just—assume I guess. He suspects one of his men was responsible—a lot of heads rolled. The original crew seem to be intact: Yoongi, Jin, Jimin, Hoesek—but a lot of new faces.”
Jeonghan snickers under his breath. “You know it’s funny. You guys spend your youth trying to be the big fish in the pond, then one day you are the big fish and you look back and all the little fish are waiting to take your place. I think the fun stops the minute you become the big fish. Always looking over your shoulder, second guessing every person you meet.”

“I never wanted to be the big fish.” Seungcheol’s tone is the ragged, quiet rasp of confession.

“I know.” Jeonghan agrees blandly.

Seungcheol can’t help taking some strange measure of comfort from Jeonghan’s presence. Not in that domestic way – he’s not completely mental. It’s just that it’s not often he encounters anyone else so intimately familiar with the unlovely early days of their gang. Who has done what he’s done, who knows what it’s like to slit your enemies throat and then go grab a drink with your friends that night, pretending you can’t still smell the wet metal scent of blood on your hands.

He lets Jeonghan refill his glass from the bottle they’re steadily working their way through. “You’re a crap host. Did you just ask me here to depress me?”

Jeonghan chuckles, “Misery—loves company or—whatever.” he says, shrugging affably. “What did you need to meet him for anyway?”

“I need him to harbour Jihoon while I sort this problem out. He’s agreed to get him a new identity, new documents.” Seungcheol’s voice comes out calm, even, sure.

Jeonghan laughs again, though this time the sound bright and tinny and just a little bit less genuine. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Seungcheol. And I hope you’ll keep this between us, but… I don’t care how far back you guys go or how good that man is at what he does. I’d trust Namjoon about as far as I could throw him. Which isn’t very far—and if you’re telling me he’s been shot and that somebody in his inner circle has divulged too much information. He’s even less reliable when he’s this paranoid.”

“Who said anything about trust. I just need him to do his job. He’s neutral in all of this—as long as the payment is right.” Seungcheol defends.

“Nobody is ever neutral.” Jeonghan is smart. Seungcheol forgets that sometimes. He forgets that he has lived a relatively long time—with exceptional success—in an impossible career largely due to Jeonghan’s professional instincts. If Jeonghan says “jump,” Seungcheol is crashing out the window and halfway to the ground before he thinks to check if there’s danger or not. He never takes avoidable chances with other people’s lives, especially those he considers his crew, and will have already considered the odds of a soft landing before giving the command.

“Touché.” Seungcheol chooses to ignore the advice. “And anyway, say what you will about Namjoon— he’s a good man to have about in a pinch.”

"At any rate," Jeonghan continues, "Jihoon will be safer outside of the city—even if it’s not under Namjoon’s care. The Masqueraders numbers are big but they’ll not risk venturing into Namjoon’s territory unless they’ve formed allegiances we don’t know about. Clearing the rest of them should be a pretty fast job, however it goes down. Jihoon won’t like it though. He’ll not want to leave you—that’ll be your biggest problem in my opinion."

Seungcheol nods thoughtfully. “Yeah, perhaps. But he’ll be fine once I explain the risks. It won’t be for long anyway.”

“Wont it?” When Jeonghan looks at him there's a sharp, shadowed worry in his eyes. He buries it as
Seungcheol squints at him. “You said yourself they won’t be a problem to take care of.”

“I’m not talking about the Masqueraders. I’m talking about—the circle of life.”

“You mean like—in The Lion King?” Seungcheol asks, and watches Jeonghan roll his eyes before the words have even finished leaving his mouth.

“No. I’m talking about this endless cycle this job puts us through. You struggle your way to the top after your predecessor is removed. There’s a few good years—then somebody else is trying to tip the scales and you have to fight tooth and nail to claim what’s yours—losing what’s important to you in the process. There’s another few good years and it starts all over again.”

“So—the Lion King then.” Seungcheol repeats in his driest voice.

Jeonghan sighs exasperatedly, “Do you ever think of doing—something else?” But it's more than that, and before Seungcheol can answer he continues, "Something that gives you a real life—an actual job.” He pushes, but there's no judgment in his tone.

"Why are you asking me this?” Seungcheol asks. When Jeonghan rolls his eyes away instead of responding, he adds “Do you? Is this your way of telling me you’re bowing out? Handing in your notice so to speak?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow over his glass.

Jeonghan hesitates at the returned line of questioning. His eyes cut guiltily away, and in the moments before he answers, Seungcheol is left to assume the worst: Jeonghan doesn't want to do this anymore; Jeonghan wants to quit but doesn't have the guts to say so.

He’s got every right to after all. Jeonghan was never the one dragging them onto the wrong side of the legal fence. He was good at it, sure, but he always followed Seungcheol's cues. He never dragged them down there himself.

“I’m not talking about myself.” says Jeonghan. Seungcheol sees his jaw tighten, his throat work in a heavy swallow, and when Jeonghan’s eyes find him they’re shadowed and intense. There's determination there, too, and Seungcheol holds his breath, unsure of just what that spark of purpose portends.

"I'm not backing out,” Jeonghan says. "It’s too late for me anyway. But you still have a chance.”

Seungcheol exhales, slow and quiet and relieved. That's one worst case scenario avoided, at least. “Still have a chance at what?”

“I get it Seungcheol. You’ve got something. Someone. They’re—making you feel things and you’re suddenly picturing a life with them you never thought possible for yourself. You think ‘this can’t be an option’ because guys like you don’t have nice things. But—you can have it. If you want it—it’s your call. And if you’re going to take it—do it soon. You need to take a step back before you can't take anything at all.” Jeonghan always sounds far more comfortable when he's in lecture mode.

Seungcheol actually smiles at that, and shakes his head in quiet disbelief, and finally says, "I appreciate it—this—advice. But I’m not in some kind of emotional crisis. I’m not pushing Jihoon away, I just need him to be in a safer place."

It's a blatant lie, and they both damn well know it. Seungcheol didn't even try for plausible denial, and Jeonghan is too sharp to let the untruth slide past him unnoticed. But he doesn't call Seungcheol out on it. 
Jeonghan drains the last of his whiskey, looking suspiciously like a man bracing for impact. Seungcheol shifts in his chair. “I have something for you.” Jeonghan says quietly, reaching into his jacket.

“Is it better company? You are sadly lacking at the moment.” Seungcheol mutters, split between the bizarre urge to laugh and a sudden tightness in his chest.

When he catches sight of the item Jeonghan pulls out of his jacket—he draws a slow breath. Years of experience prevent him from showing any of the shock ringing underneath his skin, but it’s a struggle to keep his reaction at bay.

It’s a Glock. One his father favoured, the one he died holding, the same one Seungcheol killed his attackers with when he was barely fourteen. For a second, he remembers all too vividly the scene flashing behind his eyes. The sensory recollection hits him then, punching the air out of his lungs: a calloused, bleeding hand on his face, a low voice calling out to him.

‘Seung—cheol.’

Seungcheol shakes himself back into the here and now. Jeonghan places the gun on the bar, and they stare at one another for an awkward beat before Seungcheol breaks the silence.

“Why are you giving me this? Why did you even keep it?” he asks. He doesn't bother keeping the bright flare of anger out of his question. He turns his gaze and catches the way Jeonghan flinches beneath the words.

“I didn’t. My father did.” Jeonghan’s voice is hardly more than a breath itself. “I just—thought you should have it.”

Seungcheol laughs at that, a short bark of sound that's sharp and dangerous and manic and actually hurts coming out. He never wanted to see it again, but obviously Jeonghan’s father had thought to keep it, thought it important for him to have. A thoughtless gesture.

“Why the hell would I want it?” He snaps irately. They're not supposed to talk about this. They don't talk about this. But it's late, or maybe it's early, and the half a bottle of good whiskey between them is a disconnected, dulling influence.

Jeonghan’s eyes are piercing, sombre. “To remind you.” He says.

Seungcheol bites back an impatient snarl. "To remind me? Of what? My fathers death? The day my life was officially fucked up? All my responsibilities?” he hisses darkly.

“No Seungcheol.” Jeonghan says. He shifts in his seat, angling his body to face Seungcheol more directly, locking his friend in place with the stubborn force of his focus. “To remind you, that you have choices.”

The silence that settles between them is tense and expectant.

“Thanks for the drink,” Seungcheol grunts, breaking eye contact to holster the gun, slipping it into the sheath around his chest and walking out.

Jihoon wakes in the middle of the night with a slavering bitch of a migraine. An occupational hazard that he normally weathers without issue, but tonight it seems ibuprofen just isn’t enough.
Jihoon drags himself out of bed and forces himself to wait another five minutes before calling Seungcheol’s phone with a ready excuse about a suddenly dire need for opiates, in case he gets called on his overprotective ways again. But Seungcheol’s phone goes straight to voicemail which means it’s switched off—or it’s out of battery—or it’s floating to the bottom of a canal alongside Seungcheol’s corpse.

Oh god!

Feeling ill at ease and moderately stalkerish, Jihoon gets his laptop and pulls up the encrypted GPS tracking on Seungcheol’s phone. (Something he had thought for sure would create an argument. Instead, he had been pleasantly surprised when Seungcheol conceded gracefully.)

The tracker says Seungcheol is: in the living room?

Quietly, he pads down the corridor in search of him and finds Seungcheol sitting alone in the living area, curled over something in his lap. It’s a fucking gun.

Jihoon wants to wag his finger at him crossly, because that’s definitely not good gun safety practice and he’ll blow his lid if the safety or whatever is not on.

But something is not right.

Here, in this moment, Seungcheol is unsettled. There’s a growing chill in his demeanour that makes Jihoon’s skin crawl.

When Jihoon Sneaks closer, he finds Seungcheol nearly vibrating with tension. Jihoon doesn’t need to move further to see the wetness in his eyes, the obvious tightness of Seungcheol's posture; Seungcheol never sits as rigidly as this.

Jihoon feels something move and twitch in his chest, like his heart is stumbling over its normally-steady rhythm, like his ribs are shifting and expanding. He thinks, in his half-awake daze, that he’s come to something of a crossroads. He can either turn around and go back to bed, keep this memory like a photograph hidden in a book; or he can stay here, say something, create something out of this moment.

“Hey,” he says softly.

Seungcheol turns; there’s something in his eyes, a flash of emotion as he takes in the sight of Jihoon standing in the doorway. It’s there and then gone, replaced by Seungcheol’s familiar smirk.

“Hey Jellybean. What are you doing awake? Trying to catch a midnight ride with my bike again?” He laughs. It’s a feeble attempt at deflecting the sorrow in his eyes.

Jihoon’s not falling for it.

“Don’t Cheol. Don’t hide away from me.” Jihoon whispers, moving around the back of the couch to face Seungcheol. He takes a seat next to him, dares to breach the distance between them, claiming Seungcheol’s hand with both of his.

“I want to know you. Everything you’re willing to share. I don’t care how bad you think it is, or how mundane it is. I want to know.” he whispers, because it won’t be enough unless Seungcheol gives those pieces to him, however much he longs to reach out and grab with greedy fists.

Seungcheol looks distant, half a world away, and Jihoon finds himself wanting Seungcheol to touch him again, the way he did last night, sinking his fingers into Jihoon’s flesh and bones. He wants to
give Seungcheol something to hold onto, to draw him out of his memories and anchor him here, with him, away from whatever thoughts are troubling him.

“Please tell me what’s wrong?” He pleads, stroking his hands up and down the tense line of Seungcheol’s back in what he hopes is a soothing gesture. He stares at Seungcheol’s profile; the face that is usually lit with boyish zeal is now hardened by stress and grief. Eyes dark and feverish, haunted by demons Jihoon can only guess at.

And this is one of those moments Jihoon should look before leaping, or at least keep his mouth shut, but some tightly coiled instinct snaps loose in his chest and he hears himself say, “Why is that gun so important?”

Seungcheol finally raises his eyes, and the haunted intensity Jihoon finds there is enough to catch his breath low in his throat.

He stares blankly at Jihoon for a moment, before dropping his gaze to the gun and retreating into some internal world. “It was my fathers.”

He can read uncertainty in the set of Jihoon's shoulders. Questions and curiosity and a low hint of fear—probably because of the gun in his hand. Who sits up in the dead of night staring at a gun without malevolent intentions?

Seungcheol drops his eyes to the gun resting in his palm. Even though his father has been dead for almost 14 years, his memory will always be like a broken tooth in the back of his mouth, painless until he worries the sharp edges with his tongue for too long.

Maybe this conversation is inevitable, but he so very much isn’t prepared to have it today. Or even this month. Next leap-year sounds good.

Seungcheol can't help that his mind gravitates towards it like the enticing edge of a very steep cliff. The memory is under his skin in a way Seungcheol can't escape. Maybe it's time he stopped trying.

"It was my fathers,” He begins, his voice cool. The memory of the pain seeps in. Seungcheol touches the cold, black metal of the guard that bisects the trigger, squeezes the handle until his knuckles go white. "It was his favourite, he trained me to shoot with it.” He thumbs the magazine catch, traces his fingers over the dust cover to the grip that knows his touch better than anyone else living.

“Must be special for you.” Jihoon ventures.

Seungcheol smirks despite himself, “No actually, I hate it.” he says around the knot in his throat.

Jihoon frowns, confused. “Why Seungcheol?” The tone is less cautious now, more inquisitive, and Seungcheol can feel his shoulders relax.

He should drop it. Let it be swept under the rug with all the other unsightly debris from the darker parts of his life. And yet, this time, he can’t. Some hindbrain instinct drives him to scratch at this, to dig in until some half-realized conclusion becomes foreseeable.

Even if it leaves him raw and bleeding.

“It was the first gun I killed somebody with.” He admits.

Jihoon’s touch is soft on his face—a hesitant ghosting of contact as his fingers drift across
Seungcheol’s cheek, then more solid as he cups his chin and tilts his head as if to ask 'Tell me.'

He wonders how the hell he’s managed to learn Jihoon’s barely-there expressions so well.

“These guys showed up to our house one night. Rival gang members my father angered—owed money to. He told me and my brother to go into the basement and climb out the window and run. I helped my brother out the window, but I waited. Crept back up stairs and listened to their conversation. I thought they would just—threaten him, he’d appease them with some arrangement, but things had been worse then he’d let on. He’d been losing control of his territory for years and he didn’t have anything to bargain with. Then they shot him.”

“You—saw it happen?” Jihoon gasps.

Seungcheol nods his head. “I was watching from the corridor. Next thing I knew—I was walking into the room and picking up his gun and I killed them. I was fourteen,” he murmurs in a broken voice.

A flicker of shock passes across Jihoon’s face, followed instantly by sickened despair. “Oh Cheol, I’m so sorry.”

The calm acceptance in Jihoon’s voice makes it worse, causes him to babble his way through an explanation. “I had no choice, they were pouring petrol over everything, about to torch the place with us in it and—” He pauses, breathing out heavily. “It didn’t matter. I was too late—he was bleeding out anyway, but the last thing he said to me before I pulled the trigger on them was—Seungcheol, don’t.”

His voice breaks on the last word, and he looks away, toward the ceiling. He’s not sure what to expect now that he’s started. He’s carried this hurt with him so long that it’s become a part of him, thrumming quietly in his chest all these years like a bloody heart murmur. Innocent, until it’s not.

“I don’t even know what he meant. Don’t what?” Seungcheol murmurs.

“Cheol, don’t let this bury you.” Jihoon says, in a quiet uncertain voice Seungcheol has never heard from him before. He reaches for him, tentative; when Seungcheol doesn’t react, he lays a hand on Seungcheol’s chest, splayed wide over his heart. Seungcheol wants to slap it away, and to hold it there, press it down harder until it leaves a mark.

“That’s not going to be me. That’s why I need to keep you safe Jihoon. Vernon is going to pick you up tomorrow and convoy you to the next city. I’ve arranged with Namjoon to harbour you while I take care of things here.”

Whatever he expects in response to the words, instant stillness isn’t it. Jihoon’s brows drop into a scowl, yet his voice is level when he replies, “Excuse me? You’ve arranged for me to leave the city and you’re just telling me now.”

Seungcheol gives a sheepish wince, “I didn’t have time to go through the specifics with you. I just met with Namjoon today. Anyway, It’s safe—Jeonghan agrees and—“

“No. I’m not leaving.” Jihoon interrupts, crossing his arms stubbornly.

“What do you mean no? This isn’t a negotiation. You’ll do as I say.” Seungcheol snaps. There are things about himself that Seungcheol isn’t proud of. It’s not necessarily a long list, but it is a list, and sitting squarely at the top is his temper.

Jihoon jumps off the couch and rounds on him, “No Seungcheol. This—this—isn’t up for
negotiation. I’m not going anywhere.” There’s no fear in Jihoon’s eyes. Only defiance and anger and stubborn resolve.

“Just listen to me!” Seungcheol says, voice rising abruptly. He forces himself to scale it back, to speak calmly when he continues “—it’s going to get heavy here, more dangerous. I would feel more comfortable if you were out of harms way.”

“I’m not one of your crew. You don’t get to order me about. I’m not here because you tell me to be. I’m staying because I care about you and I’m not letting you push me away Seungcheol!”

Seungcheol lurches up, grabs Jihoon’s face in both hands and kisses him, hard.

Jihoon makes a startled noise, but Seungcheol doesn’t give him space to voice a protest, just cradles his clenching jaw and kisses and kisses his beautiful angry mouth. Partly it’s to shut him up, because at this rate it could well be hours before he gives Seungcheol an opening to explain himself – but mostly it’s because he’s sulky and angry and impossible and Seungcheol loves him.

God help him, Seungcheol fucking loves him.

When he ends the kiss, Jihoon is pliant in his arms, but he meets Seungcheol’s gaze head-on, dark eyes gone black with surging emotions. It’s suddenly quiet in the room, save for their harsh breaths and the thudding beat in his chest.

“I’m not pushing you away! How can you even think that? I’ve been trying to protect you this whole time because I can’t live without you. I never felt like I had much of a life or a purpose till you showed up. You’re all I think about, you’re the only nice pure thing I have Jihoon. If I had a choice I would take you away from all of this. Start new a new slate with you, just us. That’s all I want now. But first—I have to do this.” The torrent ends abruptly, leaving a silently stunned Jihoon in its wake. Seungcheol stares back, panting, before his mind catches up with what all just came out of his mouth.

“Seungcheol—I,” There’s a new clarity in Jihoon’s eyes now when he says Seungcheol’s name. A bright finality, like closure, and he looks like he’s genuinely considering what Seungcheol is telling him.

Seungcheol can hear his own heart beating. The rush of blood inside his own ears. It makes him feel dizzy and drunk, and recklessly brave. “I love you Jihoon.” he says, and it’s so gentle, so fucking soft.

Chapter End Notes

1) Finally got to write some motorcycle sex. ....but wait there's more.
2) Why do I always write Seungcheol with sad back story? I'm sorry Seungcheol.
3) Jihoon is a nerd. :D
4) Hope you enjoy the update. Feedback is loved and appreciated.
Hit List

Chapter Summary

Death, lots of death. Not major character death though :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I love you.” Seungcheol’s voice is hushed and rough, a testament to all the unspoken weight behind those three little words.

The world stops.

Everything comes screeching to a halt beneath Jihoon’s feet, leaving him lurching in the inertia. And when reality resumes, it brings with it the feelings of crushing want and happiness.

“I—uhm—wha—“ Jihoon chokes. This might be the most important conversation of his life, and he’s already fucking it up.

He swallows a gasp, because this is so new, so unexpected it catches him unprepared to hear it. He shunts his gaze to the side, unable to look directly at Seungcheol, but Seungcheol cups one hand around his jaw, preventing the loss of eye contact. “You don’t have to say anything,” he soothes. “It’s okay.”

But it’s not okay.

It’s not okay at all. Jihoon can’t think, can’t process any of this while they’re so far apart. And the multitude of fears and longings cram up against his heart before he remembers that he doesn’t have to keep all that bottled up now. Doesn’t need to deny himself any longer.

“I love you, too.” His own admission is quieter but quick to rush out of him. Like a small bird darting into the unsheltered sky, wary but daring and proud to take wing.

And without knowing or caring how, Jihoon is in his arms—using their strength to keep himself from shuddering apart. He buries his face in Seungcheol’s neck, absorbing the warmth and scent of him, taking it into himself now that he’s allowed to.

“I love you too.” he repeats in a choked whisper. And then he says it again, and again, keeps pressing the words into Seungcheol’s skin as if to weave them into the very DNA that created this man.

He feels Seungcheol’s entire body go lax seconds before he’s crushed in a tight embrace. A trembling hand rakes through his hair, clenches and stays. And then Seungcheol is kissing him, they’re kissing each other, like their entire lives could be lived between their lips.

Seungcheol pulls back to regard Jihoon with a light smile, blinking moisture from his eyes. “I promise Jellybean, it won’t be for long. I just need to take care of a few things and then—we can start fresh. Just you and me.”
Jihoon cozies back in against Seungcheol’s chest. “I don’t want to leave.” he admits, even though he can see that Seungcheol isn’t going to back down on this.

Seungcheol reaches out and cups Jihoon’s chin in his big hand, runs his thumb over Jihoon’s throbbing temple. Jihoon huffs and returns the gesture, wrapping his hand around the thick muscles at Seungcheol’s shoulder. He wonders if he should put his foot down, insist on staying.

It’s futile. He knows being here, regardless of how secure the house is, is a distraction for Seungcheol. Jihoon isn’t new to the idea that Seungcheol would go to great lengths in order to protect him. The only question, there, is how far down he would have to go to find Seungcheol’s point of no return.

………………..

Seungcheol knows he can’t just march into Masqueraders territory and start shooting up the place, wish as he might. Their numbers are too large for a full frontal assault and Seungcheol can’t be sure they haven’t formed any allegiances with smaller factions.

No—to wipe the slate clean and prevent retribution, one must go after the head of the snake. Problem is—there is more than one head to contend with.

That’s where Jeonghan’s resources come in.

While Seungcheol has been busy instructing his crew and acquiring unregistered weapons, Jeonghan has been silently doing what he does best. Hunting.

Cutting through swaths of information to pick up hidden trails. Chasing quarry down to ground, staying downwind and finding the blind spot that even the sharpest prey leaves unguarded. These are the things that Jeonghan excels at.

Masqueraders have hideouts all over the city: drug dens, arms dealerships, prostitutions rings, all under the guise of small businesses. Seungcheol’s allowed them to flourish in his city within reason. There is nothing left of that leniency now. A line has been crossed, and to a story like this, there is only one ending

Not everyone working there will have gang affiliations or perhaps even know who they work for or think to question where their paycheque is coming from. These are innocent bystanders by his consideration. To root out the heads of the organisation, he needs specific names, faces and locations to limit the bloodshed.

Who better than to start with the most accessible and visible source: The CEO.

Digging up the CEO’S secrets lacks any real challenge, and Seungcheol learns some very interesting things about the man Jihoon once considered his boss.

“Jihoon is full of surprises. How is it possible that he knows so many shady people—without actually knowing it?” A tinny voice exclaims a nanosecond after Seungcheol hits 'accept' on his phone. Jeonghan sounds gleefully exhausted. He’s been up all night liaising with his sources.

It is rather unsettling, but Seungcheol is content to ignore that for the time being. “What did you find out Hannie?” Seungcheol says, voice bland and businesslike.

“Turns out, this CEO guy bought his way to the top of the company by bribing the shareholders.” Jeonghan informs him.
“Bribery? Is that it? I bribe people all the time Hannie!” Seungcheol says, his voice tight.

“I’m not finished!” Jeonghan hastens to say. “One of my sources tells me he’s gotten up to some very shady dealings after bribing his way out of a jail sentence for tax fraud. That got the ball rolling on his criminal activities. Since then he’s been involved in a number of missing persons cases, assault, theft, arson and had dealings with a number of smaller gangs. He’s always managed to bribe his way out of trouble or provide a tight alibi.”

Seungcheol thinks that over for a moment, scratching idly at his three-day stubble. This new development changes things significantly, and he mentally ups the ante on his plans “Hmm—you got an address for him?”

“Several, actually. He’s got homes all over the place, but when I get something more concrete you’ll be the first to know.” There is a long pause on the other end of the line, long enough to make Seungcheol’s hand clench around the phone, then Jeonghan says, very calmly. “Cheol—I know you just want to ask this guy a few questions but—maybe just do the world a favour and get rid of him altogether. Guys like him—they’re lower than a snakes belly.”

Seungcheol isn’t about to argue with that. He looks down at his desk—at the array of weapons he has set out ready for action. “I’ll think about it.” He says tersely, before hanging up.

There are hundreds of ways to get away with murder. Seungcheol knows them all. He hadn’t planned on killing the CEO, just using him to fish out the others.

But the picture Jeonghan’s research paints shows a man that barely scrapes the barrel of morality on the best of days. It’s also clear that the CEO is very thorough with those he considers his enemies. Financial squabbles, competitors found in ditches with their faces reduced to pulp—he works hard and plays rough, with little regard for collateral damage. Seungcheol knows the type—empire builders. Men that confuse money and fear tactics for business management.

The knowledge that this man exists and has an interest in Jihoon doesn’t sit well with Seungcheol in the slightest. It is, simply put, unacceptable. Therefore, he will deal with it, as is his way.

He considers what Jihoon might have to say about his course of action. He’d be completely against it no doubt, would try and find another way; that bleeding heart.

Seungcheol chooses to deal with that concern by keeping Jihoon in the dark, sending him away so to speak. The fact that he has now officially lied to the man he’s in a relationship with... he deals with that by pushing the situation past the point of no return.

Seungcheol prepares to leave before Jihoon early the next morning. At this point, getting Jihoon out of this mess safely is his main concern; he'll deal with the fall-out from his own choices later.

Jihoon is waiting to say his goodbyes at the safe-house front door, and Mingyu will be arriving any minute to pick him up. It’s not enough time to have the conversation he needs to have. Then again, maybe it’s too much time.

He has always had an amazing ability to compartmentalize. When his father died, he had only been fourteen, his brother still in elementary school; both of them heart-broken at the sudden loss. He’d seen immediately the things that were needed, what was required of him. It was as if his world could be divided into categories: must be done now, wait until later, delegate, doesn't matter. The deluge of emotions and tasks suddenly became clear as single raindrops, and Seungcheol was the one who
decided their paths.

At fourteen, he finally thought he understood what his father had been telling him: if he focused, he could deal with many things at once. It had seemed paradoxical to Seungcheol at first, but then it made a pristine kind of sense. He bracketed his grief in the ‘later’ category and got to work, finding a sense of strength he hadn't known he'd possessed as he made funeral arrangements, made decisions, formed chaos into organized, controllable pieces.

Watching the last of the soil spill on his father’s coffin, Seungcheol saw the world in a flash of stark understanding. A gun, a bullet, an enemy at the door—on paper, it was a simple equation, as clean and neat as anything involving blood ever could be.

Then he met Jihoon, and it was like looking sideways for the first time in his life. He’d never quite figured out how to have a relationship. Following social cues and making acquaintances was easy enough, but being genuinely close to people wasn't something he had a lot of experience with. It was rare for him to get attached to people. To have someone he loved with every fibre of his body; it wasn’t something he ever thought possible.

He'd wanted to keep his distance, knowing how much it hurt to lose people, but sometimes there was no helping it. Jihoon simply refused to be held at arm's length, slipping through Seungcheol's carefully built defences with ease that, if he stopped to think about it, was nothing short of appalling.

Seungcheol tilts his head towards the door. “I won’t be back before you leave, but Vernon will be around at 11:00 to pick you up. Be ready, the protection detail will be waiting at the border for you.”

Jihoon gives him a sideways look. “Yes, Cheol. I’ll be ready on time.”

Seungcheol hesitates. He’s poised to move forward, right heel lifted ever so slightly off the ground—and then he shifts back, resettling. “Vernon will do all the talking—but there isn’t much talking to be done. He’ll not hang around for long.”

“Yes, I know.”

Seungcheol nods uncomfortably and prepares to leave once again. He stops at the door and turns to Jihoon. “Namjoon’s a reasonable guy, but some of the people he works with can be real dicks. It won’t be easy for you, but try not to—”

“Yeah, we’ve been through this. Don’t insult Namjoon or his shady friends—got it.” Jihoon interjects, his tone flippant, but the look he slants at Seungcheol is fond.

Seungcheol lets out a soft laugh, resettling the strap of his bag on his shoulder. The uncertainty needles at him. It’s a hateful feeling, shoving him back into the psyche of his fourteen-year old self—anxious and resentful.

And Jihoon, bless him, has some kind of sixth sense for when Seungcheol is feeling vulnerable. “What is it?” He asks, clutching at Seungcheol’s rigid shoulders, bringing them close.

“Nothing. It’s just…” he trails off, rendered mute by his own idiocy. Seungcheol inhales slowly.

“I’m going to miss you.”

“Me too. Come here.” Jihoon whispers, pulling him in for a long kiss. It’s softer and sweeter than the exchanges they normally share. The kiss calms him, silences the voices of doubt and indecision that have been screaming inside his mind. By the time they separate, Seungcheol knows what he’s made the right decision.
He smiles at his lover, pleased to note that Jihoon looks just as affected by the kiss as he is.

“Don’t keep me waiting too long. Come back to me.” Jihoon whispers against his lips.

If, in the future, he is given different choices, so be it; he isn’t eager to have blood on his hands, but there is no guilt in doing what has to be done, and the sooner people learn there are consequences for coming after what’s his, the better.

…………………

Packing takes longer than expected. He’s still trying to reformat the remaining laptops when a notification pops up on the monitor on one. Jihoon rocks back on his chair, just a little, tips sideways to see if he can catch the edge of the screen.

There are strings of code flashing up on his laptop. “What the fuck?” he questions. Then, pulling the keyboard towards him, he delves into the system. He takes quick stock of the code sources – they’re all international lines—banking portfolios. “Holy shit!”

He’s got a self-contained hard drive in the spare room that passes for his office, and after reformatting it to a clean slate, he plugs the backup memory drive into the computer.

His hands shake as he enters a command to begin a transfer, and his heart lodges in his throat as he watches the data transfer onto the new mainframe. The bar of colour expands grudgingly, seconds upon seconds, until finally the transition is complete.

Jihoon hooks the backup drive to a newly formatted laptop and accesses the stored information from the drive.

*Seungcheol said he acquired these laptops from a previous job?*

Looking back, he should have known what that meant. These are the laptops Dr Raine and his team were using to create the code.

There *is* a code here—but it’s a mess. Fragmented subroutines, glitches, corrupted data. He can barely make out the infrastructure the analysts were trying to build.

But the framework is there. Dr Raine’s code, his vision, wrapped up in even the disrupted information scrolling before Jihoon’s eyes. The code he was working on is still in there somewhere—he can almost see it. The question comes down to the extent of the damage, and whether Jihoon is capable of reconstructing the scrambled, outdated code.

It might take a miracle, but he’s determined to try.

A clatter and a muffled curse from somewhere behind him draws his attention away from his computer.

Jihoon turns. Vernon is standing there, hands in his pockets, slouched against the wall with his ankles crossed. He looks tired and a little annoyed. “You’re not packed yet? Boss told me to have you at the rendezvous point by midday!”

Jihoon winces. He’d forgotten about that, but he shakes it off for something more important. “I’ve been busy Vernon, I’ve had a breakthrough we these laptops!” he gestures excitedly.

Vernon exhales slowly, frown lines appearing in his forehead, deeper than they should be on somebody as young as Vernon. “*Jihoon—do you know how important* Bangtan is? They’re not the
“kind of people you keep waiting.”

Jihoon holds a hand up. “Do you realise how important these laptops are? Where did Seungcheol get them?”

“Uhh—we salvaged them from the last job. Some Masqueraders villa we ambushed.” Vernon explains with a lazy shrug. He sounds tired, as worn out as an old shoe. “What’s the big deal?”

“Look!” Jihoon positions his laptop so they can both see.

“I—I don’t know what I’m looking at!” Vernon groans, shifting where he stands, restless bordering on impatient.

“It’s Dr Raine’s code! Or—fragments of it anyway. These must be the laptops they used to design the code. They were backed up on the hard-drive. I was so busy focusing on the turrets and reformatting them I never thought to check the data stored. I may have even deleted some of the work, but I can rebuild it.” Jihoon explains, his voice raising in desperation.

Vernon looks appropriately stunned, but Jihoon knows there really isn't time to explain. “Everything Dr Raine was trying to create is here. I can re-create his code from this data, I just need time.” Jihoon insists stubbornly.

Vernon gives him a considering look, then checks his watch and holds his wrist up. “Time we don’t have Jihoon, we need to get going.”

Jihoon sighs heavily. “Don’t you see. I can put a stop to all of this. I can create the code-“

“Jesus Christ Jihoon!” Vernon snaps, slamming the laptop shut so fast it's a wonder it doesn’t crack in half and explode.

Jihoon’s caught off-guard by the angry look on Vernon’s face and scrambles to think up what loose end he might have missed. “But—this is the code they’re after.” He mumbles quietly.

Vernon snorts, as if the idea is utterly ridiculous. “And what are you planning on doing with it? Calling them up and negotiating? These guys don’t negotiate Jihoon. Maybe they want the code—but they want you dead too.”

Jihoon flinches at the edge in Vernon’s tone.

“Look, I’m not trying to upset you.” Vernon’s voice turns softer. Guilty. “But Seungcheol isn’t out there—literally painting the town red to sit down at the table of peace. You think these guys will stop and retire after they get the code? The code is just going to help them bankroll their next step—taking over.”

Jihoon falters, thrown by the revelation, he knows it's the truth, but it is hard to hear regardless. “Sorry. I just,” he pauses and purses his lips, annoyed at himself. “I guess I wasn’t looking at the bigger picture. I just wanted to help.”

Vernon gives him a sympathetic smile. “Let me help you pack. Whatever you’re working on—you can work on it when you get to Namjoon’s.”

When Jeonghan texts Seungcheol directions with the location of the CEO’s house just over the border, Seungcheol goes into action.
Always hit a man where he lives—that’s what Seungcheol was taught. And men like the CEO live in the power they’re able to amass, through money and cunning and sheer brute force. It actually makes them easy targets when you know where to strike, and Seungcheol hones in like a wolf scenting blood in the air.

He makes a few calls, arms himself appropriately and sends DK ahead with a small payment to one disgruntled chauffeur—he likes to tip well for good service, after all.

The coordinates bring them to a large estate in a sparsely-populated area of the city. The house resembles a vineyard chateau; remote and relatively vacant, it’s an ideal setting for torture.

The views are nice, too.

His first order of business is interrogation and information acquisition. He parks his bike and watches through a pair of binoculars as the CEO exits his home and climbs into the back of his chauffeured limousine.

The CEO only begins to notice something is amiss when he starts paying attention to the buildings flashing by and realizes they are going in the wrong direction. “Driver—you’re heading in the wrong direction.”

No answer.

“Driver? You missed the turning you idiot.” he grumbles, having somehow expected to be dropped off at his office for a scheduled meeting, he’s a little perturbed that his chauffeur seems to be driving him towards the docks.

“Where the hell are you taking me?”

There is silence from the front of the car as the chauffeur continues to drive to an unscheduled destination.

“Driver!” the CEO snaps, at the end of his rope.

The limousine glass partition hisses open and DK turns his head to finally acknowledge the CEO. “Are you telling me--the guy works for you for ten years and you can’t call him by his first name? Rude. Maybe if you bothered to learn his name, tipped him for his service or even treated him like a human being he wouldn’t have sold you out so quickly.”

The CEO eyeballs him, and snarls. “Just who the fuck are you supposed to be?”

“Oh—sorry, how rude of me. My name is Dokyeom—DK for short.” DK informs him, shifting the gears smoothly and slipping the car into an empty hanger.

“That name means nothing to me.” The CEO spits, a muscle in his cheek jumping.

“Okay—but maybe you know my boss.” DK says, gesturing to the adjacent car door that swings open that very moment. “Cause he certainly knows you.” He adds, pressing the button to slide the glass partition up again.

The CEO’s gaze snaps to the side and he swallows convulsively. “Oh—shit.”

“Indeed.” Seungcheol drawls, announcing his presence.
“I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself back in the villa, before you ran away and some guy tried to pull a grenade on me.” Seungcheol says, climbing into the back of the limousine. He takes a seat next to the CEO, pulling two objects out of his back pocket—his switchblade and a pair of pliers—laying them in full view in the space between them.

He chuckles at the pinched look on the CEO’s face. “No, I’m not going to kill you. Well, not today. You’ll be more useful alive.” He picks up the knife, flicking the blade out.

Predictably, the CEO erupts into a tantrum of screaming expletives and flails about, putting up a good—if pointless—show of bravado. Seungcheol lets the venting go on for a little before losing patience and slamming his fist into the side of the man’s head. “Shut it!”

The CEO snivels, cowering near the door. Seungcheol waits out the pathetic whimpering before he slaps a gloved hand over the man's mouth to quiet him and pulls out his Glock. “See this gun?” And because he likes his enemies best off balance, he raises his hand, puts it against the CEO’s temple.

The CEO jerks, jumps and then tenses like a spring. Seungcheol grins, entirely too pleased with himself. “It’s very precious to me. It belonged to my father. The bullets are precious too. I don’t want to waste them on trash like you—but I will—if I have to. You got all that?” Seungcheol threatens, though he probably would feel better if he did shoot him. Maybe in the leg, nothing too serious.

The man nods shakily, moaning under Seungcheol's gloved hand. When he takes his hand away, it’s wet with tears and sweat. He wipes it on the man's white shirt with a look of disgust.

“My name is Choi Seungcheol. We have a mutual acquaintance,” He shifts forward in mock-camaraderie.

He shushes the CEO when the other man starts to prattle. “I’ve hijacked your ride to work this morning to discuss your recent attempts at having that acquaintance kidnapped.”

A renewed fire lights up the CEO’s eyes as he scoffs. The man is battered but far from beaten, which is fine because Seungcheol is an old hand at making stubborn people bend to his will. “So, this is about Dr Raine?” He spits.

Seungcheol shakes his head. “No, no. Not him, although I do know him.” He says, idly tapping his fingers along the hilt of the knife, just to see the CEO twitch. “This is about Lee Jihoon.”

The CEO frowns, and it's not confusion this time, it's something quietly amused, something that suggests he hadn't been expecting anything quite like that. “So, Jihoon sent you here to teach me a lesson? I didn’t think he had it in him!” He laughs.

Bold words, but Seungcheol can see the CEO mustering himself up to resist, to withstand what comes next. But what he doesn’t know is that he’s lost the fight before Seungcheol even opened the car door.

“No, I’m not here to teach you a lesson. You are the lesson.” Seungcheol states in a flat voice. He watches as the implication sinks in.

The CEO sneers. “How much is he paying you? I can double it—triple it, in fact. And if you can bring him to me I’ll quadruple your pay.” He offers, glaring Seungcheol down with every ounce of ferocity he possesses, but his outrage is a mere spark against the blaze of Seungcheol’s fury.
“That’s the thing. He’s not paying me anything. Not a penny.” Seungcheol shrugs, chin held at a taunting angle.

Seungcheol catches the flicker of confusion before the CEO can fully mask it, and he smiles. Things are proceeding according to schedule. Confusion paves the way for doubt. From doubt, comes fear. And fear is what Seungcheol is ultimately after.

He has one hand over the CEO’s mouth and the blade on his neck within half a heartbeat. The CEO apparently lacks a healthy survival instinct because he flails about again, trying to get away from the knife. Rolling his eyes, Seungcheol withdraws the knife and uses his full body weight to slam the man forward into the seat in front of him—once to stun, and once more because he’s feeling cranky.

While the CEO is still seeing stars, Seungcheol gets a sturdy grip on the back of his neck and leans in until the man’s face is mashed against the seat. He presses the point of his knife right below the guy’s eye, letting the blade sink into flesh until a thin line of blood warms the back of his hand. The CEO curses under his breath but doesn’t struggle.

“So, here’s the deal. I need to know every Kingpin, drug—lord, family head you’ve had dealings with that is heavily invested in this ‘code’ of yours, Masqueraders or otherwise.” Seungcheol says, putting a little extra oomph into the face-grinding. “I want their names and what business they are hiding at, rendezvous locations, the works. Then you get to go on your merry way.”

“I don’t have that information. They found me—I didn’t find them.” The CEO whimpers.

Seungcheol twists the knife a quarter turn as an extra incentive. “So, it’s just a fucking coincidence that Jihoon and Dr Raine are employed by you and are both flagged as high priority targets by the masqueraders?”

The man swallows nervously. “I just suggested the idea and they bankrolled it. I was only in charge of finding the talent to design the code and keep a watchful eye, I didn’t know they would try and kidnap or kill anybody and when I realised I was already way in over my head. I’m just a business man—I’m not a criminal.”

Seungcheol leans in close—closer—until he can see himself reflected in the CEO’s bloodshot eye. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t know what they would do when they kidnapped Jihoon.” Seungcheol twists the blade, feeling it push against bone, until the CEO screeches—an inhuman noise that eventually dwindles down into babbling curses.

“Stop! Stop—please. If I talk—I’m as good as dead!” The CEO shoots back at him, tight and angry. “You’re as good as dead now.” Seungcheol reasons.

“You’re as good as dead now.” The CEO says, like they are actually negotiating about it. “Just ‘cause Jihoon hired you first, doesn’t mean you can’t change your allegiance.”

Seungcheol sighs. “You haven’t been listening closely enough. That’s alright. I’ll explain it to you.” Seungcheol shifts forward in his seat, re-sheathing his knife for the meantime. He grabs the CEO by the jaw and forces his head back at an unnatural angle. He wants to be certain the man is looking him in the eye for this. “No one hired me. Jihoon didn’t hire me, he doesn’t even know I’m here. He wouldn’t even approve of my tactics because he’s a soft, little jellybean. I’m here because I want to be,” he says softly, almost gently. “Because I want to hurt you… very, very badly. I want to watch you bleed. I want to hear you scream. You see, Jihoon is the love of my life. And you tried to have him kidnapped.” Seungcheol searches the CEO’s face and smiles at what he finds there. Still not
broken, not yet, but getting there. “I see you’re starting to understand me. Good. Then we can get
down to some real business.”

He reaches for the pliers still sitting on the backseat. He isn’t even angry anymore. Anger is too pure
for his current state of mind. He goes about his task, the motions coming back to him like a once-
remembered dance. Pinch, grip and twist.

It only takes Seungcheol ten minutes and three broken fingers for the CEO, before he gives up the
information. Weeding out bad information from among the good is a slow task, but not as slow as
Seungcheol had first feared.

The men the CEO conspired with don’t exist in official channels and unofficial channels are
unreliable at best, but Seungcheol is content with the multiple locations and four codenames: Python,
Boa, Cobra and Rattle.

In the end, the CEO is broken; unused to sitting on the other side of cold brutality—but Seungcheol
finishes nonetheless. He doesn’t like to leave jobs undone. A man’s reputation is key, after all.

**The CEO**

Python

Cobra

Boa

Rattle

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Jihoon finishes putting the last laptop in its case, making sure he leaves nothing behind at the safe-
house. He secures the door and sets all the alarms, wanting to make sure it’s secured for
Seungcheol’s return.

In the car, Vernon is a moody, silent presence. They’re late, he's distracted—driving through traffic is
a bitch. But even so, he's aware of the silence spreading out, like water seeping from a leak.

Worried; it is the only word Jihoon could think of to describe the look on Vernon's face. He didn’t
like that one bit.

“You seem nervous Vernon.” Jihoon speaks up, desperate to break apart the silence.

“I am.” Vernon acknowledges quietly. He hears him draw in a breath, about to say something else,
but he just shakes his head instead.

“Have you heard from Seungcheol today?” He asks.

Vernon hums a little, his eyes on the road. Jihoon taps his fingers against his knees, feeling self-
conscious. He keeps talking regardless. “You said he was out—*painting the town red*—does that
mean what I think it does?”

“You’re a smart guy Jihoon,” Vernon says, frowning a little. “It’s probably best you don’t ask these
questions because we both know you won’t like the answer.”

Jihoon swallows, tearing his gaze away from Vernon. The unsaid words settle like stones in his
The highway stretches out in front of them, flat and bleak in the glare of the midday sun. Jihoon’s driven this stretch more times than he can count. He knows it like the back of his hand, a hairline fracture of a road between two cities.

There are two SUV’s parked in the distance and even though it’s bright out, Vernon switches the cars full beams on as he approaches. It’s a signal. The first SUV flashes its lights twice as they get closer and Vernon pulls the car to a stop.

A guy with minty coloured hair, a dark shirt and a black overcoat that looks a little too hot for the weather steps up to them. He ducks his head to glance through the passenger window, looking at Vernon with a kind of calm, fixed intensity. He doesn't look at Jihoon at all.

"It's 12.35!" is all he says. It comes out sharp, like an accusation: *like where the fuck have you been?*

“Traffic.” Is all Vernon replies with.

“'You rookies have no respect for the way things are done.” Minty titters.

Jihoon can't decide if he sounds cheerful, sarcastic, threatening or all of the above, but whatever it is, Jihoon wishes he would to tone it down. Vernon looks unimpressed but doesn't press the issue.

After a brief staring contest between Vernon and Minty, the latter jerks his head toward the car and Vernon jumps out to unload Jihoon’s luggage and steers him gently but pointedly towards the SUV.

Minty takes the front passenger seat while Jihoon gets trapped in the backseat next to a man with orange hair, who meets his stare with an insolent grin with too many teeth in it.

Vernon shuts the door behind him. He doesn't nod or wave or say a word. He just leaves. Jihoon sits back in his seat and buckles his belt, and stares wearily at himself in the window as Vernon’s car fades in the distance.

Once they are on the move, Orange hair turns to look at Jihoon, holding out his hand. "Hi, I'm Jimin. The guy driving is Jin, and this moody motherfucker is Yoongi."

“You look like you’re wearing a traffic cone on your head.” Jihoon says before he can stop himself.

Yoongi snorts, amused despite himself.

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It isn’t hard for Seungcheol to find the location of the first head of the snake. Drunken boasting to a prostitute in a brothel is not exactly protected by confessional privilege and if you ask the right people the right questions, you can get just about anything. His father taught him that. Seungcheol’s got the address to Cobra’s mistress written on a scrap of paper, shoved into his pocket.

The first hit goes a little something like this:

There’s no parking on the curb where he needs to leave his bike. Seungcheol cruises past, makes the block, and comes around again slowly. It’s early morning, grey and dark. The sidewalks are almost bare, the street lamps still on. There are fucking cars *everywhere.*

The ride over was completely silent. He didn’t turn his radio on, because he didn’t want to telegraph
his discomfort to the rest of his crew. He also didn’t want anything to mask sound, to make him that much easier to take by surprise. He’s been checking his mirrors regularly, every couple of minutes the whole time, but there is nobody suspicious tailing him and Cobra hasn’t emerged from his mistresses apartment yet.

Still nowhere to park. Seungcheol checks his watch and decides to switch to Plan B, which is double-parking. More conspicuous, more awkward—but the time’s too tight. He’s trying to keep an eye on the sidewalk, to catch a glimpse of Hoshi and Minghao, who are supposed to be lingering nearby, waiting for Cobra’s to appear, waiting for their window. He sees someone, a man who looks about the right height and size—and is craning his neck to confirm when someone grips his arm.

“Fuck!” He jumps, and sees that it’s a traffic warden pointing at a sign that indicates no double parking.

His heart is hammering, his face is hot. He feels a taut, humorless smile on his lips. “Sorry, I’ll move now.”

The traffic warden says nothing. Seungcheol makes a show of turning the engine on, checking his bike and adjusting his seat to buy time. The traffic warden is still standing there, waiting for him to leave.

Seungcheol makes himself stare straight ahead, up the street. Around the corner are the front steps to the building. That’s where Cobra will approach, where he’ll tip the valet and get in his car. He checks his watch. Flexes his hand. Two minutes.

Next to him the traffic warden shifts, crossing his arms in frustration. “Sir, you can’t park here. Please move along or I will be forced to write you a ticket.”

Seungcheol’s heart double-beats painfully. He grits his teeth and stares at the street corner.

Cobra is taking forever. Seungcheol keeps running the steps of the job through his head, the same methodical process he always follows while a job is happening, but he knows he’s not really focusing. He’s skating over the surface of it.

“That’s it—I’m going to write you a ticket pal. I gave you a chance!” The traffic warden grumbles.

Then three men come around the corner, walking quickly, one turns to the other in a come-along gesture. Cobra. He’s a short man in a grey coat, darting suspicious glances in every direction. Something about him makes Seungcheol uneasy.

Before he has time to dwell on it, they pass into the darker shadows of a shop awning, and there’s a brief pause. Then a sudden emergence, four bodies tangled up together. Hoshi and Minghao, bum-rushing the two guards. Cobra evidently hasn’t got much experience with firearms: he doesn’t once try to reach for his gun.

Traffic abruptly slows to a crawl, and Seungcheol takes the opportunity to turn the key in the ignition. If he doesn’t move now, he’ll be stuck, trapped in the gridlock of cars without a clear shot. The traffic warden manages to fist a handful of Seungcheol’s sleeve before he pistol-whips his fingers, darkly satisfied with the crunch of bone under the grip of his gun.

Seungcheol downshifts, twists the throttle, and rockets through a narrow gap in traffic that seems to appear out of nowhere, just as the thwarted traffic warden screams in pain and outrage.

It all happens in a matter of seconds. One minute Cobra’s on the sidewalk watching the commotion...
behind him, the next his brain is splattered on a shop window; the Beretta’s suppressor dulls the
sound of the shot to a muffled pop, as good as lost in the clamor of traffic.

Hoshi and Minghao slip through an alleyway where they should rendezvous with DK, and
Seungcheol criss-crosses through the traffic of parked cars. Neat, fast, precise.

“You guys clear?” Seungcheol asks over his mic, merging into traffic as the first sounds of frightened
screams echo behind him.

“Clear boss,” says Hoshi through his earpiece.

Seungcheol says nothing. He checks his mirrors for police lights, for anyone following. They’re
clean. He can’t quite believe it. It seems like things are going according to plan.

The CEO

Python

Cobra

Boa

Rattle

The second hit goes a little pear shaped.

When Seungcheol steps inside the pawn shop, Python recognizes him almost immediately and orders
his goons to draw on him. That Python had been able to take one look at him and correctly guess
who he was, is irritating and ever so slightly alarming, but Seungcheol doubts anything more will
come of it. They all know his name, but almost none of them have seen his face and lived to share
details.

Python slants a look at him, unreadable. He’s standing behind the far counter, a cigarette hanging
precariously from the corner of his mouth while he counts stacks of money and places them into an

One of the men steps forward to grab him and it only takes a heartbeat for Seungcheol’s reflexes to
kick in, all muscle memory when he steps back and lands a clean kick to the man’s knee, breaking it.
There is a thick, ugly crack. The man shrieks.

The sudden chaos grips the attention of the other goons just long enough for Seungcheol to bolt
sideways and pull a Browning out of one of the men’s holsters.

He hears, rather than sees, the swift movement in front of him, the sound of metal clicking over
metal. But he’s already ducking and rolling, landing behind a wooden shelving unit just as the first
bullet fires.

“Is this any way to treat your customers?” Seungcheol shouts out from behind the shelf as it’s being
riddled with bullets. He ducks low to avoid taking broken glass to the face, fighting off a wave of
déjà vu.

He heart is beating in his chest. It’s not the rabbit-fast heartbeat of someone who is terrified. It’s a
steady, intense rhythm. Seungcheol is calm.
More bullets fire off, and Seungcheol counts them down. They’ll have to reload soon. Seungcheol counts. Seven, eight, nine—

Then it’s there, the empty click—then another.

Seungcheol bolts up the second he hears it, landing a clean shot to Goon #1’s shoulder while the man fumbles to reload his clip. He shoots Goon #2 square between the eyes before stepping over Goon #3, still rolling around on the floor in agony over his broken leg. He aims his sights on where Python had been standing a minute ago, but—Python is gone, escaped out the back exit.

Seungcheol flings the door open again and steps out into the street. When he reaches the corner of the building, a bullet hits the asphalt inches from his feet. He ducks behind an industrial garbage bin without a second to spare, his back smacking against the metal side of the bin, the ground hard under his ass. Three more bullets chase the first, crack, crack, crack, speeding through the empty air where his head was a second ago.

He crawls forward and takes cover behind a thick slab of metal siding that’s leaning against a brick building. He hears motorbikes thundering past him, another peel of gunfire goes off, shaking the metal sheet covering him. He tries to get a location on the shooters and gets nothing for his efforts but a bullet whistling past his head, way too close.

He hears the rumble and screech of a motorbike slamming to a halt nearby.

“Cheol!” a familiar voice calls out. Seungcheol cautiously peeks out to find Jun, a short distance away, gesturing for him to climb on.

“Perfect timing Jun.” Seungcheol grins, standing up with gusto. He jumps onto the back of Jun’s bike and holds on as Jun peels out into the rush of frenzied traffic.

Up ahead he can see three motorbikes driving off, Python seated on the back of one.

Seungcheol pulls out a Beretta, a comforting weight in his hands, only to fumble it as Jun zigzags between several cars moving at high speeds alongside them. He hastily adjusts his grip on the gun and calls, “How many?”

“Four guys, three separate bikes.” Jun veers sharply onto another lane, weaving with hyper-intent precision through the throng of cars and bikes.

Seungcheol hooks his ankle round the back of the passenger footrests and squeezes the bike between his legs, knees digging into the tops of Jun’s thighs. The position gives him enough leverage that he can spare both hands for his gun, even taking into account Jun’s somewhat capricious driving, and he readily takes out a speed camera and the closest biker in quick succession.

They gain distance on Python readily and Seungcheol’s feeling quite optimistic about their chances, actually, until the moment another bike leaps out in front of them, steered by a stony-faced young man in an inappropriately festive Hawaiian shirt. Jun curses and swerves, clutching instinctively at the hand brake. The tires lock for a moment, long enough for Seungcheol to consider how his face will look smeared across the road – but then they’re careening round another corner, leaning hard into the turn.

“Fuck, that was close!” Jun says, forcibly wrenching the bike back under control. “We got a tail.” He warns, shouting to be heard over the wind whipping past.

“Ya think!” Seungcheol observes, a bit lightheaded from the near miss. He’s pivoting around, torn between watching the armed men pursing them and the near-collisions to the front. He needs to take
the tail out first, which is easier said than done when you’re the passenger on a motorcycle and Jun is deliberately swerving to avoid them getting shot.

Jun frantically switches lanes to avoid a hail of bullets, the angle of his jaw rigid with tension. “Gonna spin the bike around, be ready to shoot.” He suggests tightly.

“Don’t need it. Accelerate.” Seungcheol commands as a tight whizzing sound snaps past his left shoulder, halting his train of thought.

Jun swivels his head to the side quickly to eye Seungcheol with disbelief. “Don’t do what I think you’re going to do.” He shouts, voice coming out tight, veering far too close to the edge of panic.

Seungcheol ignores his concern. Yes—he’s only done this manoeuvre once before, on a whim and in a desperate situation. But it worked and he can’t afford to let Python gain distance.

He grips his Beretta and tilts back—back, until he’s aiming the gun on the tailing biker upside down. “Fuck!” He hisses, gritting his teeth, tightening his abdomen muscles to at least keep his aim steady. The target bobs in and out of his crosshairs, taunting him with the thought that he might miss the shot. But Seungcheol knows he won’t miss.

Seungcheol never misses his shot.

Hawaiian shirt grins at him over the top of his motorcycle dash, even as Seungcheol puts two bullets through his chest and another between his eyes. He rights himself on the bike almost immediately after, dragging his quivering muscles back to a prone position; his sweating hand gripping onto Jun’s jacket in a desperate bid to hang on.

“You’re fucking insane!” Jun chastises.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Seungcheol says, earning himself a roguish grin.

They close the gap on Python’s motorcycle quickly, despite the added weight of Seungcheol on the bike; Jun’s is able to pick up speed and cuts every bend sharply.

Before Seungcheol can lean out to take his shot, Python crashes his bike; nobody has got the skill to recover from being sideswiped by a lorry. His bodyguard is thrown clear, lucky for him, whilst Python ends up tangled with the bike, leg trapped under the weight of it, the exhaust pipe searing through his trousers and eating into his calf. Seungcheol is familiar with that kinda pain; it’s horrific, and he can see the man jerk against it, struggling to free himself.

Jun pulls the bike to a stop and Seungcheol knee-caps guard number two who has pulled over to assist his boss. The man does howl, though, as he goes down, which seems to add a certain liveliness to Python’s attempts at breaking free of his motorcycle wreckage.

Seungcheol reloads his gun as he approaches him. “That was surprisingly fun.”

“There’ll be hell to pay! Our day will come.” Python screams out, clenching his teeth in agony. The smell of his scorched flesh makes Seungcheol want to be sick.

Seungcheol doesn’t even hesitate. He brings the gun up and shoots him in the forehead. Python’s head slams back violently, a gory hole bored through it.

“Yeah—shame you’ll miss it.”
The third hit is an exercise in patience.

There were a lot of people in the world who truly deserved a bullet in the head for a variety of reasons, no more so than Boa.

“Can I take the lead on this next hit boss?” Mingyu asks, watching Seungcheol drop down to crack open the briefcase and start assembling weapons.

“What? Why?”

Mingyu shrugs affably. “I could do with the experience and—I don’t feel like I do much.”

Laughter bubbles out of Seungcheol’s throat before he can help himself. “What are you talking about? You’re my body guard—you do plenty.”

Mingyu’s face takes on a look of concentration, as if he is searching for the right words. “You’re just saying that. You don’t really need me—you take care of things like 99% of the time and I just stand back and try and look intimidating.”

“And it works. You have a fearful rep Mingyu—nobody wants to mess with me when you’re around.”

Mingyu pouts and Seungcheol sighs. “What did I tell you about pouting? You know that nullifies the whole intimidating look—it makes you look like a giant puppy.”

The glare he gets is rather impressive, especially from someone with such a smooth, sweet face. “Alright, alright. Stop. You can take the lead. But I’ll back you up with the sniper.”

Seungcheol checks the light gauge a second time, makes a minute adjustment to his telescopic lens. From his perch atop a ramen restaurant and across the street from the warehouse Boa uses as a front for his drug den, Seungcheol can see everything. From the light traffic to the comings and goings of the factory workers, crew, and occasional delivery men. Seungcheol feels the world is at his feet, human lives within his grasp.

He watches as Mingyu approaches the gates, suitably disguised as a factory worker. He stops in front of the security barrier, chatting with a few of the departing workers like he’s known them all his life. He even bums a cigarette off one of the guards with what Seungcheol can only term a pleading hang-dog look and a stupid grin. The guy hands over a cigarette cheerfully and even lights it up for him. God bless Mingyu.

He waits out the next 30 minutes as patiently as he can manage, watching the workers leave for the day. Mingyu will remain inside until he gives him the all clear. Soon a convoy of SUV’s drive through the entrance and around the back, slipping into a hanger and out of sight.
Boa has arrived.

“Alright Mingyu—he’s here.” Seungcheol announces through the mic. “He’s got a lot of muscle with him—what’s your stealth like?”

"Excellent bordering on exceptional," Mingyu says with a winning tone in his voice.

Under the circumstances, Seungcheol appreciates the lack of false modesty, and only rolls his eyes a little. “Okay then. One guard in the first room on the left,” he murmurs into his mic, fingers curling around the stock of the rifle. “Gun holstered.”

“On it,” Mingyu replies, heading up the first flight of stairs to a narrow corridor. His feet are quiet on the steps, quieter than they should be for his size. Mingyu knows how to contain himself when he has to, when he needs to; and he moves so well, Seungcheol can’t hear him over the comm, not even a rustle of fabric. He’s a little proud.

Through the scope, Seungcheol sees one shadow become two, then there’s a faint gurgling sound.

Seungcheol smiles on the rooftop across the way. “Good boy.”

“Thanks,” Mingyu says sheepishly. The shadow that is Mingyu flits in what Seungcheol imagines is a quick victory dance and he rolls his eyes.

“I can see you Mingyu.”

“Sorry.”

Seungcheol sights down the scope, watching the second guard saunter through the long hallway to the staircase. There are so many windows, big and clear and bright, Seungcheol tastes something like sugar in his mouth, he’s biting his lip.

“—second guy on his way to you Mingyu, I’ll take him out.” Seungcheol says and Mingyu sighs.

“I thought you said I was leading on this, or did you forget?”

He doesn’t reply because he’s too busy putting the guard’s head in the crosshairs. One, two, pull the trigger, there’s a sharp snick of the bullet passing through glass, and the guard topples over.

It all happens almost simultaneously.

“Nice,” Mingyu says.

“Don’t walk through the blood,” Seungcheol reminds him, searching the area for other guards and alarms.

“That was one time, one time, and you’ve never let me live it down.” Mingyu appears at the bullet-punched glass, making an obscene gesture, so Seungcheol fires a shot over his head and the window completely breaks.

He appreciates how Mingyu doesn’t flinch. Trust. “Alright, hurry it up,” Seungcheol orders, “because I haven’t got all day to lie around on rooftops watching your ass.”

Mingyu, bastion of maturity that he is, sticks out his tongue at him before disappearing back into the shadows. Seungcheol smothers the feeling of worry he gets every time it happens, as if Mingyu will disappear and not return.
They’ve taken out most of the security guards roaming the upper levels of the factory in a similar style, and Seungcheol is certain everyone in the factory is accounted for, but a shadow moves near the guard station, then another.

“Two at the station,” Seungcheol says and Mingyu grunts in reply. He has to wait; he doesn’t have line of sight to the station itself, the guards will have to show themselves. If they’re dumb, they won’t realize there’s a sniper. Two guards become four—then become six, probably noticing something amiss and believing the safety in numbers theory.

Seungcheol has to separate Boa from his detail so that Mingyu can creep into his office and sweetly put a round in his head. He attempts the turkey shoot approach: start from the back so the others don’t realize they’re dying, and it works, two men down, four men to go, until one of them turns for a cigarette and sees dead bodies. Then it’s frantic, Mingyu materializing out of the shadow of a doorway to incapacitate whoever is closest and Seungcheol muttering, “Shit shit shit shit,” under his breath, more worried than irate as he traces the fight with the barrel of his sniper rifle, Mingyu learning to hold a man still for a split-second long enough for Seungcheol to take a clean shot.

Mingyu and him work in tandem, Mingyu breaks a man’s neck as Seungcheol’s bullet drills into his chest and one man collapses with a shot in his belly and a knife in his throat.

Mingyu bee-lines for Boa’s office after, and throws up one hand in thanks to Seungcheol as he hauls it open with the other.

Seungcheol doesn’t see Boa die, but he can hear it well enough; hoarse yells and pleas in the same voice.

_Torture_, his mind supplies. Torture always sounds the same, regardless of the person.

**The CEO**

**Python**

**Cobra**

**Boa**

**Rattle**

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The final hit goes a little something like this:

DK parks the truck a few streets over from the Masqueraders drinking hole, and Seungcheol jumps out.

It’s stiflingly muggy outside, in spite of the late hour. The heat itches under his skin, makes him want to strip out of his damp clothes and make any number of poor decisions. It’s taken almost all day to locate Rattle and Seungcheol is tired.

He keeps to the shadows as he approaches the club. There are lights and music coming from inside, but the windows are frosted, so Seungcheol isn't able to get a decent look inside. Beyond a number of unidentifiable clubbers waiting in line, it is unclear how many people in the club are armed gang members and if one of them might be Rattle.

Seungcheol doesn’t have a gun on him. The only weapon he has is a small knife on his calf—all he can probably smuggle through door security at the club. There is probably a price on his head by
now as well, and there would always be someone eager to make a name by taking out someone like Seungcheol.

As surreptitiously as he can, Seungcheol scouts the probable perches for snipers. He counts two nestled into rooftops across the street. One is a rank amateur; Seungcheol is certain from the way the scope keeps catching the streetlight and reflecting it back. He is likely there for added protection; when one or more heads fall, the others get suspicious, betting somebody would come looking at some point. The other sniper, dressed all in black and unmoving, is a little harder to spot; a silent bulk in the darkness. It wouldn’t do to take them out noisily and risk alerting the occupants inside.

Seungcheol stays where he is pressed against the dark stone at the turn of the narrow street, evaluating his options. The club has a back entrance, but it is in an alley boxed on three sides with high stone walls. Seungcheol doesn’t like the idea of getting trapped back there when he has no idea what kind of security the rear door has; from what Boa told Mingyu about Rattle, Seungcheol wouldn’t be surprised if it was a steel reinforced door with a retinal scanner guarded by a ravenous pit-bull. The guy has money and is very paranoid.

Choices, choices. Except not really.

He’ll have to enter through the front and try and blend in with the clubbers. He ditches his gloves in a nearby trash can and shrugs his jacket off as he approaches the entrance, combing his hair back into place with his fingers to tame it fractionally.

The door security seem to be checking every 4th person and anyone by themselves looking to gain entry. He must look somewhat half decent because the man with the clipboard takes one look at him and waves him in with a wink.

The sudden brightness of the club leaves Seungcheol blinking for a moment, and he steps down a short flight of brightly lit stairs and out onto the main floor. His fingers twitch with restless energy, and a persistent itch at the back of his neck keeps reminding him that he is on hostile territory.

He weaves his way through the moving crowd on the dance floor, ignoring the press of bodies and wandering hands with the ease of someone who spends too much time in places like these, scanning the place for dangers. The music is so loud he can feel it invade his ribcage. The lights are spinning, coating the bodies on the dance floor like pieces of candy.

The top level is a VIP area and mostly likely where Rattle will have a designated table for businessmen and women to fawn over him. A quick check reveals that both staircases leading upstairs are manned by additional security; beefy looking men patting down a group of girls trying to blag access to the VIP area by flaunting their assets. They’re like a sycophantic fan club, practically foaming at the mouth when the guard pulls back the rope to let anyone pass.

Maybe Rattle is a pervy old man? He hopes so. Pervy old men give Seungcheol vulnerabilities to exploit.

Just then, somebody taps him on the shoulder and he spins to come face to face with a young woman, covered head to toe in glitter. “Hey gorgeous, you looking to get upstairs.” She says, giving Seungcheol a sly look. She has an asymmetrical haircut, a single hot-pink stripe standing out among the white-blond of the rest.

“Yeah actually, but they seem to be turning a lot of people away.” He says, half-laughing.

He doesn’t hesitate for an instant when she pulls him close and grinds slow against the beat. “The guy upstairs has a very specific taste. I’ve seen a few guys gain entry though. You could totally get
“Aw damn—I left my big bottle-o-glitter at home.” He deadpans.

“Let me help you out.” The girl says, fluttering her eyelashes at him. Before Seungcheol can open his mouth to protest, she’s whipping out a can and spraying glitter on his t-shirt, then smearing something on his lips.

He looks down to examine himself. “Great. Thanks. How do I look?”

“Like you’re ready to party!” She smiles at him, her teeth bright white from the blacklights.

He’s really expecting to be turned away but the minute he steps up to the red divider, the bouncer looks him over from top to bottom. Slowly. With an emphasis on bottom, and waves him on through. The glitter makes him stand out and blend in all at the same time, invisibly visible. He supposes someone this glittery couldn’t appear to be that threatening.

He can feel eyes on him the minute he reaches the top of the stairs. For once in his life, he’s grateful for his body and the unwanted advances it gets him. Normally the attention irritates him; having people mentally undress him when he steps into a room. But it suits him perfectly now. He’d grown into his body the way he’d grown into slicked back hair, leather and motorcycles. A born criminal, in so many ways. Beautiful. Smart. Ruthless. Unassuming and imposing.

He nabs a glass of something or other from a waitress’s tray as she scurries past and does his best to blend in. Which is easier said than done.

He’s in the VIP section for less than five minutes when he’s cornered against a wall by a drunk troll of a man. “Fuck—you’re gorgeous. How hard do you want to get fucked?” He grunts, leaning on Seungcheol heavily, grabbing at him with sweaty palms.

Now, Seungcheol isn’t a man prone to shock or surprise. His seminal years have taught him to expect everything and nothing at once, which has turned out to be a capital philosophy to have when one makes a living holding automatic weaponry. Plus, he happens to think his calm and collected demeanour to be one of his better features.

But here, in this moment, Seungcheol is unsettled, and can’t help but grimace in disgust at the mans advances.

The troll is a little shorter than him, with broad shoulders and a scar on his face that makes it look like someone tried to cut his left ear off. Seungcheol wants to finish the job, then maybe smash his face into the wall. Somehow, he resists the urge and gracefully side steps him with a condescending pat on the shoulder. To add to Seungcheol’s surprise, the Troll grabs his elbow and forces him back around.

“Nobody, nobody says no to me.” Troll hisses in his ear, and Seungcheol finds himself pinned to the wall with an arm across his throat and what feels very much like the muzzle of a SIG shoved into his gut. Seungcheol’s rapid fire instincts have him side stepping the gun and wrenching the mans hand behind his back until he groans in pain and drops his side arm.

The lively chatter in the VIP area is replaced by the unmistakable sound of firearms being cocked. Seungcheol swears under his breath and automatically raises his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“But, now—that’s no way to treat a guest.” A voice calls out.

Seungcheol follows the voice to where a man is sitting in a private booth in the corner, profile
smeared in the shadows. He leans forward a little and Seungcheol thinks he detects a faint, odd sort of amusement in his expression.

From what he can see, he’s a tall, slim man, roughly Seungcheol's age, but he wears his experience more visibly. Seungcheol can bet the nose has been broken more than once, and at some point he’d fractured his cheekbone; the deep bruise makes the man's face look hollowed out, sallow in the dull lights. For all that he’s not a big man, there’s a vibe about this guy that warns Seungcheol’s primitive instincts of another predator in the vicinity.

*Rattle*, his brain supplies, and his pulse races ahead without his permission.

“He twisted my arm!” The Troll is a snarl of rage, a challenge chiseled on his hard-edged face.

After a tense moment, Rattle leans back in his chair, his eyes hooded. “That’s cause you got handsy and he’s clearly way out of your league.” He jokes, waving the man off.

Seungcheol watches the Troll lean down to pick up his weapon and holster it, which seems to be the signal for everyone else to put their guns away too. Seungcheol hasn’t seen that many weapons in one place since he'd crashed an arms dealer's storage locker.

He doesn't like how close that had been. He’s got everyone’s attention now, and he doesn't like that either. He needs to be careful if he wants to walk out of here alive. There are too many firearms and frayed nerves here to do this with his usual style. He needs to improvise.

Rattle motions to one of the guards flanking his booth, exchanging a few words Seungcheol is too far away to make out, but he's looking at Seungcheol the entire time.

“Care to join me for a drink?” He says suddenly, gesturing to an empty seat across from him. There is nothing overtly menacing about his words, tone or stance, but that doesn't stop tension from gathering in Seungcheol's muscles, like some part of his brain is expecting a fight. It’s definitely implied in his tone that he expects more than a drink from Seungcheol.

Seungcheol steps forward and licks his lips unconsciously, disturbed to see Rattle's eyes flicker. Some unnamed impulse sparking in his veins. It’s not fear, exactly, but it’s not a peaceful feeling by any means.

Rattle gestures to a waitress standing nearby and two drinks are placed on the table. He slides a glass of what appears to be a vodka mixture across the table to Seungcheol.

He picks up the glass, and pauses with the glass against his lips. “You haven’t spiked my drink, have you?”

Rattle smiles appreciatively and makes a show of switching their glasses for Seungcheol’s comfort. “Do you take me for a man of such subtlety?” He asks, downing his drink without ever losing Seungcheol’s gaze.

Seungcheol tries to smile back. But the movements feel stiff and alien, like he’s a stranger in his own body. If Rattle detects his falseness, he doesn’t give anything away. Seungcheol shrugs his shoulders, slipping into the booth next to Rattle, not bothering with the chair across from him. Rattle looks amused and doesn’t protest, so Seungcheol flags down a waitress and orders a scotch, none of that Russian swill for him, thanks a lot. “No offence, I don’t accept drink from strangers.” Seungcheol defends.

“None taken.” As though bored by Seungcheol’s existence, the man's gaze flits distractedly around the room while he frowns and shakes his head a little. “I know you’re just trying to get my attention
like everyone else in this club. Now, you have it, so I don’t think I’ll need to drug you to get what I want.” Rattle tells him, face dour, his glass of Vodka wetting his thin lips.

His scotch comes with a smile and Seungcheol downs it in one go. It’s good—strong and smoky with a roughness that feels a bit like a rope against his throat. It makes him want to swallow quickly and breathe deeply, letting the air cleanse some of the heat and sting from his mouth.

Between one blink and the next, Rattle is plastered against his side, leaning in to whisper in his ear. “I’ve been waiting for a pretty boy like you all night.” He says, pushing his face against Seungcheol’s neck, inhaling.

Seungcheol’s eyes narrow at ‘pretty boy’. He has to consciously relax his jaw before he can speak. “Have you.” he drawls, packing his anger tightly away under his skin. What he lets other people see is smooth and languid. Liquid and easy to bend.

“Hmmm—yeah. They serve me the same stale hook-ups here every night. You though—you’re something else.” He whispers huskily, smoothing a hand down Seungcheol’s chest. He retracts his hand briefly to examine the fine shimmering dust that has transferred. “Shame about all this glitter.”

Seungcheol gestures for a refill, and takes another mouthful of scotch, closing his eyes briefly as he swallows. “Yeah, it’s not really my thing, but some chick downstairs assaulted me with it.”

Rattle laughs as conversation picks up again around them. “It’s okay—I look forward to licking it off you.” He whispers against Seungcheol’s cheek. He slides his hand into the back pocket of Seungcheol’s pants and squeezes.

Seungcheol tries not to roll his eyes. He would very much like to gag at the suggestion. He feels like he’ll need a tetanus shot after this conversation. And a really long shower. Possibly several. Maybe, if he is very lucky, with Jihoon.

He clears his throat. “I’m flattered really, but—I don’t feel comfortable about this,” He runs his tongue over his teeth, contemplative, his eyes taking in the flow of people around them, unfocused and all-seeing. “I like a show, but not this much of a show. Not with so many people watching.” He says, nodding his head in the direction of the two guards flanking the booth.

Rattle chuckles, his breath hot and unpleasant against Seungcheol’s ear. “You want a little more privacy? That can be arranged, but you’ll have to make it up to me.” He murmurs.

Seungcheol shivers, adrenaline spiking in his blood. He exhales calmly and shifts in his seat to face Rattle, stroking his own hand over the man’s torso. “Choi Seungcheol.”
“That’s a pretty—wait—what?” Rattle says, eyes bulging, voice strangled.

Seungcheol shoves the barrel of the Glock roughly against the edge of Rattle’s jaw, trigger cocked, making him wince. The gun had been holstered around Rattle's chest, he hadn't seen Seungcheol reach for it. “This might just be—the easiest hit I’ve had all day. At least your associates put up a bit of a fight at first, even a good chase. You’re like a sitting duck up here, ya fucking pervert.”

Rattle stares at him for a long heartbeat, and Seungcheol can see the wheels working behind the grey of his eyes. “Wanna take your hand off my crotch now Rattle?” Seungcheol says and Rattle retracts his hand quickly, as if burned.

“I’m not Rattle. The guy you turned away is Rattle—I’m just his decoy kid.” Rattle (or perhaps not) says, looking Seungcheol dead in the eye.

There are literally a dozen things Seungcheol was expecting to hear. Neither of those are on the list. They throw his world view into a slight lurch, but he recovers with aplomb. Expect everything and nothing, after all.

“You would say that.” Seungcheol dismisses with a cut off laugh, even as he searches the other man’s face for a lie.

The Decoy shakes his head and gives him a faint smile, “Shoulda done your research better kid.” He says, almost a tad trite. He taps the lapel of his jacket, pointing to a where a concealed mic is tucked into the seam.

The man could be lying to save his own skin, prolong his life, but Seungcheol can’t be sure. Seungcheol recollects the indignation in the Troll’s voice at being rejected, and bile crawls up his throat, hot and sour. He does hate being caught out with flawed intel.

He takes his eyes off the man sitting next to him to quickly scout the area. Men in security uniforms have already started filtering into the space, taking up positions around the fringes. A grim-looking chap wearing a suit and an earpiece stands by the staircase. It’s obvious that he’s reporting back every move Seungcheol makes as he tracks his progress with a glare.

His next movements are reflexive, born out of primitive survival instinct rather than conscious methodology. He jumps up out of the booth just as the guards that were, until now, glaring balefully at the two of them from a distance, all jerk towards him, like bloodhounds catching a scent.

He quickly scans the balcony for the Troll (or possibly the real Rattle), finding the man heading quickly down the stairs with a small security detail. Seungcheol doesn’t have a halfway decent shot. He fires anyway, and keeps firing everything in the clip even as he hears a gun being cocked behind him.

He sees the next ten seconds with a kind of suspended detachment.

One of his bullets connects with Rattle’s leg; he pitches forward onto the bannister with a messy spray of blood and curses tumbling from his mouth; a guard’s lips open around the word ‘No’; his eyes wide, a stark terrified look as he points to Seungcheol on the balcony.

An instant later automatic fire blasts past his head, singeing the air.

Seungcheol knocks over a table, uses it as cover as the area erupts with the tell-tale pops of a high-calibre rifle, suppressed. One, two, three rapid-fire shots, denting the heavy wood and sweeping the entire room with lead.
He hears the crack of wood and the too-fast smash of glass when the windows are blown out, erupting in a shower of splinters against the skin of his face and into his open mouth. But all he can do is clench his eyes shut and grit his teeth. Live in that roar of noise and wonder if it's ever going to stop.

The interior lights flash to full brightness, making spots appear in Seungcheol's eyes. He blinks them away and brings a hand up to his face. The VIP balcony now looks like a bombsite. The place is a wreck, every window at his back is smashed and the floor is covered in splintered wood.

He is too visible now, and security are converging on him from both sides. He needs to leave immediately. He holsters his Glock and leaps over the balcony just as the club erupts into chaos.

**The CEO**

**Python**

**Cobra**

**Boa**

**Rattle?**

Chapter End Notes

1) LOOOONNNNGGG.
2) I suck at coming up with names for Korean criminals......sorry I just didn't want to use Jin Young, Seho AGAIN. I keep recycling the same Korean names because I can't come up with any :D
3) Sorry about the cliffhanger.
4) Feedback is always appreciated! Hope you enjoy!
Failures and Liabilities

Chapter Summary

The timeline for this jumps back and forth a little. Only because I didn't want to break up the previous chapter by including Jihoon's time in Bangtan. I wanted the hit chapter to flow seamlessly. So that's why I have added locations etc to some of the sections in this chapter. To give you an understanding of the flow of events.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Seungcheol

Location: Club

The fall is not very high, but it's a drop into a heaving mass of terrified people. A vicious landing steals Seungcheol's breath in the hard slap of concrete and something else. He thinks the floor whimpers beneath him, gone soft and wet, but he can't be sure it isn't him. He glances down to find he’s taken a reveller with him to the floor and cushioned his landing somewhat. Lucky for him—unlucky for reveller.

He doesn’t have time to feel guilty about it now because the club is all shouting and chaos, and Seungcheol can’t avoid being trampled by the mass of people trying to rush for the exit. Fuck if he’s going to die on this filthy floor.

It takes an eternity to drag his shaking arms underneath him, to push up onto hands and knees. And eventually he’s successful in sitting back on his haunches, more or less upright.

He can do this.

In that exact moment, something drops from the balcony above and rolls into the centre of the floor. There is a flash, a boom that echoes in the cramped space, and the room begins to fill with smoke.

Instinct drives Seungcheol to the floor beside the bar. Hands fly up to cover his ears and he snaps his eyes shut as the flare of light hits. He's experienced flashbangs and stun grenades, but experience never helps with the sense of disorientation. It will pass more quickly if he stays still and regains his senses before moving.

The crowd is a writhing, moving mass of people all trying to get out the same narrow exits. There’s sound everywhere: security shouting, clubbers screaming, a smoke alarm ringing, and some pathetic bastard is saying, “Please, please don’t shoot me,” in the most appallingly desperate voice.

Seungcheol can hear the panic rising; he dismisses it as non-essential background noise.

Somebody starts firing into the crowd, no doubt trying to find him. Two figures in black are moving slowly down the other set of steps, handguns out, but any cover they've gained with the flashbang is being obliterated by the evening breeze.

Seungcheol draws the Glock from its holster and chambers a round. In any other situation, he
would’ve probably shot them both in the head and moved on, but it’s foggy. He settles for a quick, close-range hit through the meaty part of the thigh, disassembling their handguns and snapping the firing pins as they go down. The two men scream in unison and fall, clutching their bleeding legs.

The smoke is starting to thin, but the staircase where he shot at Rattle is empty. Seungcheol just about catches a glimpse of a group of men, huddling somebody out the back exit before turning to face him.

Rattle is *still* alive.

Seungcheol is fucking furious.

Security are zeroing in on him from all sides now, wild-eyed with mindless fury; it’s been a long day and it’s becoming increasingly difficult to hold them all off. The next ten minutes are a quick smear of death, his brain acting on instinct and deep-seated anger, all his experience rising like muscle memory, he breaks bones, feels the warmth of someone else’s blood on his skin, and he comes to as he pulls the trigger on a shouting kneeling man to see a red cloud shoot from the back of the man’s head along with the bullet.

The sight of blood doesn’t alarm him anymore. After years of being on the right side of a gun, Seungcheol no longer flinches at seeing blood, guts, and other internal pieces becoming—suddenly, violently—external.

The steps Rattle’s security ushered him down are partially illuminated by the emergency lights, but they appear to be empty save for a huddle of petrified waitresses. And a visible trail of blood leading down the corridor and out the back exit. As if someone has been dragged to safety.

Logically, Seungcheol knows Rattle is *probably* as good as dead, blood trail or not. He should get out while he can, considering he is standing in a Masqueraders bar with a recently fired illegal weapon in his hand, another beside him, and several dead bodies at his feet. Gunfire and grenades, unsubtle as they are, will surely draw the attention of the local authorities. Leaving is essential.

But leaving loose ends is not his style. He hates failure.

He backtracks to the stairs to see if he can get a lead on Rattle. By the time the first police car arrives moments later, Seungcheol is out of the building, across the neighbouring roof, and following a trail of fresh blood drops that is too blatant to be anything other than deliberate.

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**Jihoon: Arrival in Bangtan territory.**

**Location: Namjoon’s Villa.**

Bangtan must be in the habit of keeping unwilling houseguests—the house they drive Jihoon to is a spacious villa at the foothills of a mountain, isolated from neighbours and major roadways.

Namjoon has already arranged an apartment for him in the east wing; a concession he rarely cedes to the criminals he harbours Jimin had pointed out. Jihoon doesn’t think 24/7 babysitting is necessary now that he’s out of Seungcheol’s territory, but has a hard time finding points to criticize.

The structure itself is a stylish three-story building with red shutters and a front courtyard screened on all sides by large, lush trees. It’s private, spacious on the inside, and secured like Area 51. A charming combination of Spanish colonialism tradition and modern indulgence, with a number of
personalized details for the discerning career criminal.

In other words, it’s damnably perfect, and exactly the sort of place Jihoon can lay low and work on his code.

Despite the luxury, he finds himself standing in the open space of his private room and wishing he was back in the claustrophobic confines of the safe house.

Home is where Seungcheol is after all—not here.

He’s just about to begin unpacking when there is a quiet knock on the door.

“Hey, sorry. But, the boss wants to meet you.” Taehyung says, poking his head in.

They escort him down the stairs to another wing of the house, to Namjoon’s office space.

The door opens. A tall man he assumes is Namjoon, stands there looking at the space above Jihoon’s head—at first blankly, and then with a flush of colour in his cheeks, as he notes the considerable height difference and drops his gaze.

“Hello, I’m Jin.” He greets. “Please, come in.” He inclines his head sideways, telling Jihoon to walk into the room.

The door swings open another six inches, revealing several other men standing just on the other side of it. Jihoon introduces himself quietly. No sudden movements to startle the slightly unhinged, highly-trained killers, but neither does he hesitate to smile and offer his hand in greeting.

One of the men is sitting behind a desk, and from the sling around his shoulder and the authority he exudes; Jihoon deduces that he is in fact Kim Namjoon. He has a square head and a square jaw and eyes carved out of ice, but he’s smiling at least.

Jihoon knows that Namjoon is Seungcheol’s longest-standing connection within Bangtan. Seungcheol’s fond of Namjoon, in his own way, so Jihoon digs deep for patience while Namjoon opens up their meeting with a stream of glad-handing.

“Welcome Jihoon. I’m Namjoon and you’ve met the others.” He says, gesturing to a the few men standing in the room, “I gather Jimin has shown you around the place, and you’re satisfied with your accommodation.”

“Yes, thank you. Everything’s great.” Jihoon says sincerely.

“There are a few specific rooms in the house I would appreciate you steer away from, but other than that you have free reign of the place. I only ask that you let one of the men know if you plan on going out for a stroll. I can’t be certain you weren’t followed here and I do have an arrangement to keep you—out of trouble.” Namjoon says, voice bland and business-like.

“Yes, of course. This place is huge. I’ve been confined to smaller spaces and not had cabin fever so I think this will be fine.

“Seungcheol and I didn’t discuss a period of time for your stay, but to err on the side of caution, Hoseok here has taken the liberty of creating a new identity for you, should you need it.” Namjoon says, handing Jihoon an envelope.

It’s filled with a number of identity papers, a passport, social security card. Jihoon’s most impressed by the fake ID. He’s never had one before, then again—a fake ID only works effectively if the
person handling it can pass for an older age. Jihoon is lucky when he doesn’t get ID’d for a PG movie.

“Wow. I’ve never had a fake ID before!” He squeals, thumbing the edges of the card in wonderment.

Namjoon startles at this childish excitement. “Really?” He looks confused, but lets it go. He seems to be chewing something over. “You know, when Seungcheol asked me to harbour you, I was—surprised. It’s not usually a favour he would ask for.” He pauses. A moment passes, “You must be very special.”

The ‘to him’ goes unsaid. When Jihoon doesn’t immediately reply, he continues on with a wry smile. “So, what is it exactly that you do for a living?”


Namjoon shifts in his seat, looking bewildered. “Yeah, Seungcheol told me. I just thought that was a euphemism for something.”

Jihoon suppresses the urge to sigh. “No. That’s my actual job.”

Namjoon snorts. Then he purses his lips, looking thoughtful. Jihoon can almost hear the gears clicking. “Hmm. So, how did you come into contact with Seungcheol?” He sounds amused, but there’s an edge to it.

“I got a flat tire, he pumped it up for me.”

Namjoon tilts his head, curious. “Is that euphemism for something?” He asks, clearly not tracking.

Jihoon takes a deep, patient breath. “No, that’s actually how we met. Let’s just agree not to use euphemisms from now on.”

“Interesting. Then how do you contribute to his business?” There’s a different edge in Namjoon’s tone now. Jihoon thinks, Oh for God’s sake.

“I’m not in the business.” he says, giving Namjoon a little self-assured smile.

Namjoon looks mildly insulted. He looks at Jihoon from beneath his brows. “Is Seungcheol branching out into software development?”

Without meaning to, he lets out a single short bark of laughter. Namjoon raises his eyebrows. “Oh god no. He’s like a caveman with computers.” He means to leave it at that, but Jihoon has a tendency to talk too much when he’s nervous. “I only managed to set him up with his very first email the other day.”

Namjoon slouches back, relaxes as he draws the obvious conclusion. “Oh really? Great. Give it to me so I can update my contacts list.”

“Ummm—It’s uhh,” When Jihoon trails off, Namjoon looks at him expectantly, waving his hand in a circular motion.

“What?” Namjoon pauses, and looks at him as if he’s stupid. “You don’t know it?”

Jihoon grins to himself and looks down. “It’s kinda long and hard to spell.” He runs his hand through
his hair. “I’ll just write it down for you.” He fumbles, reaching over to scribble Seungcheol-loves-Jellybean@gmail.com on a piece of paper, folds it and slides it over to Namjoon.

Namjoon unfolds the paper and squints at it for a second. There’s a slight uptilt at the corner of his lips. Not a smile, not quite—but it’s something. “Jellybean?” he intones, raising an eyebrow.

Jihoon shrugs silently, but the blush heating his cheeks says it all. This time Namjoon smiles in genuine amusement.

“I should go, you’re a busy man I’m sure. I’ll let you get back to your work.” says Jihoon, sounding tired and a little embarrassed. He’s quick to make his exit, feeling eyes on his back the entire time.

Jihoon: Second night in Bangtan territory.

Location: Namjoon’s Villa.

He’s halfway through brushing his teeth when his phone goes off from where he left it on the bedside table—Seungcheol’s personalised ringtone is NIN: Closer, that justifiably reminds Jihoon of Seungcheol every time he hears it. If he leaps across the room to answer the phone in an undignified rush, well… no one is around to see it.

“Miss me, yet?”

Jihoon’s heart kick-starts into gear. Seungcheol’s husky voice instantly makes Jihoon want to grin, so he scowls instead. “Who is this?”

“Your mechanic. Wanna have phone sex?” Seungcheol’s voice a sudden, low rumble; flirty.

“Big Bob? Is that you?” Jihoon deadpans.

A pause. “You just had to ruin the mood by mentioning his name, didn’t you?”

Jihoon bites his lip to keep from smiling. “Well you can understand my confusion when you introduce yourself as my Mechanic first and not my boyfriend.”

“It’s called role play. Seeing as you have all these sexual mechanical fantasies I thought we could partake.”

Jihoon wasn’t about to argue with that. “Well, in that case…” He drops his voice into a low drawl. “What are you wearing?”

“Funny you should ask. A skimpy little mechanics boiler suit.”

Jihoon drops down onto the arm chair by the window, staring at the striped wallpaper but seeing something else entirely. “Tease.”

“You love it. It’s got—lots of pockets, for all my tools.” Seungcheol drawls seductively, but the image startles a laugh out of Jihoon.

“You’re terrible at this.”

“Okay, boiler suits are not sexy. But what if I told you, I’m straddling my bike—without any pants on?”
Jihoon lets his body slouch back into the chair, his free hand already inching towards the front of his boxers. “Hmm, that’s marginally better. Go on.”

“I’m in the garage, reminiscing about the last time we were here together. Do you remember?”

“Of course. How could I forget. I was having a wonderful time with your bike, then you showed up.”

Another pause, then a sigh. “That’s it. I’m going to get this fucking bike scrapped.”

Jihoon rolls his eyes. But it makes him smile, just a little. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry. Tell me what else you’re doing.”

“Hmm. I dunno. I don’t think you’ll believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Silence on the other end, long enough to make Jihoon’s hand clench around the phone, then: “I’ve got a butt plug inside me.”

Jihoon choke, actually chokes on the shock—and the mental picture of Seungcheol riding his bike, plugged up. “Liar.” He says breathlessly.

“Fine. Don’t believe me. Don’t believe that I bought a butt plug just because it reminded me of your cock. Because I missed your cock filling me. Don’t believe that I drove around with a plug in my ass for three hours straight.”

Jihoon tries to swallow, but his throat is desert dry. “Oh—god. Seungcheol.”

“I’ll hang up now, since you don’t believe me.”

“I believe you, I believe you. Don’t you dare hang up Cheol!” Jihoon warns, just as the sound of an obscene moan comes across the line. “What—what are you doing now?”

“Trying to sit comfortably. But it’s—ahh—really hard. Ahh—so sensitive from having this inside me for so long Jihoonie.”

Jihoon’s cock twitches painfully at the low register of Seungcheol’s voice, the catch of breath he can hear on the other end of the line. “Yeah?”

More moaning. Then Seungcheol starts laughing almost immediately as his moans trail off. “Why did I not think of this sooner. This feels amazing.” His voice is light and lilting. “Hmm—So sore. So full. Hmm—so good. But, not as good as your dick baby. You fill me up so much better.”

“God you’re such a fucking cock tease.” Jihoon grunts, biting his lower lip and screwing his eyes shut.

“Am I? Oh, I guess I shouldn’t tell you about how the vibrations of the bike seat drilled the plug up inside me.”

Jihoon skims his hand over his cock, now hard and wanting, and breathes, “Oh—God.”

“Or how I took the scenic route, just to drive along the country roads. Just so I could feel every bump in the road.”

“Fuck.” Jihoon says, voice barely audible.
“I should definitely not tell you how wet my dick got, soaking through by boxers because I was so fucking overstimulated. You know I’m not used to penetration, so my ass was on fire. Every jerk and bounce on the road drove the plug deeper and deeper. Till I was screaming inside my helmet.”

“Cheol, please!” Jihoon whines.

“I couldn’t help it Jihoonie. I was so sensitive. So, I probably shouldn’t tell you about how I pulled over to the side of the road, dropped my pants, pulled the plug out and finger fucked myself till I came all over my bike.” Seungcheol whispers breathlessly.

“Oh—fuck.” Jihoon replies, just as breathless.

“You’re touching yourself aren’t you Jellybean? Want me to keep talking?” Seungcheol says, voice low but still a little a little teasing around the edges.

“Yes.” Jihoon whispers, because now isn’t the time to call Seungcheol on his smugness. He’s not wrong anyway.

“Are you hard?”

I have been since hearing your fucking voice, he wants to say, but bites his lip before that minor confession can escape. “Yeah...”

“Good. Work yourself slowly for me baby,” says Seungcheol and it’s more of command, voice roughened with arousal, a tone Jihoon is happily acquainted with now.

He reaches down to tug his boxers off, pulling them down to his knees before sliding his hand down and grasping his cock. It practically leaps in his hand. He raises his palm to his mouth and licks before once again wrapping his fingers around his length.

“Are you thinking of me?” Seungcheol’s voice is gravelly and slightly amused.

Jihoon grits his teeth. “Idleness doesn’t become you, Seungcheol. You’re practically fucking my ear, naturally I’m thinking of you.”

“Okay. I just thought you’d be thinking of my ass instead of me personally.”

Jihoon’s breath hitches as he tightens his grip on the base of his shaft. “Hmm—the whole package is pretty nice.”

“But my ass is your favourite part?”

Jihoon smiles, lets his eyelids lower, and starts to jerk off. It’s a little slow, but he enjoys the build, the drawing-out sweetness. “Your ass is pretty spectacular. But—you’re gorgeous all over Seungcheol. You’ve got a gorgeous face; cute ears, dreamy eyes and obscene lips.”

“Aww—I’m blushing.”

“Shut-up.”

“Hmm—do you ever think about fucking my mouth, and then coming all over my face.”

The words, blatant and dirty, hit him like a punch to the chest. Are we seriously doing this? thinks Jihoon. “Jesus, Cheol...fuck.”

Seungcheol chuckles darkly. “Nggh, can you call me a ‘good boy’ again. I really liked hearing
“You’re twisted,” he says, voice flat and monotone. Yet he trails his fingers over his face, smiling against his fingertips, and feels his dimples treacherously take shape.

“Aww c’mon Jihoon. Are you saying I’m not a good boy?” Seungcheol says this like it’s the world’s utmost offense. Jihoon can’t even tell if he’s joking anymore.

Jihoon huffs through the phone. “Fine. Cheol,” Jihoon starts, suddenly irritable, his hand stilling at the base of his cock where he’d been working up a nice, teasing stroke. “Be a good boy for me and twist that toy inside yourself. I wanna hear you--”

Seungcheol’s moan cuts him off. “Hmm—fuck Jihoon. It’s so thick. Ahhh—Ahh.”

Jihoon’s glad his cell phone has been cradled against his shoulder because he’s sure he would have dropped it. Heat pools behind his eyes and he literally can’t speak. This is not conducive to phone sex.

Seungcheol sighs. “Hmm—fuck. Tell me what you’re doing. Talk to me.”

Jihoon blinks rapidly and clears his head. “Stroking myself.” And he continues to; long, sure strokes up to the head, thumbing it and biting his lip as a drop of fluid touches his skin. “Are you close Cheollie?”

“Yeah,” Seungcheol moans, thick and deep in his throat, like he has to fight for words to escape; it goes straight to Jihoon’s dick.

“Tilt your head back. God, I can see you, biting your lip, throat exposed. Is your hair slicked back?”

“No, I took a shower.”

Jihoon speeds up his movements, grabbing the phone with his left hand. “Mm. Still kinda wet then, I bet... Wanna run my hands through it... pull on it while I bite your neck. Wanna plug you up with that toy Cheol. Make you wear it all day. Take you on the longest ride with it stuffed inside you. You’ll beg me to pull over so you can take it out. But I won’t let you. Not for ages. Then when I do—I’m gonna bend you over that bike—spank your ass again and fuck you. Fill you up with my cum—then plug you up again. Make you ride with my cum inside you.”

Seungcheol’s lungs have lost the capacity for air, it seems. The noise he emits is a breathless whine.

“Fuck, I’m good at this huh!” breathes Jihoon. He can hear shuffling on the other end of the line and a slapping sound. “That’s right Cheollie. Such a good boy. Touch yourself... fuck up into your hand. Damn, I want you to ride me, want to watch you on top of me, sinking down onto my cock. That perfect ass, you’re so fucking tight.”

“Yes—yes—want that so much. Miss you cock.”

“Oh fuck,” Jihoon cries out, snapping his hips up and fucking his fist wildly, rubbing the head frantically, all thoughts of finesse gone. “Have you been thinking about it? The way I felt inside you Cheollie? Fuck, you felt good didn’t you? You loved my dick fucking you raw. Good boy.”

Seungcheol just groans. “Yes. Oh my...Jesus, fuuuuck...”

“Yeah,” Jihoon’s panting, chest heaving. “Want you to cum for me Cheollie. Imagine it’s my dick inside you, tearing you up.”
Seungcheol is breathing shallowly now, and Jihoon can hear the sounds grow louder.

“When I get back. Gonna run my hands all over you, watch you. Oh, screw yourself down on me, thinking you’re controlling it until I... until I throw my leg over you, knocking you over till you’re on your back and I fuck you hard, the way you like it. Tell me, tell me you like it.”

“I like it—I like it.”

Jihoon can barely see anymore, gaze hazy with lust. His palm is sweaty and unsteady where it holds the phone to his ear and his thighs are clenching. He draws the balls of his feet up on the chair, bending his legs at the knee and fucks his hand in earnest, “I’m gonna... oh my god...”

“Me too... come for me, let me hear you.”

Jihoon lets out a loud cry, not even attempting to hold back, white heat exploding at the base of his spine. He thrusts up until he has nothing left in him, hot ribbons of come marking his hand and stomach. He hears Seungcheol’s answering sobs and wishes he was there to see it. Seungcheol is panting and swearing and the best part is Jihoon knows exactly what he looks like right now.

They’re silent for a few moments and Jihoon can hear the bike squeak as Seungcheol gets up. He’s reaching for his tissues on the bedside table when Seungcheol says, “I love you. Not long now—I promise.”

“I love you too.”

Jihoon settles in well enough. He keeps to himself mostly, but then again—he’s busy working with his code and looking for a solution to get him back to Seungcheol as soon as possible. The idle time is enervating for anyone, terrible for a personality like Jihoon’s, which depends constantly on accomplishing things in order to feel right. The same qualities that make him such a good hacker, his endless foresight and calculation, make him terrible at sitting still.

He extends himself to social offers when appropriate; no sense in shutting people off if they’re just trying to make you more comfortable.

All told, Jihoon is pleased with the crowd he’s landed in.

Namjoon is a constant. He doesn’t stray too far from his base. He’s the one person that always has time for a chat or a sympathetic ear, the voice of wisdom when Jihoon gets lost in his adoptive world.

Jin, his lead babysitter from the gang, seems to be fond of him. Which is weird—most people find the fact that he’s not in the business off-putting, he knows. Jin is always trying to talk to him, to bond or whatever, but his paternal demeanour just makes Jihoon feel more young and naïve.

There’s Min Yoongi, a lanky bastard from the same town Jihoon originated from. They have that in common and literally nothing else. He’s a quiet sparkplug of a guy, with a sarcastic attitude sharp enough to cut glass. Jihoon takes an instant dislike to him.

Jeon Jungkook, the youngest of their lot, apparent criminal prodigy and eager to prove himself to the seasoned crew. He tries to look more menacing then his youthful face allows, and would probably get away with it if he wasn’t teased by Jimin and Taehyung.

They’re the livelier members of Namjoon’s gang. Extremely, painfully sociable and trying to be in
Jihoon’s face 24/7. They remind Jihoon of DK and Hoshi, so he’s naturally fond of them. Even if they invade his space on the odd occasion to re-tell highly dramatized accounts of their day.

“So, there I was, toe to toe with three of the fiercest Masquerader’s you ever saw. Each one of them had guns the size of my arms drawn, and the ones not holding guns were holding even bigger knives!” Taehyung gestures expansively.

“Slowly, all ten of them surrounded me. But do I surrender? No! I summon my highly trained combat instincts and attack!”

He demonstrates some attacks in mid-air, Jimin fills in the role of the enemy. “And when the dust cleared—there where twenty less Masquerader’s in the world.” He finishes smugly.

“I thought you said there was three of them to begin with? How did you end up killing twenty?” Jihoon says, sounding jocular, not even pretending to believe the idea.

Taehyung abruptly affects a scowl. “That’s not the point Jihoon, the point is: I kicked ass.”

Jihoon humours them a lot, when he has the patience. It goes against his accustomed grain to lay about whilst technically on the clock. But it’s also at times like this when Jihoon is most relaxed, these impulsive breaks from expectation and dutiful habit.

When he doesn’t have the patience for tall tales; he’s grateful for Hoseok who marches in and drags them out of his office.

“Don’t you guys have a rookie to be training? Jungkook isn’t going to learn the trade by listening to you guys wax lyrical about your skills. Take him out and show him.”

Mixed together, they make a lively yet skilled lot. Their company is pleasant, but it only serves to make him more homesick.

Lately, they’ve all taken to eating meals together. Conversation is subdued but comfortable. This evening, the discussion revolves around gang gossip, including Jimin’s favourite topic: Min Yoongi.

Yoongi’s not eating with them obviously. Jihoon suspects the man doesn’t have to eat; surviving solely on coffee and the blood of his enemies or something equally dark.

Jihoon listens with half an ear as the conversation dissolves into a diatribe on Yoongi and his frigid demeanour. Jungkook and Taehyung whisper about him like he’s some a mysterious ultra-badass, trained from the inside out to be the coldest, deadliest motherfucker in action. A veritable bogeyman among professional killers.

To hear the other men tell it, one would think Yoongi never so much as blinked, much less expressed actual emotions. Which Jihoon knows to be patently untrue given how frequently he’s seen him in Jimin’s face, sneering and being an all-around prick. But Jihoon supposes Jimin just has a natural talent for upsetting the man, as they tend to argue constantly no matter how many times Namjoon lectures them about professionalism around ‘the guest’ (aka. Jihoon)

“I was shaking down a bar owner, who’s payment was late. Then, Yoongi just came and took over. It was embarrassing! I was getting the job done!” Jimin complains.

“He’s just looking out for you. He does the same for most of the newbies” Jin, ever the mediator, suggests.

Jimin gapes and squares his shoulders gamely “I’m not a rookie!” he whines.
“You sound like a rookie when you whine.” Yoongi interjects, suddenly appearing in the doorway. Jimin flounders for a few blinks before visibly shrugging off Yoongi’s words. “Joining us for dinner?”

“No, I already ate on the job.” Yoongi dismisses.

Namjoon studies him for a moment “Where have you been?”

“Busy, had my ear to the ground.”

“Anything worth sharing.” Namjoon asks.

“Hmm—just that—your boss is poking at the snakes nest. Hope he doesn’t get bitten.”

Jihoon is chewing through a mouthful of pasta when he hears that too-smug voice behind him. “Oh—me?” He startles, realising Yoongi was directing that at him. He shifts in his chair, oddly uncomfortable. “I’m not privy to Seungcheol’s business. I don’t know what poking the snakes nest means.” He says it as casually as he can, like an afterthought.

Yoongi snorts derisively. “It means—he’s getting his hands bloody. Very bloody from what I hear. Not one for subtly Seungcheol. Although I suppose it’s hard to be subtle when you’re wiping out half of the competition in the space of a few days.”

Jihoon says nothing. He feels strangely hostile. It’s because he’s surprised, he tells himself. He hates surprises.

“Didn’t you know?” Yoongi asks, eyes a bit wide

Namjoon looks over, frowning. “That’s enough Yoongi.”

Yoongi just gives him one of those condescending head tilts that makes him long to knock a few teeth out. “Of course you didn’t know. He wouldn’t tell you cause you’re probably a liability. A chink in the armour.”

Jihoon tries to tense up and not react at the same time but he suspects Yoongi’s just trying to goad a reaction out of him. But it’s a challenge that Jihoon can’t help but rise to. “I’m not a liability.” he snaps, just barely stopping himself from shaking a finger in the air.

Yoongi snorts, his expression unchanged. “Moved you out of his city didn’t he? For one reason or another he couldn’t protect you himself. That must mean you’re a liability then. Or else he’s just getting weak—I hear he’s losing his touch. Ha.”

“Yoongi.” Namjoon’s voice rings out in warning and Yoongi seems to reign himself in a little.

Jihoon feels an irritated indignation on Seungcheol’s behalf. Seungcheol is many things—overprotective, pragmatic, obstinate, occasionally so unbelievably smug and childish that teasing him feels obligatory—but he’s not weak.

Also, Yoongi is a colossal prick. “Seungcheol’s not weak.” Jihoon spits, he doesn’t bother to keep the petulance out of his voice.

“You wouldn’t understand kid.” Yoongi states calmly, like a foregone conclusion spoken to a small child.

On instinct, Jihoon reaches within himself for some defence against all these things he doesn’t want
to feel. Searches blindly and finds a calm corner of his mind where words don’t mean anything and Yoongi is just lashing blindly without remorse. The world gets quieter. Time moves slower. And the sting levels out, becomes less of a bite and more of an irritation.

His eyes follow Yoongi as he strolls out of the kitchen. “I don’t like him.” He says it quietly, but the words spit out of him like bullets.

Jimin pats him on the shoulder. “Yeah, he takes some time to get used to.”

Namjoon invites him to a private dinner a few nights into his stay. It strikes him, as he sits down at a dining table overburdened with platters, that Namjoon is glad to have his company. Cooped up as he is in his own Villa style safe house. He wonders why Namjoon doesn’t just leave the house to conduct business, why he isolates himself so. If he wanted to pry he could probably find out, but he doesn’t want to pry. Strictly speaking, there’s nothing to pry into.

They talk about simple things that first hour—where he grew up, their mutual preference for Samsung’s over I-Phones, their conflicting views on hot weather. Nothing especially energetic about any of it. In fact, Jihoon finds himself calmed by Namjoon’s easy company.

Not to say that Namjoon isn’t sharp in his own way. The man is very clever, and it’s clear that his affinity for violence rivals even Seungcheol’s.

Namjoon doesn’t ask him about what he’s working on. Jihoon expects him to, and he mentally rehearses multiple responses, from casual brush-offs to righteous diatribes. But he never asks. It’s the first taste of personal freedom Jihoon’s had in days.

Near the end of dinner, Jihoon finds himself relaxed enough to ask a more delicate question. “Why is your shoulder bandaged?”

Namjoon tosses his napkin across the table with a sigh and leans back in his chair. He’s clearly been anticipating this conversation. “I was shot.”

“Oh. Ouch—by whom?”

“I don’t know.” Namjoon mumbles.

It’s on the tip of Jihoon's tongue to say something, he doesn't know what—just something to take the edge off the conversation—but then Namjoon looks away again, staring out the open balcony. His face breaks open into a grin, and his shoulders sag. “Well—I know who shot me directly—because I shot him back, but I don’t know who sent him.”

“Oh—that’s unsettling. But I’m sure you’ll find out soon, sure you have the right people to find out for you at least.” He trails off, not knowing what else to say.

Namjoon’s laugh is short, dry, and not at all humorous “I do—but it doesn’t matter. There will always be somebody out there ready to take up a similar offer for a similar payment.”

“Is that why you don’t leave the compound?” he hears himself say, and instantly regrets it.

Namjoon flicks a glance up at Jihoon's face, dark and furtive. “I don’t need to leave, I can run my business just fine from here.” He says sharply.
Paranoid stickler, Seungcheol had said. Jihoon tries not to sigh.

When Namjoon continues, his voice is more measured. “I’m used to it. This is my life. It’s actually more unsettling when somebody doesn’t put a hit out on me.”

Jihoon almost laughs, but he’s afraid it wouldn’t come out sounding right.

Namjoon gives him a searching look. “It’s Seungcheol’s life too yanno.”

“Not forever.” Jihoon says, and there’s a tightness there.

Namjoon’s watching him with an expression Jihoon’s only ever seen on one face. It’s Seungcheol’s ‘why don’t you understand’ expression. Careful and intent and so impossibly deep. Like there’s a whole world beneath that he could never comprehend. “You can’t possibly believe that. Or you do, and you’re just as young as you look.” Namjoon says, and it sounds like chastisement.

“Seungcheol promised me.” Jihoon says quietly. He glances over to see how Namjoon will take this. Namjoon takes it by opening his mouth, then shutting it abruptly.

There is a drawn out silence before he speaks again. “I grew up with Seungcheol, we even went to the same school and ate at the same lunch table. We even had our own little gang in school.” Namjoon’s expression is focused but there’s a gentle nostalgia to the words. Something sad under the raised eyebrow and the way he’s relaxed in his chair.

“That’s kind of adorable.”

“Ha. The teachers didn’t think so. We got suspended a lot, but it was fun. Almost innocent before it got very real.” Jihoon studies his’s face. His eyes have a sort of intense openness. Most people don’t let that kind of thing show through, they hide it behind layers. And Namjoon is a master of layers.

Then his face sharpens again. “My point is—things never change. Yes, they change on a grander scale, different cities, different enemies and players in the mix. But the same cycle spinning over and over again. You spin in the same circle until you spin out. That’s life.” Namjoon finishes and it's soft and slow, accusing but also strangely final. Those two words left out there on their own.

Jihoon shakes his head. “He’s getting out.” He says, but he doesn’t elaborate, then kicks away from the table because he has to stand up, has to walk or he’s going to go mad.

This is officially the most claustrophobic conversation he’s ever had.

He goes to the window, wonders if it even opens before he shoves his hands in his pockets and stares outside.

Maybe It’s too late for Namjoon to leave, to undo what he’s become, but Seungcheol has struggled to protect a remnant of who he was before. Jihoon knows he keeps it deep within himself, where it can’t be touched or corrupted, and surrounds it with the strongest barricades he can find within his degraded soul. Seungcheol may have spent the last decade rubbing elbows with criminals and deviants of many natures, but he has always been something different.

Jihoon will never blame Seungcheol for the things he did, the person he was. Especially not after learning more about the price Seungcheol has paid for those years. But he believes—has let himself believe—that Seungcheol is ready to put those parts of himself aside. He thought Seungcheol wanted to be… better. Maybe not good. Neither of them can ever be good men. But there has to be a limit, doesn’t there? There must be rules that a person lives by, or else what’s the point of anything?
Jihoon ruminates on that, exploring the implications of that idea rather than focus too much on the anger simmering beneath his skin.

The chair makes a noise and Jihoon knows that Namjoon has moved. He listens to his boots bring him to the window. Until he's close enough for Jihoon to hear the shift of fabric, to see the faint echo of his reflection above his own.

“I’m not trying to upset you.” And he does sound sincere, not that it makes things any better. “I’m just trying to inject a little reality into your outlook. But, you believe what you want to—if it makes living this easier.” Namjoon says quietly, but firmly.

He’s settling into bed later that night, when his phone buzzes. He doesn’t know the number but he opens the message anyway.

22:33: A lot of chatter on the line. Your BF is making waves and has been name dropped more than once. I hope he knows what he’s doing. R.

He knows several people whose names begin with R. Only one is a decent typist.

22:35: He knows what he’s doing.

He withholds from telling Dr Raine about the code, he’s not sure why, but he doesn’t. He’s working from a lot of substandard data that’s archived on the laptops, it’s no more Dr Raine’s code then it is his now.

His phone screen lights up with another incoming message.

22:46: Going to get Anna to safety. The men patrolling her hospital ward withdrew suddenly. I’m going to take my chance. R.

Jihoon texts back:

22:47: Let me know when you get out safely.

He tosses the phone down and stares out the window. There’s a long wait, long enough that he breaks a light sweat. Then: the screen lights up.

23:37: Clear.

That’s all, and he feels both a swell of relief and a separate, conflicting wave of irritation. He’s about to dial Raine’s phone when another text appears.

23:40: Something is definitely going on. They have never removed security from her ward before. What is your BF doing that’s got them breaking ranks? R.

Jihoon texts back the only information he has.

23:44: Poking the snakes nest, apparently.

23:50: Shit. I’ll keep tracking their cells. I hope you are safe wherever you are. R

Jihoon tosses and turns for half an hour, Seungcheol firmly on his mind. He has the strangest hollow feeling in his gut, as if something large and serious has been cut out of him. It hasn’t. Everything is
fine. He reaches for his phone and fires off a quick message to Seungcheol anyway.

00:23: I hope you are okay? Miss you. Xx

He turns up the volume on his phone ringer before he goes to bed, just in case. He closes his eyes, knowing he's not going to fall asleep for hours.

Somehow he does, though, because he wakes up to a fierce slat of sunshine falling straight across his eyes and no messages on his phone. He has a momentary falling sensation in his belly, before he catches himself with a reminder: Seungcheol’s a pro at this, he’s got this. And anyway, no news is probably good news. At least it’s not bad news.

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Seungcheol

*Location: Outside club, rooftops.*

Given the amount of blood Seungcheol is tracking, Rattle is knocking on deaths door. He should just turn back around, or at least call in back-up to help clear the stragglers. But instead he finds himself following a smudge of fresh blood across yet another rooftop.

There are people on the roof—he can’t see them, but he can hear movement; the scuffling of shoes as a body is dragged across the gravelled roof surface.

He steps around the corner of a small water tower, the gun drawn but held down, pointing at the floor. Sure enough, there is Rattle groaning in pain, flanked by a large number of guards.

Rattle is the only one facing him, and he sits halfway up, his face a perfect rictus of surprise. The bodyguard crouched at his legs turns partway, sees Seungcheol, and reaches for his gun.

But he’s too slow. The guard is still drawing his gun when Seungcheol shoots him through the shoulder, knocking him half on top of Rattle and, incidentally, trapping rattle under his weight. Rattle is scrabbling to sit up, to find his own gun, and while he does it, Seungcheol shoots a wave of bodyguards in their faces without slowing down, cutting their number down by half in just seconds. Clips empty, he drops the guns and collides full-on with another guard as he reaches for his gun. With a quick grapple, Seungcheol sends the man flying heavily to the ground and meets the next two offenses with a series of arm blocks and kicks.

Another guard lands a bruiser of a kick to the back of Seungcheol’s leg, causing Seungcheol to drop to one knee. He narrowly blocks the next kick with raised arms. On the third kick, he grabs the guards leg and yanks. The man hits the ground, skull bouncing hard enough to be heard across the rooftop.

After a time, the guards reduce to a scattering of bodies and one lone guard struggling to get to his feet. Seungcheol dispatches him with a decisive kick to the face, and suddenly all is still. Seungcheol stands in the middle of the fallen men like an angel of death in black leather and silken hair. His eyes are dark and vacant, predatory as he pins his gaze on where Rattle huddles, wiping blood from his face, whimpering over his bleeding leg and staring at Seungcheol like he’s the coming of Christ.

Seungcheol stalks across the short distance, sights honed in on Rattle. He’s out of bullets, but it doesn’t stop him launching himself on Rattle like a storm, slamming a fist into his face. Rattle manages to turn his head just in time to avoid having his nose driven into his skull. Seungcheol grabs his hair and immediately lugs his head up, to slam it down into the concrete. He leans in with the
movement, using his own considerable body weight to increase the impact as Rattle’s skull smacks the ground with a sick thud. Seungcheol does it again, this time he hears the crunch of broken bone, feels Rattle’s head sag in his hold.

He lets the head drop and then, having conveniently incapacitated his victim, Seungcheol lets his fist fly. Quick, punishing blows that target all the places most sensitive to pain.

He stops tracking time and reality, consumed by the singular need to hurt, to damage. He’s only vaguely aware of Rattle’s screaming coming to a halt, the shuddering body stops trying to wrench itself out of his hold.

He’s so distracted, beating his fists into the bloody pulp that was once the man’s face, when he feels the cool metal of a gun barrel against his neck.

“What the fuck--” Seungcheol starts to push himself up with his other hand, but freezes when he hears the unmistakable click of the safety coming off the Browning.

“Don’t move, kid,” A voice insists, using the barrel of the gun to make his point. “I think you’re smart enough to know when the game is up.” The man’s voice is unflinching.

He holds for a minute, just kneeling there in shock. The gun at his head. That one concussive instant. He wonders why he hasn’t been shot, but then he’s too busy being dragged out to the middle of the rooftop at gunpoint to appropriately analyse that revelation.

Seungcheol jerks back stubbornly, but he knows it’s already too late.

“Don’t be deliberately dense, Seungcheol. It’s unbecoming.” A newly familiar voice rings out over the rooftop.

The Decoy appears, stepping over the lifeless bodies on the ground. He saunters closer, basking in the spotlight. “You and I both know death is too easy. When you eventually die—it’s gonna be after a long and painful wait.”

Should have shot him back in the club, Seungcheol thinks.

“Bet you wish you had of shot me back in that club.” The Decoy finally says, practically reading Seungcheol’s thoughts. “I may not have been the real Rattle, but now that you’ve taken him out of the picture. Guess who just got a promotion?”

“Fuck you.” he yells, and then something hits him in the middle of his back, knocking him face-first onto the rooftop. On a second’s delay, a rusty hook of pain digs into the side of his face where it is ground into the concrete. There is something in his back, something huge and heavy, grinding through his spine. Someone was kneeling on him, pinning him. Then he’s hit on the side of the head, and he gasps, tasting wet blood down the back of his throat. He feels something cold and hard press against his skull, just behind his ear.

“Ah—ah. Don’t be like that, don’t make it difficult. I wanna play with you a little first.” The Decoy drawls.

Seungcheol feels his breath hitch, grinds his molars together until it hurts. He knows it’s pointless to say anything, to protest. He’s alone amid a circle of predators, and they’re scenting blood.

And that’s how Seungcheol finds himself on his knees, gun to his temple and surrounded by silent Masquerader’s, while their new boss stands over him, monologuing up a storm. He feels cold all over, hypersensitive to the night air on his face. Surrounding him, the faces of the crowd are in sharp
focus, seared into his vision. He can feel a tremor work through his body, starting in his feet and coursing up, and he clenches his hands into tight fists behind his back.

“Police are closing in, lets relocate. Grab him.” The Decoy commands.

Then there are hands on him, yanking at him – brutal and clumsy. It’s instinct to coil up, kick out, to aim for the vulnerable spots. He fights back with no clearer goal than forcing them to let him go. There are too many hands on him. He doesn’t like it when strangers touch him.

“Shit! Grab him!”

“Watch out for his—”

“Can’t we just shoot the fucker?”

“Try not to fil him with holes boys. I’d like to do that myself.”

The response is lost amid the sounds of fabric ripping and grunts of pain. Seungcheol does his best, but he’s already taken too many blows to the head, his body isn’t working the way it should, and a hard clip to his jaw sends everything into a darkening whirlpool.

He holds on as long as he can, but it’s a day for failure.

Jihoon has always had the tendency to fixate on tasks to the exclusion of all other concerns. Completing a job, doing it well—he’s driven to be the best at everything he takes his hand to. It’s both an asset and a personal failing.

By rights he should be in bed right now, should never have dragged himself to his make-shift office after hours of coding, and Jin had argued strenuously about Jihoon getting some sleep. And may have had a point, too, considering Jihoon is struggling just to stay upright. But the code is almost finished, though, so that’s one more incentive to keep his shit together.

The primary reason, of course, being this… what he’s about to do.

Jihoon has spent a lot of his time fixating on Dr Raine’s code; building it up, modifying it—scraping obsolete components. Cracking the tight encryption on the laptops and assembling it piece by piece has been one of the greatest moments of his career as a hacker—and he can’t even tell anyone who understands coding a thing about it. Those he can share his success with—wouldn’t have the foggiest clue what he was talking about either.

That feeling of revelation, of understanding, of getting back home, has been the true motivating force for Jihoon on this task, and the obstacles surrounding the situation have only made the puzzle that much more enticing. From what he can tell, it’s greatly refined compared to the original one, harder to trace with more instantaneous results. He just needs to trial it on something—he has a target in mind.

Although he promised Seungcheol he’d keep his head low and not irk any of Namjoon’s men, he’s not prepared to be labelled a pushover. By anyone.

Jihoon is not a man given to resentment. It’s bad for his complexion, to say nothing of the equanimity needed for being a successful hacker. But all rules are merely guidelines, and exceptions must be made when called for. Exceptions such as that jerk, Min Yoongi.
Most of Namjoon’s men have been extremely hospitable since he’s arrived, but Jihoon has spent so much time around hitmen and criminals. Perhaps he’s beginning to think like one.

He has learnt that there are entire pockets of the world that operate under different rules than those he grew up with. Rules that are more about do than don’t. Rules that don’t just allow him to be more than he ever had been before but that actually encourage it. It’s his first taste of freedom, of control, and it’s addicting.

He attaches an external hard drive that has the completed code into one of his laptops. A few taps of the keyboard later, he has Min Yoongi’s life story at his fingertips.

The banking systems are simple enough for him to break into, even the more sophisticated accounts held in Hong Kong and Luxemburg. Jihoon siphons off the liquid funds and anonymously donates the money to various hospitals around the city, ones that specialize in treating Sexually transmitted diseases. He considers it an appropriate choice.

Yoongi’s physical properties are a little trickier. With Yoongi’s main residences, a couple of high-dollar homes in the city, he transfers the deeds over to two different banks, burying the records so deeply that it will be months if not years before anyone thinks to follow up on them. For the rest of Yoongi’s property, it proves far easier to alter the mortgage status on them. It means he has to hack into a completely different system, but well worth it in his opinion.

Finally, Jihoon turns his attention to the contact list on Yoongi’s cellphone. For that, he takes great satisfaction in sending out a series of inflammatory text messages. A few pointed statements are really all it takes to secure Yoongi’s fate.

It takes the better part of the early morning, but Yoongi has been reduced to an impoverished pariah by the time Jihoon sits down to an early breakfast. The man himself, of course, doesn’t know it yet, but Jihoon will enjoy bearing him the news.

Jihoon is sitting with his laptops spread out around him on every surface available, reviewing code, clacking away on his keyboards at the table.

It’s almost peaceful. Except.

“Jihoon!” Yoongi throws the door to his office room open with more attitude than the conversation warrants—at least in Jihoon’s opinion, anyway. It’s the first time that Jihoon’s seen him since him since their incident over dinner. The resentment catches him by surprise.

*Liability my ass…*

To his credit, Yoongi skips the pleasantries and goes straight to business. “What the fuck did you do?” He yells, striding up towards Jihoon’s desk.

Jihoon keeps his gaze on the monitor. A muscle in his jaw tics. “Hello Yoongi. How are you this fine day?” he retorts, but Yoongi is already talking over him.

“Stop fucking around and tell me what you did!”

Jihoon finally looks up, perversely enjoying the sight of Yoongi in all his irate glory. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
Yoongi points a long finger in Jihoon’s face. “You did something—with your little computer thing.” He goes on. “You stripped my bank accounts!” He accuses through gritted teeth.

Jihoon turns, outwardly composed even though his heart is jumping “Did I?”

“What’s going on here?” Namjoon says, standing outside the open door, watching them with frank interest.

And then the words all but explode into the air. “Jihoon did something,” Yoongi flings his arms out, as if to demonstrate, then immediately reels them back into a rigid self-hold. “He did something. I went to pay for lunch with my bank card—my card was declined. I just thought it was a pin error. I called the bank up and they told me the account was closed—all funds withdrawn yesterday!” He waves a hand in a cutting gesture, building up steam.

“I tried another bank account—the same. I went home to grab some cash and there were bailiffs outside the house—foreclosing on it! Because I haven’t been keeping up with my mortgage payments!”

Namjoon just looks back, implacable. “Well—maybe you shouldn’t have neglected the payments on your mortgage. God knows I pay you enough.”

“I didn’t even have a mortgage on that house! He—he did something.” Yoongi spits, giving Jihoon a sour, challenging look.

“How do you know it was him?”

“Because I checked with the bank where some of the funds had been secured. It was deposited in an account that belongs to the fake ID Hoseok set him up with.” Yoongi seethes.

Namjoon, bizarrely, seems to have the ghost of a smile on his lips. “Is this true Jihoon?” He sounds amused, not annoyed.

And resignation might be one thing, but Jihoon has never been one to accept a dressing down without comment. He forces his shoulders into a casual shrug. Well, Yoongi’s finances are Yoongi’s lookout. And if he wanted to keep all his parts in place he shouldn’t have called Jihoon a liability.

He risks showing his hand with this. “Who said it was me? Maybe somebody else doesn’t like you? Maybe I dunno—you got enemies who would do that to you. Yanno—chinks in the armour.

Liabilities, so to speak.” A small bit of grandstanding, he knows. The prudent thing would be to hold the guise of indifference, deny knowledge and leave them all completely unsuspecting. But a part of him, the rebellious impulse he’s kept tethered all these years, wants them to see. Wants somebody to know what he’s pulled off.

Yoongi goes pale, then red, breathing hard. “Undo it—whatever you did.”

Jihoon snorts without looking away from his screen. “Hmm—I dunno. That would be unfair to the hospital. They really appreciate that massive donation you made.” he scoffs and watches Yoongi’s chin thrust up.

“What!” Yoongi snarls.

Jihoon glances instinctively at Namjoon, whose face hasn't changed. “You know—the hospital, that treated you for the rampant syphilis you had.”

“I never had syphilis!” Yoongi is incredulous.
“Really? Cause, your medical records say otherwise.” Jihoon says, fixing him with a hard look. “In fact, according to your medical records—you’ve had almost every sexually transmitted disease imaginable. Good luck getting laid again.”

That part of him rejoices in the stunned widening of Yoongi’s eyes. Jihoon can see it in that dark gaze that has scorned, mocked, and dismissed him—Yoongi is astonished. And impressed.

“Aren’t those records confidential?” Namjoon asks curiously.

Jihoon turns to answer him, feeling that he is edging onto new, untested ground. “Normally yes. But maybe some good Samaritan notified everyone in Yoongi’s contacts list that he had all the STI’s under the sun and suggested that they get checked too. I wonder who that could have been?”

Yoongi has grown stiffer with each word, until that last revelation leaves him gawking, incredulous. He opens his mouth, possibly to scream in rage when Jimin pops his head around the door.

“Hey—Yoongi—what’s this about you having chlamydia? How can you just text me this? You should tell me in person.” Jimin’s voice is blithe, indifferent to the power struggle being waged.

Yoongi’s mouth shuts with a click, an indignant expression crowding out the hesitancy in his eyes. He turns to face Namjoon, who’s taken a seat on the edge of the couch. “Are you just gonna sit there and let him give me sexually transmitted diseases?”

Namjoon lifts his hands, the universal helpless gesture of a man out of his depth in the smiting arena. “Maybe you should just apologise for calling his boyfriend weak?”

“I’m not—WHAT?” Yoongi gazes at him a moment, the wheels turning. “Oh.” He fails at hiding his surprise, and with good reason. Jihoon’s never given anyone reason to think he gave Seungcheol more than a passing thought. But Yoongi recovers quickly and tries to spin some humour into his voice. “Seungcheol has peculiar taste, what with the size difference and all.”

Jihoon gives him one pointed look, then starts typing furiously into his laptop.

The smarmy confidence drops right off Yoongi’s face. “Oh god—oh god—stop what you’re doing. Stop it. I don’t know what you’re doing but stop typing!”

This time, Jihoon is the one sneering. “That doesn’t sound like an apology to me.”

To his credit, Yoongi looks startled. He’s not all veneer, he’s a real person under there. Jihoon knows that, but it’s still nice to see it. “I just thought you worked for the guy, I didn’t know you were together! I wouldn’t have said that—had I known.”

Jihoon gives a single derisive exhale, and turns away from Yoongi and goes back to typing. “I still don’t hear you saying sorry.” He sings songs.

Yoongi tries to stare Jihoon down, but Jihoon has that belittling expression on his face that beautifully conveys his disdain for dealing with irritations. “I’m sorry, okay. Seungcheol’s not weak.”

“And you called me a liability.” Jihoon pouts.

Yoongi sighs heavily. “And you’re clearly not a liability. You’re a dangerous asset. I get that now. Please—just—undo what you did.”

Jihoon scrunches his face up, unnerved by this first real compliment Yoongi has ever given him,
however questionable it may be. “I’ve relocated most of your finances to an offshore account. I’ll
give you the details later. When I feel like it.”

But he sees no hint of reprisal on Yoongi’s narrow face. Just plain acceptance. “And the messages—
about the STI’s—that I don’t have. Can you withdraw them?”

Jihoon smiles wanly to show how impossible that will be. Then drops the smile.

“Just for the record—Seungcheol’s not weak. He never was and never will be.” He doesn’t mean for
his voice to get so hard. Doesn’t even know where that razor-edged tone comes from, or where that
part of him has been hiding all these years. But he kind of likes it. “Just because he cares about
something, doesn’t make it a liability. Having something to care about—to live for, makes you
stronger, not weaker.”

Silence falls between them like lead. Jihoon is determined to let it lay there as long as necessary, but
it doesn’t take even a minute before Yoongi starts to fidget, teeth now gnawing his lip. “Fair
enough.” He says with a curt nod, before exiting the room a lot more calmly then when he entered.

Jihoon takes solace in have righted Seungcheol’s honour and manfully represses the urge to stick his
tongue out at Yoongi’s back. Mostly because Namjoon is watching with avid amusement.

He leans forward and lowers his tone confidentially. “That’s a neat little trick you’ve got up your
sleeve. But—me and Seungcheol go way back okay. Don’t pull that shit on me.”

Jihoon nods in acknowledgment. “I wouldn’t dream of—”

“Hold that thought,” Namjoon interjects, shifting slightly to pull his phone out of his right trouser
pocket. Jihoon can see the phone lighting up with an incoming call, but the displayed number means
nothing to him.

“Hello—I wasn’t expecting a call from you.” Namjoon drawls. Jihoon can hear the panicked voice
on the other end of the line.

Namjoon nods slowly. Then his face changes completely—his eyes sharpen, his jaw slackens. Then
suddenly he sits up straighter, giving the conversation his full attention. “What?”

Jihoon goes back to his work. The majority of his focus, however, is fixed on the one-sided
conversation next to him. He wonders who died. Because, in his experience, only death puts that
look on someone’s face.

“Slow down, what happened exactly,” Namjoon breaks off, clenching his jaw. “How?”

Namjoon slants him an indecipherable look for a long moment, before shifting his gaze away. “And
you’re sure? How long?” He sounds bleak, or maybe just distracted. Jihoon observes this little drama
from the corner of his eye while maintaining a steady wave of typing.

For just a second, he sees surprise in Namjoon’s face—surprise and something almost like panic.
Then it’s gone, covered up. It gives Jihoon a prickling feeling on the back of his neck, a hollow in
his belly. He hesitates on the keyboard.

Namjoon grunts in response to something said and hangs up without another word. His eyes are
expressionless, but the lines around his mouth are tight with tension.

Jihoon drums his fingers on the desk. It’s only then that he becomes aware of how his weight is
shifted to the edge of the seat, leaning forward to watch Namjoon. His weary dark eyes, his aura of
gloomy distraction.

He forces himself into a more neutral position, hands clasped in front of him. It’s so hard to stay calm when it feels like something inside of him is breaking. “So, what was that about?” He asks, trying for his least-confrontational tone.

Namjoon doesn’t respond right away.

More quietly, he says, “What the hell is going on, Namjoon?”

“That was Jeonghan.” Namjoon goes silent again, long enough for Jihoon to think he isn’t going to answer. And then… “Seungcheol’s been captured.”

Chapter End Notes

1) I WON'T ANGST FOR LONG
2) It's not really angst anyway....
3) I can imagine Jihoon getting turned away with a REAL ID "Sir, this ID is clearly fake..."
4) I had to slip in some phone smut there. Soz. But I had this idea for it and didn't know where I could fit it in.....XD
5) Feedback is appreciated.
Chapter Summary

Seungcheol in the thick of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seungcheol first regains consciousness while on the move. The walls shift around him, disorienting, even though his feet aren’t touching the ground. It takes him a moment to understand that he’s being carried, his body slung between at least three people with bruising grips.

“Oh, fuck,” he says, or would say, if his mouth weren’t taped shut. It comes out as a low, muffled groan, and one of the guards gives him a blindingly white smile and slaps him across the face.

Everything goes black. A few seconds at most, not long enough to qualify as losing consciousness. But by the time his senses come back online he’s vaguely aware of being forced into a chair, arms and legs bound in such a way as to prevent movement.

He knows he’s lost time, but he doesn’t know how much. Not enough to have been taken out of the city, though; of that he’s sure. He draws in a shaky breath, tries to assess the physical damage. Tightness in his chest: most likely a cracked rib, but it doesn’t feel like it’s broken or in danger of venting his lung. He thinks Jihoon would be pleased he’s looking on the bright side of things.

Oh God, Jihoon…..he needs to get out of here.

He twists his head to examine his surroundings.

An empty warehouse.

It’s a location he would approve of if he hadn’t been the one tied down—industrial tile floors make for easy cleaning. Although the fact that someone bolted the chair to the floor probably reduces the resale value.

They’ve ripped the tape off his mouth. Which is concerning. Wherever they’ve taken him, there’s obviously no worry about neighbours hearing what they shouldn’t, and Seungcheol knows from his own experiences that letting captives scream futilely into an empty room only breaks them down faster.

The whole situation could be better, to put it shortly.

Jihoon…..he might never see him again.

Seungcheol loses it, plain and simple. Even knowing that he’s letting dread get the better of him, there’s no stopping the primitive reaction. Desperate, panting breaths barely fuel the secretive keening that seeps out from behind clenched teeth. He thrashes against the restraints, manic and senseless like an animal caught in a trap, pulling at the straps until his joints ache and the skin of his wrists and ankles burn.
Seungcheol forces himself to breathe, to just calm the fuck down. He needs to deal with this—now, while he’s alone. There will probably only be this one chance. If he messes up, he’ll be stuck. Nobody knows he’s here. Nobody is coming for him.

He promised Jihoon they’d be together soon. He can’t break that promise.

He can’t let that happen.

He spends a few precious minutes concentrating on his breathing. It goes against his flight-or-fight instincts to just sit there, inactive during a hostile situation, but he’s regained enough sense to realize he won’t get far with hysteria driving his actions.

He runs through it like a checklist. First, stop hyperventilating. Check. Next, get out of the restraints. And then he can get the fuck out of there. Simple.

Or, it would have been, had he been alone for long enough.

The warehouse door creaks open, a splash of natural light reaching across the floor, and for a moment all he sees are silhouettes lurking in the doorway. Then the light slips back behind the door, silhouettes solidifying into two rough-hewn men with sour faces and pebble eyes.

Tweedles Dee and Dum he decides to call them could have been twins, sporting the same nondescript white button-downs with stained cuffs, black trousers and mismatched ties. They look every bit the definition of “thugs.”

“Well, well, well. Look what we have here.” Tweedle Dee says, coming to a stop in front of Seungcheol’s chair. He cracks his neck from side to side—it’s probably meant to be intimidating.

Seungcheol can’t resist rolling his eyes. The cliché of it all, really.

“Not so tough now are ya?” One of them says. So much bullshit posturing. Amateur.

Seungcheol bites down the urge to be a smart-ass and says, “True, I do seem to be incapacitated at the moment.” But then he really can’t help himself sometimes. “I’m sure all your friends that I’ve been busy killing all week would say differently.” He adds with a small private smile.

Tweedle Dum’s face burns an angry red and his nostrils flare with affront.

“But talk to him man, he’ll just piss you off. Remember, we’re just babysitting.” Tweedle Dee says. He’s the one with the functioning brain cell it seems. Just one mind you.

“That’s right, won’t be long now.” Tweedle Dum says leaning against the wall, and Seungcheol isn’t sure whether that's good or bad.

According to Seungcheol's internal clock, it must be nearing late afternoon when the man in the Cheap suit shows up.

He’s been sitting, strapped in the empty warehouse long enough that he’s exhausted his fantasies of what he'll do when he gets free, and all possible escape plans have been formulated, reviewed, and rejected.

He's been left with sporadic bouts of uncomfortable sleep and memories of Jihoon from days long
passed. Seungcheol wants nothing more than for this to be over so he can press his face into Jihoon’s warm neck and know he’s home.

Cheap suit doesn’t look like a Masquerader, but looks can be deceiving.

He isn’t a hitman Seungcheol recognizes, but that’s not unheard of. Unlike Jeonghan, who keeps a running profile of every criminal working in the city in a notepad somewhere, Seungcheol tends to stick with the same circles until those circles spin out.

“This him?” Cheap suit asks, tilting his head towards Seungcheol. Tweedle Dum and Dee nod in unison.

Cheap Suit thinks for a moment. Then he walks—strolls, really—across the space to stand in front of Seungcheol. It forces Seungcheol to tip his head back, to keep eye contact. He does it, and lets Cheap Suit stare into his face and think whatever thoughts he’s going to think.

There’s a long, long moment of silence. To Seungcheol it looks like Cheap Suit is deciding what to do next. That’s not good, because it means Cheap Suit is empowered to make his own decisions. The other two might be no more than goons, but Cheap Suit is a free agent.

The man has a handgun holstered across his chest, just peeking out from beneath his jacket. He pulls it out.

Seungcheol has a flash of what a mess the warehouse floor will be, his blood and brains everywhere.

He stops thinking and closes his eyes. He takes a last deep breath, steadies himself, and thinks of Jihoon.

Seungcheol isn’t sure if he believes in penance, if praying would be enough to take the stains off of his soul. His dad always said guilt was a wasted emotion, serving prison time wouldn’t bring back the dead, but maybe his death would bring more balance to the universe.

In the end, though, the gunshot he’s expecting doesn’t come and when he opens his eyes, Cheap suit is shrugging his jacket off and rolling up his sleeves.

“Not gonna lie, this is going to hurt.” Cheap suit says darkly, cracking his knuckles in a menacing fashion.

Despite himself, Seungcheol is a little relieved when the man removes the ring off his finger before he starts wailing on him.

He’s never been vain, but neither does he want to go through life with a face full of short, deep scars. Jihoon will say, “It gives you character,” or “You could do with looking uglier if I’m being honest.” Something sweet to cheer him up and he’ll kiss every scar tenderly, but Seungcheol would rather keep his unblemished face.

Then Cheap suit starts asking questions in between bruising punches.

The guy’s an amateur too it seems. What is with all these amateurs?

Cheap Suit isn’t very clever when it comes to extracting information. What he is, is brutal, persistent, and extremely goal-oriented. Whoever hired him is looking for a blunt instrument and nothing more.

He’s frustrated when Seungcheol tells him that he won’t reveal the location of the safe house for any amount of money, so he punches him for a while.
He’s frustrated that Seungcheol won’t tell him where Dr Raine and Jihoon are hiding, so he kicks him for a while.

“I’m not going to ask you again.” He threatens at one point.

Seungcheol can’t form words around the taste of blood in his mouth. He turns his head and spits. “Yes, you are. You probably have specific orders not to kill me. I know how it works.”

Cheap suit glowers. “You are still a useful bargaining chip, we could ransom you to another gang. I know there are a lot of people who would enjoy killing you personally. But we want Dr Raine found, and if you know his location it would be best to simply tell us.” He says, for possibly the millionth time.

Seungcheol barks out a breath of laughter. “Did you know that one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?”

Cheap suit and the Tweedle twins exchange glances that suggest they understand enough of what Seungcheol said to be insulted. Maybe more than one brain cell then, two brain cells between three people though.

Cheap suit storms up into Seungcheol’s face, pointing a shaking finger at him. “Listen here you little shit,” he seethes.

The monotony of his bluster is broken when Seungcheol spits a mouthful of blood and saliva on his face.

Seungcheol snorts, his reckless bad habits have become fine-tuned over the years.

Cheap suit is plain pissed about it, and wipes the spit off on the back of his hand—before using a crowbar to break Seungcheol’s wrist.

Seungcheol passes out, at some point after that.

The next time he comes around, he’s not alone.

The Decoy is there.

His hands are still tied to the chair arms and his broken wrist is bandaged—poorly. That was nice of them, *thoughtful* even.

Seungcheol can feel it twinge as broken bones grate against one another. Seungcheol can still see, a little, through the eye that hasn’t swollen completely shut.

The Decoy is lean and pale in a white shirt and tan trousers, a heavy black-strapped watch around his left wrist. He has faint circles under his eyes, his greasy hair is raked flat against the crown of his head. He’s as neat and contained and ultimately as transparent as a bottle of water. The first time Seungcheol saw him, he knew precisely he was the kinda of guy to sell his own mother for a higher position.

The guy thinks he’s in charge now—but Seungcheol’s not so sure about that.

“Apologies for the poor hospitality. But we’re very low on patience here.” The Decoy sounds almost sorry for him, and Seungcheol laughs, a little hysterically, he can admit.
The Decoy puts a hand on Seungcheol cheek, fingers pressing lightly against a deep bruise. Seungcheol hisses through his teeth, the shocked inhalation sending a fresh spear of pain through his cracked ribs.

"I suppose the men couldn’t control their excitement. Finally getting their hands on Choi Seungcheol." The Decoy acknowledges, prepared it seems to carry the conversation on his own for the moment. "I mean, I’ve heard a lot about you—but seeing you in the flesh—wow—You’re something else……

Seungcheol tunes him out for a while and nods politely at appropriate pauses, pretending to follow the conversation.

Hearing criminals monologue is torture.

And Seungcheol is intimately familiar with torture, so it’s not a facetious metaphor, more a statement of inescapable fact.

He uses the time to catalogue the man talking animatedly in front of him, to inspect the room, check everything and anything for weaknesses to exploit. Somebody has loosened the ropes around his wrists when the fingers on his swollen hand started turning blue and now all Seungcheol has to do is get the ropes free and his one working hand around a certain someone’s throat.

The Decoy seems to recognise what he’s doing, because there’s a drawn out silence and a hand tipping up his chin. “I monologued, didn’t I?”

Seungcheol blinks with his one good eye. “A little, yeah.”

A smile grows like a vine on the Decoy’s face. He stares down at Seungcheol, hands on his hips, and shakes his head. “It’s a shame we had to get off on the wrong foot, all over a little territory dispute.”

“I don’t give a shit about the territory. That’s not why I took your heads out.” Seungcheol admits.

The decoy flashes him a yellow grin. “Ahh—then this is about the code. About Dr Raine.”

Seungcheol shakes his head, dismissing the insinuation. “I don’t give a shit about him either.”

The Decoy doesn’t try to hide his confusion “If you don’t give a shit, why don’t you just tell us where he is?”

Seungcheol scoffs, as if things are that simple.

The Decoy seems to take that for the answer it is. A resounding no. He sighs heavily before speaking. “You know, me and you are quite alike Seungcheol.”

“I dunno about that. I have a prettier face.” Seungcheol says with an air of superiority. He refuses to be likened to someone who barely ranks above a street thug.

The Decoy’s eyes crinkle at the corners when he chuckles, it grates in Seungcheol's ears. "Maybe back in the club, but we’ve been a little heavy handed with you recently. You don’t look so good.” he says, dragging his fingertips along the bruised mess of Seungcheol’s face.

“I’m probably still prettier.” Seungcheol says, teeth catching on the sharp edges of a broken tooth. His lips are on fire, raw from being split open.
The Decoy gives off a heavy sigh and he crouches a little to put his face directly in Seungcheol’s sightline “Yeah. You are pretty.” he says, smoothing his thumb over Seungcheol’s lower lip, smearing blood. “Had so many plans for you.” He adds, grin slipping towards sleazy.

Seungcheol shakes his head. He’s flushed, he can feel it. He stops himself partway through forming a fist, forcing his fingers to unclench. The Decoy catches the aborted gesture, though, and makes no move to hide his delight at making Seungcheol lose a little bit of his cool.

“Such a shame we couldn’t come to some kind of agreement.” He murmurs.

Then he leans down, stares Seungcheol right in the eyes and cups the back of his neck. It’s weirdly tender and Seungcheol knows exactly what he’s thinking, what he’s about to do—so he head butts him first.

“Son of a bitch!” The Decoy recoils, hand flying up to his bleeding nose.

Seungcheol grins victoriously as the Decoy rummages around for a pocket handkerchief, trying to rein in his temper. There’s blood running down his face, a steady drip of red painting his chin.

“Didn’t think you could get any uglier. I was wrong.” Seungcheol laughs.

The man growls, and strides to the door. He calls out for two of his lackeys to come back to the room and the heavy door swings open as Tweedle Dum and Dee walk into view.

They take one look at Seungcheol, then at the Decoy trying to staunch his bleeding nose and grin. They’re actually happy he’s hurt—a revelation.

“Don’t just stand there. Rough him up.” The Decoy says, jerking his head towards Seungcheol. He backs off, but he doesn’t go very far.

And just like that they begin beating him again. New bruises layer over old ones. It feels like his whole body is one massive nerve, everything bright with pain.

The Decoy seems content to stand and watch, as if it's a lazy afternoon on his back porch and he’s waiting for the sun to set. Seungcheol doesn’t know why the Decoy doesn’t just rough him up himself.

But the man is careful to keep his distance, and Seungcheol gets the feeling he’s a little out of his depth, a little fussy, maybe a little phobic. Not the type to get his own hands dirty.

He even snaps at Tweedle Dum when he hits Seungcheol around the face too many times, then corrects himself—even the low level lackeys—frighten him. Maybe they should. A man should be afraid of what he abuses. What he can’t control.

“Enough. Leave us.” The decoy calls them off after a moment.

Seungcheol catches Tweedle Dum and Dee exchanging suspicious glances; they don't like the being told what to do by him. Nevertheless, they leave them alone and walk out of the warehouse once more.

The Decoy doesn’t start talking right away, he begins to pace a tight path in front of Seungcheol’s chair. Brow furrowed, deep in thought.

“Seungcheol.”

He snaps back to attention and winces. Were the lights this bright before?

The Decoy asks him something, but Seungcheol blinks, not sure if he understands the question. His ears are ringing and he’s lost a fair amount of blood from what he can tell, it’s filling his mouth, dripping down his chin and soaking the front of his shirt through. He's more numb than anything, and he's starting to feel chilled.

Then the Decoy is back to standing in front of him, his air of upbeat determination already exhausting to Seungcheol even before the Decoy talks.

“A lot of the guys just want me to put a bullet in your head and be done with it. But I know you’re more useful alive. Do yourself a favour, tell me where your safe house is, give me Dr Raine and all this pain will stop.”

Seungcheol just smiles back through a mouthful of blood. It’s weak—but it’s the best he’s got. “I’m not stupid. That’s not how this works. I give you anything and you’d just wipe out my guys and probably put a bullet in me anyway. So, I ain’t telling you shit.” He says, before coughing. The blood is warm and thick in his mouth, sliding down his chin.

The Decoy levels a steady look at him. “These kind of arrangements always have a small degree of collateral damage, but I can assure you no further harm will come to you.”

Seungcheol shakes his head, regretting it almost instantly. His vision swims.

It’s a stay of execution in one sense. But there’s more at stake than just a continued heartbeat. “I’d rather take the bullet, thanks.”

The Decoy narrows his eyes and hardens his tone, “Your integrity is noble, but misguided,” he says. “What is that expression – ‘no loyalty among thieves.’ I’m certain any one of your men would sell me your secrets in a heartbeat if they were in your place.”

“Not my guys, never.” Seungcheol insists, and he knows it’s true too.

The Decoy studies him for a beat. “Perhaps.” His hand drifts tenderly down Seungcheol’s chest, pausing just above his belt.

The urge to jerk away makes Seungcheol’s hands twitch, his wrist ache. Sends his entire body in revolt against itself. It would be the perfect opportunity to take him out – head-butt him again, to the stomach, knee to the groin, knocking him out – if Seungcheol could just think past the quivering, nauseating pain in his gut.

The Decoy sighs heavily and lifts his hand. “You’re not giving me a lot to work with here.” He titters, sliding a hand through Seungcheol hair, scraping his nails along his scalp, then wrenching his head back. “Don’t be so stupid. Or is it in your nature to be deliberately obtuse when somebody is offering to bargain with you? What I’m suggesting here is an agreement to appease both sides.” He says with the utmost gravity. As if he knows a damn thing about what Seungcheol wants.

The guy really is out of his depth.

“You’re in no position to make agreements. You’re not even in charge here.” Seungcheol says, unable to contain himself any longer.

The Decoy gives Seungcheol a puzzled look. He grips his hair a little tighter, tugs just hard enough
to remind Seungcheol of his position. “Look around Seungcheol—I think you’ll find I am in charge. This is my territory now. My empire, my gang, my men.”

Seungcheol’s laughter is painful, but worth it.

The Decoy narrows his eyes at Seungcheol's smile. “You find something amusing?”

Seungcheol licks his lips, considering how best to phrase his answer. “A few guys you had no hand in killing, are out of the picture and you think that makes you boss? That’s not how it works. Hardly seems like you earned it. So I’m just wondering,” He pauses, tilts his head, makes a noise that manages to perfectly convey inevitability. “When will your ‘men’ figure out that you’re hardly qualified for the job of leading them, and take you out.”

The only response he gets is a flat stare.

Seungcheol continues. “So you see, even if I make some deal with you—it’s just a deal with you. There’s no saying the rest of your gang will go along with it.” Seungcheol supplies triumphantly, loving the look of utter surprise on the Decoy’s face.

The Decoy glowers back but ultimately capitulates. “Fine. Have it your way. You leave me no choice.”

Chapter End Notes

1) Short chapter. Because....it's hard to cover both Jihoon and Seungcheol's POV in the same chapter without things blurring.
2) Yes, it's not a very upbeat chapter either.....things will get better.
3) I WON'T ANGST FOR LONG.
4) Jihoon's POV next.
5) Feedback always appreciated!!
“Seungcheol has been captured.”

Namjoon’s announcement hits like a bolt of lightning, a searing flash of hellfire followed by deafening silence. Jihoon has to turn his eyes away from the sympathy on Namjoon’s face, the finality he sees there.

Everything inside of Jihoon goes tight and cold. He sits perfectly still for a moment, and everything around him is quiet, even his own mind.

He leans forward, grasping the edge of the desk tightly and trying to push down the panic.

Seungcheol has been captured.

It was bound to happen eventually. Too many chances taken, too many attempts at cheating fate. It just doesn't seem possible, and it sure as hell isn't fair.

Jihoon leans forward in his chair and pushes down the sickened despair that threatens to deposit his breakfast all over the floor.

He takes a moment to compose himself. A pulse thuds in his head; he can actually hear it ringing in his ears. “When? How did—why?”

“He went missing last night.” Namjoon cuts him off before he can get any further, his voice suitably grave. “He was wrapping things up by himself. Taking care of a target at a hot location and was overwhelmed. For one reason or another, he didn’t call for back up. Police were called to the area so Jeonghan couldn’t move in till they left and by then they—he was gone.” Namjoon finishes solemnly.

“Who—who has him?” he asks, refusing to give voice to the terror that is screaming inside of him.

“They’re sure it’s the Masqueraders. It might not be—but,” Namjoon shrugs his shoulders. Jihoon can hear the prevarication in his words, the reluctant apology in his tone.

So, maybe the Masqueraders, which covers a lot of possibilities. It's not much to go on.

“Jeonghan was vague and maybe he doesn’t trust me with all the details, but I suspect it’s because he just doesn’t have all the facts.” Namjoon guesses.

Jihoon’s fingers tighten around the desk and his mind gives a curious dizzying lurch, one that makes
him blink away black spots that swim before his eyes. He cushions his head between his forearms and tries to figure out how they came to this moment.

It all started with this stupid fucking code.

Or was it before that? When he had a flat tyre on a deserted highway and met Seungcheol for the first time.

Maybe even before that; Seungcheol watching his father die fourteen years ago.

The cycle repeating itself. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Still, Jihoon realizes in that moment how painfully unprepared he truly is for this.

Sometimes disasters happen in increments: you can see the first domino fall. Sometimes you can step in and stop the cascade, other times you just stand and watch helplessly. Jihoon has lived most of his life watching things change around him with little response to his actions. He’s gotten used to letting things happen as an observer, always under the notion that there is somebody else out there to act when he doesn’t.

Jihoon rubs his hand over his mouth, his eyes. He leans back in the seat, letting his hands fall against his knee. Looking back, he can see that first domino. And from the centre, as he is now, he can almost see the last one, too.

Somebody needs to step in.

“You know his crew are working round the clock looking for him, they won’t stop till they find him.” Namjoon assures.

Jihoon doesn’t lift his head. "I know." He whispers.

And it’s true, they’re probably doing everything they can but it's little comfort at times like this when Seungcheol is missing and Jihoon feels like he’s half a continent away.

Standing back becomes less of an option with each minute that passes. When he can’t be assured of Seungcheol’s safety, Jihoon can’t stand back and wait for someone else to act.

A hand rests on his shoulder. “Maybe you should get some rest, you look like you could use some sleep. Go upstairs and sleep it off, I’ll update you if we hear anything.” Namjoon suggests.

“Sleep?” Jihoon looks up finally, eyes narrow with bitterness.

“Yeah, sleep.” Namjoon repeats in the same tired voice. “You look exhausted Jihoon and I know this is a difficult time, but you need to look after yourself to help cope with the loss.”

“LOSS?” Jihoon says and he makes the word sound vaguely insulting. “Don’t talk about him like it’s official. He’s not dead.” He snaps, standing up quickly.

“Not yet.” Comes Namjoon’s brash reply.

The words are like a slap, and Jihoon realizes he can taste blood on his tongue where he's bitten his own lip.

Namjoon squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, running a hand across his face “I didn’t mean it like that, I shouldn’t have said that.”

Even still, his assertion is a clear shot across the bow, and Jihoon has to work to keep his demeanour
steady. “You’re right. You shouldn’t have. Seungcheol’s alive.” He insists.

“Yes, he is. Of course.” Namjoon says, looking apologetic. Jihoon’s not entirely sure how much of it is feigned and how much is genuine. He wonders if it really matters since sometimes Namjoon seems to wear emotions like hairstyles, one stiff breeze and they make way for something completely different.

Jihoon turns away to pace a tight path beside the desk. “Okay.” he says, breathing out. He feels a wave of tension leave his body. “So, what are our options. You’ve dealt with situations like this before. What are we going to do next?”

“We are not going to do anything.” Namjoon says simply, quick and certain.

Jihoon’s hands clench into fists at his sides. ”What? Why?” If it sounds like more of a demand than a question Namjoon doesn't seem to notice.

“It’s not my fight.” Namjoon says automatically, as if he's already given it considerable thought. The knee-jerk anger rises first, a hot flush that scalds his lungs and shoots up his throat. Jihoon catches it in his mouth, and it fades to sour dust. “You can’t be serious. You can’t just leave him with those guys. They’re going to kill him.” Or worse.

He expects a considerate response. He doesn’t expect the refusal—the open rejection—that spreads across Namjoon’s face with each word. It’s on the tip of Jihoon's tongue to say, fuck you, to walk out on his own—but that is stupid. He can't afford to be stupid now. He needs Namjoon’s help, he needs to get back to the city, he needs to get in touch with some people they can trust, who can shed some light.

“Listen, Jihoon. My agreement was too harbour you—not to get involved. I have my own enemies to fight, I don’t need more.” Namjoon explains.

His face is perfectly reasonable, not angry or passive-aggressive. And that’s Namjoon all over. He’s got the whole thing weighed out, what matters and what doesn’t, what makes sense for him. It’s all rational and sensible and in the worst possible taste. Selfish.

“Fuck your agreement! This changes things!” The words tumble out, weighed down by all the emotions he can’t give proper voice to.

Namjoon shakes his head determinedly. He pulls out his phone, types something, says nothing. Jihoon watches him for a quiet minute, it becomes apparent he has no intention to intervene. “You can’t just stand by! You need to do something Namjoon!”

“You stick with people as long as they’re useful, as long as they stay ahead of the game. Seungcheol is falling behind—that’s not my problem.” Namjoon mutters, still typing away on his phone.

Jihoon reaches for the phone and tosses it aside so he can’t avoid him. “How can you say that? Seungcheol is your friend.” He watches the tiniest wince roll across Namjoon’s face and latches onto that crack in the stubborn façade.

“It’s one of the few friendships you got and you’re turning your back on it? You’re a fucking coward!” The rebuke is out before Jihoon can stop it, sharp with annoyance.

Namjoon looks up from beneath his brows. “You’re angry, and upset so I’m going to let you off this time for disrespecting me.” He says, fixing Jihoon with a hard look.
Bitterness wells up, spurs Jihoon on. “Fuck that! I’m not disrespecting you, I’m stating a fucking fact! You’re being a coward.” Jihoon spits, waving at the tension-fraught space between them.

Jesus Christ, his hands are shaking. He takes a step back and folds his arms across his chest.

There’s a vein pulsing in Namjoon's forehead. Jihoon's fairly sure it’s a sign of an impending aneurysm, but at this point, there's not much he can do about it without backing down, and he has no intention of doing that.

“I’ll say whatever the hell I want about you, and you won’t do a damn thing about it. You know why? You have the man power to do something but you’re too chicken shit to step outside the house into the real world! All because of what? Getting shot! Boo-fucking hoo! That’s life. It comes with your job—you said so yourself.”

Namjoon looks taken aback, but only for a moment. “It’s not about that! This isn’t my fight Jihoon!” he slices a hand through the air. A final, definitive movement.

Jihoon shakes his head sadly. “If you’re afraid to do anything, I will!” he spits.

He grabs the first five things that he can’t live without: his main laptop, his cell, his wallet, his glasses and his keys.

Namjoon hovers awkwardly in the periphery of his vision. “Once you leave, you leave Jihoon. Nobody’s going to chase after you.” He calls out. But he still follows Jihoon when he bounds over to the door and swings it open.

It takes Namjoon an extra beat to catch up. By then, Jihoon has his cell open and is sorting through the various contingency numbers stashed away. It provides an excellent excuse to avoid eye contact as Namjoon closes in, aggression boiling off of him like steam.

“You can’t go Jihoon, it’s not safe.” Namjoon snaps, voice as sharp as Jihoon has ever heard it.

Jihoon can’t resist a sharp look of his own. “Try and stop me.” He challenges. He throws on every ounce of rigid indifference he possesses, but it’s a paper-thin veil instead of the mantle of defence he longs for.

He grabs Jihoon’s arm as he strides down the corridor, dropping his voice to a quiet hiss. “The smart thing would be to wait here until his crew get more information.” He breaks off, visibly gathering the reins on his temper before he can continue. “Don’t be stupid and throw yourself in the firing line. That’s the last thing Seungcheol would have wanted.”

Jihoon forces himself to stop, take a breath, and compose himself into something casual, less frantic.

“Don’t stand there and pretend you know what he would have wanted. You know nothing about him. Not a damn thing. You think you’re both in this business a long time, know each other and that makes you think alike. He’s NOTHING like you. Seungcheol’s got a spine. He did all this because he wanted out and had something to lose. You have nothing but your mansions and your money. Well I hope you fucking choke on it!” It takes the last dregs of his willpower to force the words out. He tries to jerk his arm out of Namjoon’s grasp. The hand on his elbow is unyielding, hard fingers sinking in to his bones as he’s forcefully swung back around.

“I promised him I wouldn’t let you leave! I promised him to keep you here, regardless of—”

Namjoon starts to argue but fades off, staring. It takes Jihoon a while to feel the hot trails on his face, but it’s the pity in Namjoon’s gaze that makes him realize he’s crying.
He closes his eyes, and still the tears stream free. He waits for the relief that’s supposed to come—
isn’t crying supposed to make people feel better? Instead, he feels that pressure in his chest, still building and building until it might climb up his throat and choke him.

An awkward hand settles onto his shoulder. To Jihoon, it has the weight of lead, but he still leans into it, lets himself curl into the rigid half-embrace Namjoon offers.

He’s just so tired.

“It’s not supposed to end like this. He was gonna get out.” Jihoon sobs.

Namjoon sighs heavily and nods, and Jihoon thinks maybe, just maybe, he’s gotten through.

“Oh, okay. We’ll find him,” Namjoon says once more. “We’ll find him.”

Namjoon encourages him to get some much needed sleep while he plans, but they both know the likelihood of that happening is zero to nil.

In spite of that, Jihoon retreats to his room to give the man thinking space. He needs thinking space of his own to go over the pieces.

He’s still well beyond anxious—but he’s also exhausted, and the whole thing has taken on a loopy, surreal quality.

The headache he can handle. He’s used to those. And he didn’t have much of an appetite to lose, but he grabs something to eat from the kitchen anyway, he’ll need the energy. The food is bland but he eats fast, realizing as he does it that he is ravenous. He hadn't eaten since morning, and it’s almost 4 pm.

Jihoon glances at his watch and does some mental math. Seungcheol’s has been missing for almost half a day.

A lot can happen in half a day.

Laying on the bed and staring at the ceiling, he tries to keep his thoughts and feelings carefully blank. It’s hard. Seungcheol is probably injured, most likely bleeding, maybe scared.

But he’s alive.

Jihoon refuses to think otherwise, refuses to lose Seungcheol. No matter what, Seungcheol’s alive.

It’s what Jihoon needs to believe. Because anything else is unbearable.

He manages to run a GPS trace on Seungcheol’s cell phone, but given its location at the bottom of the city river, Jihoon's sincerely hoping Seungcheol is no longer in possession of the phone.

He systematically tries contacting each member of Seungcheol’s crew. He makes a few calls. (A lot of calls.) Casual enquiries. (A thorough and methodical search of all Seungcheol’s known contacts.) It’s nice to have somewhere to aim his energies when his thoughts take a sullen turn.

But nobody answers.

It might be deliberate.
Jihoon starts to think he’s going to have to send up smoke signals. Possibly by burning Namjoon’s mansion to the ground.

He runs himself through endless cycles of “They know what they’re doing, everything is okay. They’re not picking up because they’re busy looking for Cheol.” interspersed with the memory of Seungcheol limping home one night with a broken nose and cracked ribs.

He turns the TV on and stares blankly at the screen only because he refuses, on principle, to sit about his room tapping his fingers against every surface they come into contact with.

When his phone rings half an hour later, the display reads ‘Mingyu’ and Jihoon answers before it’s through the first ring. When Jihoon speaks, he says, quietly and very measuredly, "ABOUT FUCKING TIME! I’M FREAKING OUT OVER HERE!"

“I can’t talk for long Jihoon.” says Mingyu, driving at full speed somewhere, judging by his clipped tone and the ambient noise almost drowning out his voice.

“Nobody is picking up my calls.” Jihoon croaks. His voice is plaintive, angry, and desperate

There’s a pause. He can hear Mingyu taking that on board. “I’m sorry—Hannie told us not to. Told us to keep you out of it.” He says.

Jihoon makes a fist and presses it to his forehead. “Then why did you call me?”

“I felt bad for ignoring you. And—I guess I thought you could do something smart that we haven’t thought of yet. Boss always said you were really smart.” Mingyu says, not so much stating the fact as testing the idea out, hoping for confirmation.

Jihoon understands his situation, and his own lack of perspective. He’s got to get his head on right again. “I want to do something—but I don’t have any information to work with here. I need more information Mingyu!”

“I don’t have anything concrete Jihoonie. We’re chasing down leads but the Masqueraders have businesses all over the city. He could be anywhere.”

From Mingyu’s tone—measured, restrained, impersonal—Jihoon knows this isn’t going to be a best-case scenario. This is actually going to be very, very bad.

Grief and frustration hits him like a sledgehammer, and it takes all of his concentration to avoid doubling over in despair. Yes, he had expected this, prepared. But nothing could have made him ready for this actual moment. Just breathe, he tells himself, breathe through the pain.

“Where are you guys? Are you at the safe house?” Jihoon knows he sounds a little (perhaps a lot) desperate, and Mingyu’s response is firm, but gentle.

“I can’t tell you. Jihoon, you can’t come here.”

Jihoon’s throat feels tight and hard, as if there is a fist clenched around it. “Listen Mingyu, I’m coming home. So you can tell me where you are or I can drive around to each place I know and check.” He threatens, even if the shakiness in his voice betrays him a little.

There’s a moment of silence, and Jihoon wonders if Mingyu can hear his heart pounding over the phone. Mingyu sighs heavily before he caves. “We’re at Seungcheol’s house. I gotta go Jihoon, Hannie’s just pulled up.”
He hangs up, leaving Jihoon feeling utterly alone.

Jihoon presses the phone to his forehead, closes his eyes, and bottoms out. He’s still lying like that when his phone rings again.

“Hello?” He answers quickly, hopefully.

“Don’t recognise my number? Interesting considering you spent a lot of time sending fake messages from it today.” Yoongi says blandly.

Jihoon sighs. “I was expecting somebody else.”

“Who? Your boyfriend? That’s not likely now, is it?” Yoongi snarks.

Yoongi’s words rankle along Jihoon's spine like a physical chill. “Did you just call to rub that in my face.”

“No, I--” Yoongi hesitates, then sighs over the line. “Be ready in five minutes, I’m taking you back to the city while Namjoon makes arrangements.”


“Yes—me. You’re still a target and you’re going to need protection. Apparently, that’s me.” His tone is light, but he leaves a pause after saying it.

“Okay, I just need to pack.” Jihoon says. He tucks the phone into his shoulder, and starts pulling on clothes, mentally making a list of what he needs to take, what can be left behind.

“And for the love of god put down the laptops. If you need to bring something, bring one—not five.”

Jihoon stares at the five laptops he has sitting out ready to be packed. “How did you--”

“Four minutes!” Yoongi says and hangs up.

Jihoon stares at the phone, thinking, not for the first time, that Yoongi is kind of a scary bastard.

He puts on his sweater, grabs his stuff, and heads down to the car.

Yoongi knows better than to work with amateurs. He does. He also knows what happens when you stick your neck out for people, and he prides himself on having a well-honed sense of self-preservation. Ask anyone in the crime business, and they’ll tell you: Yoongi looks after himself first, and everyone else a distant second.

So Yoongi has no reasonable explanation for why he’s currently chaperoning a tiny man who seems to fancy himself a cross between a Human Marshmallow and Steve Jobs, or whatever is the Korean equivalent.

Yoongi shouldn’t, by all rights, be babysitting anyone— but there’s too narrow a line between notoriety and notoriousness in the criminal world. A rare skill set commands high prices, yes, but it also draws high bounties on a man’s head.

Jihoon’s desirable talent for hacking, combined with Seungcheol’s criminal background, has all but painted a target on his back and Yoongi has no desire to see the kid dead.
That would be a waste.

Things might not be all puppies and rainbows between them, but Jihoon’s parlour trick with his finances had earned him a certain level of respect from Yoongi.

*Reluctant* respect.

He’s still a little pissed about the non-stop messages he’s been getting from his contacts about his supposed fictional STI’s. Jimin’s not talking to him till he gets checked at a clinic for fucks sake. Honestly!

“This car is *too* large.” Jihoon says suddenly from the passenger seat.

Yoongi spares him a glance. “What are you talking about? This is an average sized car.”

Jihoon turns to give Yoongi a flat look, “It’s too large. I can’t see out of the windscreen.”

“That’s because you’re sma—“ Yoongi coughs, ostentatiously letting the opportunity go by. Today’s not a good day for him to be himself, Namjoon had advised. Jihoon is hypersensitive. “What kind of car do you have then?” He asks instead.

Jihoon’s smile is genial. “A smart car.” His voice is quiet but proud.

“Figures.” Yoongi snarks automatically.

Jihoon seems inordinately pleased by that, and Yoongi shakes his head. He didn’t mean it as a compliment. He should clarify himself. “Smart cars are *stupid*.”

It’s instinct really, but Jihoon isn’t smiling anymore. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He spits out. He reminds Yoongi of a cat with its back up, all hiss and raised hackles, waiting for the barest excuse to sink a claw into someone.

“It means, that car is bad for my image. It’s embarrassing.” He clarifies. He agreed with Namjoon to be more compassionate with Jihoon today, but some things have to be said out loud.

“How does anybody take you seriously when you drive that thing around. Actually—this explains a lot.” He says, watching as Jihoon’s expression ticks over into a series of emotions: hurt, confusion, misery. Fury. The fury wins outs, turning the contours of Jihoon’s face into planes of ice. “Don’t talk about my baby like that. My car has been nothing but good to me. It can handle a lot and it saved my life once. Sure, it’s not big and flashy and imposing—but it fits me perfectly and I don’t have to jack the seat up ridiculously to see through the windscreen.”

Yoongi draws in a breath, and lets it out slowly. He deliberately breaks out of his professional mask, the impatient dickhead attitude that he knows rubs everyone in all the wrong ways. “I guess *it is* a surprisingly fast car, despite its size.” He offers like a tentative truce.

Jihoon nods gallantly. “I know! It is! And it’s fuel efficient and energy efficient and has a great miles per gallon. It’s also incurs zero road tax.” He babbles.

“Hmm. You’re—very proud of it.” Yoongi says, feeling that he is edging onto new, untested ground.
“Yeah. Seungcheol picked it for me.” Jihoon says. His voice is quiet, and he sounds younger than he has at any point in this already long day.

Yoongi just stares helplessly at the crack in Jihoon’s features.

Marshmallow Steve Jobs really is too sentimental for his own good.

Seungcheol is as good as dead. That’s Yoongi’s estimation anyway.

He doesn’t like the idea of laying it out in black and white to Jihoon while he’s looking so desperate, but there is a certain degree of inevitability with this life. These things happen. Jihoon needs to wake up and smell the dead body.

And yet…

There’s something worrying in the way Jihoon clings on to hope, and Yoongi finds himself wanting to tell him the sharp truth of it. He keeps quiet; he doesn’t think anything he says will have much effect on Jihoon’s outlook anyway. Seungcheol’s survival and their relationship are already too ingrained in him, and Yoongi can admire the dedication it inspires at the same time he’s glad it’s not him that’s so caught up in that vicious circle of denial.

Yoongi wonders when they do find Seungcheol dead, if the next few days will be a suicide watch for Jihoon.

If so, it might be better to just hand the man his own gun because Yoongi doesn’t know the first thing about managing someone else’s pain. Unless inflicting it counts.

As if reading his thoughts, Jihoon says, “I know you don’t think Seungcheol’s alive. But he is.” Steel and certainty echo in his voice.

“I didn’t say anything—“ Yoongi begins.

“But you’re thinking it.” Jihoon interjects sharply. “And if you’re gonna keep thinking it—I’d rather you drop me off and leave.”

Jihoon’s voice is steel, and Yoongi can’t help but feel a shiver of respect for Jihoon like this.

Yoongi’s not accustomed to being lost for words. He’s the smooth talker. He always knows what to say. For the first time in his life, he doesn’t even know where to start.

They drive in weighted silence for a few minutes before he can think of anything.

“You’re probably right. You know him better than me after all. I’m sure we’ll find him.” He assures, or tries for an assuring tone at least.

The expressions on Jihoon’s face flicker too quickly for him to parse. “Thanks.”

Marshmallow Steve Jobs, not so marshmallow it seems.

Jihoon might not know all the ins and outs of the shady side of this life yet, but Yoongi suspects he’ll learn quickly. If he sticks around long enough—and if Seungcheol is alive to teach him, it’s more likely than not—they’re going to become a force to be reckoned with.

This isn’t the first gang conflict Yoongi has been dragged into and he won’t be the last, but at least Yoongi knows what to expect from the hardened criminals like the Masqueraders.
Hackers like Jihoon are something else entirely, and all he knows is that their criminal world is on the brink of changing in ways both brilliant and terrifying.

When they arrive at the Seungcheol’s house, everyone has gathered there.

Mingyu’s standing watch outside. He doesn’t even show any surprise when Jihoon shows up, but practically convulses as Yoongi steps out of the car too.

“I’m—I’m—I’m—” He stutters.

“You’re going to pat me down for weapons and relieve me of them.” Yoongi finishes for him.

Mingyu nods carefully. He seems to be warring with himself; whether to frisk Yoongi or avoid that death trap all together.

“Well—get on with it then.” Yoongi says, lifting his arms.

Jihoon walks around them and into the house.

It’s been a while since he’s been here and he observes his surroundings with the expression of a man trapped in his own thoughts. He feels hollow. Shaken.

Seungcheol’s house is a bit of a mess, by Jihoon’s standards. Clothes, empty cans and an array of weapons left lying around pay tribute to the owner’s devil-may-care attitude.

No sign of packing or preparations to be gone. Seungcheol obviously left that morning with a view to returning later.

Jihoon feels silly, mooning like an adolescent in a house full of Seungcheol’s stuff. There’s nothing to gain from it but hurt, but Jihoon is desperate for a piece of history or habit to treasure, some new bit of information he could use.

When he walks into the living area, Hoshi and DK are stunned to see him, but underneath it, relieved. Jun and Minghao acknowledge him with a small nod, smiling at him but caught up listening to some information over the radio.

Jeonghan, who’s leaning over some maps on the table, jerks upright, brows raising. “Jihoon! What are you doing back here?” he says, tone somewhere between exasperation and relief.

“What were you expecting me to do? Luxuriate in Namjoon’s villa while Seungcheol was captured? Thanks for keeping me out of the loop by the way. That was helpful. I feel great.” He says bitterly.

Jeonghan’s shoulders loosen as sympathy softens the sharp curiosity from his face. “Jihoon, I’m not going to apologise for that. Seungcheol sent you away for a reason. You shouldn’t be here, it’s too dangerous.” He says, shaking his head as Jihoon steps further into the room.

Jihoon can feel Yoongi’s presence behind him. He looks at the man closest to him, Wonwoo, who’s now got 9mms in both hands, neither of them pointing at him, and realizes everyone’s gaze has focused over his shoulder at Yoongi.

A second later he hears the unmistakable sound of several firearms being drawn and cocked.
Jeonghan’s lips tighten and he visibly stiffens as Yoongi steps through the doorway.

“I believe it’s customary to offer guests beverages when they visit. Not wave guns in their faces.” Yoongi drawls, raising his hands in lazy surrender. “I take my coffee with milk and no sugar—but maybe you guys do it differently down here. You’re probably tea drinkers or something.” He says, stepping right up to the gun Jeonghan has trained on him. He sounds peevish. But not frightened, not to be deterred anyway.

Jihoon blinks at the sudden stand-off in astonishment. “Can we show a little more diplomacy? Yoongi came with me. To help.”

“Help?” Jeonghan laughs, an edge to it Jihoon hates.

“Yes, Namjoon has agreed to send back up.” Jihoon clarifies.

Jeonghan’s gaze narrows, he’s giving Yoongi a critical look, from head to toe.

“You’re going to help us?” Jeonghan says, in a clarifying tone. He doesn't quite seem to believe it. Nobody does. If it’s possible, more guns are drawn.

Yoongi gives them a thin smile. “Namjoon didn’t send me here to just chaperone this midget. I was under the impression that Seungcheol was missing and couldn’t be located. He is missing isn’t he?” He challenges. Jihoon winces, avoiding Jeonghan's questioning eyes.

Yoongi’s attitude isn’t exactly helping smooth over his sudden arrival.

Jihoon knows Jeonghan is going to push for an explanation, but there’s still a small part of Jihoon that hopes to dodge this, that Jeonghan will trust him enough to back down. Best-case scenario—they’ll fight about this later. Worst-case, everyone is armed……

“We need the resources, and Namjoon has considerable fire power we could use.” Jihoon says, but there's a wariness in Jeonghan’s expression that doesn’t falter.

“And Bantang are suddenly feeling generous? Offering to help out when there’s nothing in it for them? How very kind of them.” Jeonghan’s voice all but bleeds sarcasm.

Jihoon wants to take Jeonghan and shake him, so he forces himself to concentrate on keeping his distance on one side of the kitchen's spacious island, fists clenched at his side to stop from smashing something he'll regret later.

Yoongi, on the other hand, just smiles like a man with a secret. “Who says we don’t gain anything from this?” He announces cryptically, stepping right up into Jeonghan’s face.

The air chills a fraction.

Jeonghan, thankfully holsters his weapon. Jihoon notes that nobody else does the same.

“Whatever agreements Jihoon has made with Namjoon don’t apply to us. Jihoon’s not part of this crew. He doesn’t speak for the rest of us.” Jeonghan says.

Jihoon is already moving to the table, feeling the sting of Jeonghan’s comment even though, logically, he knows it isn't intended as such.

Yoongi snorts and waves him off, side stepping him to approach the table, heedless of the triggers that follow his movements. “It’s simple really. Namjoon doesn’t benefit from Seungcheol losing
power. He would have to build relationships with a completely new faction if that happened. And Jihoon has demonstrated a few skills that have perhaps—persuaded him to help.”

“And what skills would these be exactly?” Jeonghan says, crossing his arms and giving Jihoon his full attention. His scepticism has entirely faded, leaving only irritation and distrust.

Jihoon shrugs, but the gesture isn't half so careless as he intends. It's a fair question but he’s suddenly tired of this conversation and Jeonghan’s defensive expression. They’re arguing semantics instead of confronting the real issue at hand.

“Can we stop arguing about why he’s here and who’s got what to gain, and focus on what’s important. We need all the help we can get and if Namjoon is offering to get Seungcheol back I don’t give a flying fuck what anyone here thinks.”

The announcement slices through the growing standoff between them and charges the air with fresh urgency. Jeonghan goes quiet, considering his words or arguing silently for all that Jihoon can tell.

He can feel the man’s approval and irritation in equal measure and tries not to calculate how much time they’d wasted already, just standing here arguing.

Time Seungcheol doesn’t have.

It’s a reminder he could have lived without.

“So, tell me,” Jihoon starts, studying the map Jeonghan has spread out on the kitchen table. There's already a block of ice in his chest, but he's working on calm, projecting it. “What do we know? Do we have anything?”

“It’s not much, but let me fill you in.” Mingyu says finally when all the weapons are, if not holstered, at least no longer directly aimed at anyone.

Everyone gathers around the table. “Well. DK dropped him off at this bar last night.” Mingyu points to the map. “He went in alone--despite my objections.”

DK speaks up next. “I saw him enter through the front. It was quiet for about an hour—then shots rang out from inside. Lots of gunfire, pretty sure a grenade went off too. People started fleeing from the club. I tried to make my way in but the crowd was thick and security was ushering everyone out.”

“When I eventually got in—the place was littered with bodies. Thankfully, none of them his. I roughed up a few witnesses and they said a group of men hightailed it out the back exit. I traced blood spatter and footsteps to this point here.” Mingyu taps on one area of the map, drawing Jihoon’s eyes back to the rooftop of a hardware store.

“The place was crawling with Masqueraders. Then Hoshi was on lookout on this rooftop and—“ Mingyu says, pointing to another section, then handing over to Hoshi.

“I saw him, surrounded by a group of guys. He was unconscious by then and they bundled him into a van.” Hoshi says quietly.

Jihoon buries the instinct to cringe before it can’t surface. “Did you get a licence plate?”

“No. I’m sorry. They started firing at my hiding spot. I couldn’t see shit from my cover.” Hoshi sounds bleak, or maybe just distracted.
Jihoon’s mind is turning frantically, but he keeps his face impassive. “Do we have any idea where they could have taken him?” He asks, eyes fixed firmly on the map.

“They have hideouts all over the city. We’ve—cleared a lot of them but—that doesn’t count anything underground they could have squirreled away.” Jun explains.

“Well, we just search them one by one.” Jihoon offers.

Jeonghan closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Jihoon, that will take too long. He’ll be dead by then. And—’ Jihoon’s quick intake of breath at the phrase gives him pause.

“And—I don’t know if you’ve noticed but we’ve kinda been working non-stop since you left. We’re running on empty here.” Jeonghan finishes quietly.

Jeonghan is practical where Seungcheol had been fierce. He’s good with facts and scenarios, with layouts and tactics and strategy. He’s precise with both planning and resources, so he uses his people and his supplies with a calculated efficiency. Jihoon knows already that Jeonghan will be the person who can make the hard decisions, the one who’ll recognize a losing battle and sound the retreat, the one who’ll sacrifice the few to save the many.

It’s not actually something that makes Jihoon feel better, but he can understand now why Jeonghan gets to be the right-hand man.

And for the first time since he’s arrived, Jihoon notices the dark circles and sallow complexion the crew are sporting. They’re not just worried about Seungcheol’s absence, they’re exhausted.

“Not to mention that we’ve been blacklisted.” Wonwoo pipes up.

The sentence manages to derail all of Jihoon’s thoughts. “What does that mean?” he asks.

“Since word got out—somehow—of Seungcheol’s capture, the other factions have stopped trading with us. Any arms deals Seungcheol had are null and void, so we can’t get more fire power. We don’t have the resources for a full-frontal assault.” Wonwoo explains bleakly.

Jihoon swallows hard as he realizes the implications. “Well. What are our options? Are they likely to ransom him if we offer something up?” He suggests. He still has his code, he could offer it up.

“No.” Yoongi butts in. “They’re not going to ransom him now. It’s gone too far. They’re going to make an example of him. Something grand that will resonate with the other factions. Put them on top. Putting a bullet in Choi Seungcheol’s head will be a windfall for them.”

“Thank you for positive and uplifting contribution.” Jeonghan says, giving Yoongi a hard look across the table.

“Just shedding some realistic light on the situation.” Yoongi drawls.

“Can we do anything about the weapon situation? Why can’t we strike up a new deal? I can source the money.” Jihoon says.

“It’s not that simple. The other factions won’t trade with a destabilised crew. They won’t deal with Jeonghan for instance.” Jun explains.

“They’ll deal with me.” Yoongi says.

There’s a flurry of whispered conversation, tight sentences in a few different voices, and Jihoon
really hopes they’re not planning on drawing their weapons again.

Jihoon turns to face Yoongi, “If you’ve got any weight to pull, now would be the time.”

Yoongi nods. “I’ll make some calls.” He says, slipping away from the table.

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Acquiring weaponry is disgustingly simple: Yoongi is a well known member of a crime syndicate with connections in the private arms sector, a friend of a friend of a friend with tangential overlap into the black market.

With Seungcheol’s reputation on the decline, he picks up the slack and networks, making connections in the unsavoury world of underground weapons dealing. Jihoon uses his code to siphon money discretely into the crews account to pay for the shipment.

He’s a hacker and an arms dealer now. Lovely additions to his resume. Sometimes it makes his stomach churn with the thought of what he's becoming.

With the firepower obstacle overcome, Jihoon’s busies himself by hacking into several CCTV servers on his laptop, searching for any footage of Seungcheol’s last known location to give them a head start.

It’s a needle in a haystack by all means, but he can’t just sit and wait and hope.

Jeonghan steps up beside him, he leans in to speak directly in Jihoon's ear. “Even if Yoongi can get us the resources. It doesn’t mean we’re any close to figuring out where Seungcheol is. It’s a big city, we don’t have time to check every public CCTV archive available Jihoon. We need to—”

“Wait!” Jihoon doesn’t wait for him to finish. He doesn’t know why he didn’t think of this sooner. Probably the shock.

“Dr Raine contacted me a few days ago. He said something about running interference and tracing calls between masqueraders cells. Seungcheol’s name was mentioned. If he’s still tracking their movements, he might be able to isolate a cluster of cell phone signals.” Jihoon says.

Jeonghan blinks away some of his visible scepticism. “Well—then….”

Jihoon scrambles for his phone. If anyone could locate their hideout, it would be Dr Raine. He has his own network and ways of ferreting out people’s secrets and probably a few favours to cash in here and there. It’s time Jihoon cashed in a favour of his own.

His cell phone is in his pocket. He takes it out, finds one of a half-dozen numbers Dr Raine had kept, picks the most recent one and hesitates with his thumb over the screen.

His lungs feel shallow, his back is tight.

Basically, he is scared. That is no good reason except his fear of finding out what he can’t bare to hear.

He takes a deep breath and hits the call button.

The call picks up on the first ring, but as usual, the line remains silent.

“Raine?” Jihoon is deliberate in using the man’s name, both of them knowing he would only do so if
his status was secure.

Dr Raine sighs over the phone. “Jihoon, thank god. I was wondering when you would contact me! Surprised you left it this long.”

Jihoon breathes a sigh of relief. “I--, Something happened. I don’t have time to update you right now.” he adds, overly aware of everyone listening in.

“I need—“ Jihoon's voice comes out cracked; his clears his throat and tries again. “I need your help.”

“I know.” Raine interjects swiftly. “You’re looking for Seungcheol. I know where they’re keeping him.”

Chapter End Notes

1) Wow, that took me a whole month to update. I have been writing other fics but still :( I kinda need a break when writing this cause it's a lot more angsty than my usual work and I like to not angst as you know XD
2) I wonder when I'm finished if this will be the longest fic I've written!
3) Did I cliffhang again. Oh well.
4) Hope you enjoy! Feedback appreciated.
Rescue

Chapter Summary

Developments.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jihoon: Safe-house

“There seems to be a cluster of them in a warehouse by the docks. I’ll forward the location I triangulated their cell phone signals to. It’s a complex of private businesses and most of them are empty.” Dr Raine says.

Jihoon’s glad he put the phone on loudspeaker, because he can barely process what the man is saying over the pounding of his pulse in his ears, the sudden sharpness of the floor tiles in his vision. Breathing requires focused effort, in and then out again, and Jihoon can’t focus on any one detail long enough to make sense of it.

“I’ve been intercepting their cell phones calls for some time, from what I can tell—there has been a shift in power. Many of their top dogs have been taken out and they’re attempting to re-group. Not everyone likes the new guy in charge and there have been whisperings of a mutiny—if you’re going to act—I would do it now.” Dr Raine adds.

From that moment on, Jihoon feels like he’s holding an unpinned grenade.

With no time to waste, Yoongi leaves to make a call to update Namjoon on Seungcheol’s location.

Mingyu analyses the maps spread out across the table, quickly isolates the coordinates Dr Raine has sent them and maps out their route—the quickest path to Seungcheol.

The docks.

"They’ve probably got him in one of these warehouses near the waters edge,” Mingyu circles the spot in red. “It’s defensible, discreet. They have an easy escape route by boat if needed and—not to mention, easy disposal.” He points out.

A twisting chill winds its way between Jihoon’s ribs, and he feels caught out. “To dispose of this body you mean.”

Mingyu looks at him now, giving Jihoon his full attention. “Yeah, uhm-sorry.” Mingyu’s voice rumbles impossibly low, and Jihoon looks away.

He drops his gaze to the floor, staring resolutely at the muted grey tiles. His voice is lodged somewhere in his throat, and he can still feel the guarded weight of everyone’s focus bearing down on him.

As they wait for reinforcements to arrive, some of them sleep. Or try to anyway.
Jeonghan’s stalks around looking dangerously annoyed, restless. Jihoon keeps his fingers flying over the keyboard, watching for trouble the best way he knows how.

According to Jihoon’s laptop, it’s nearly 3am.

When he looks up from the screen, Jeonghan has stopped pacing to stand at his side. “Just so we’re in agreement now—before things kick off—you won’t be coming with us to the docks.”

Rage clouds Jihoon’s vision for a moment before he manages to shut the useless emotion down and set it aside. He folds over his laptop and slides it into its carrier.

Jeonghan’s a very good right hand man, loyal—in theory, he’s one of the more frightening people Jihoon has ever met—but trying to reason with him can be tiresome. “Jeonghan, please—“

Jeonghan locks him with a determined stare and says, “This isn’t up for discussion. I’m just telling you how it’s going to go.”

Jihoon pinches the bridge of his nose, mouth set in a thin, unhappy line “But—I don’t want to sit on the side lines! You can’t expect me to just—wait here while you go in and rescue Cheol!”

“That’s exactly what I’m expecting you to do Jihoon.” Jeonghan admonishes, and a strong hand closes on his shoulder. Jihoon shakes his head, but Jeonghan just grabs the other shoulder in a grip just as firm. He gives Jihoon a shake.

“Listen—you’ve done well. But this time, you need to sit this out. You’ll just get in the way and Cheol would kill me if anything happened to you. He’d die if anything happened to you.”

“I can help.” Jihoon says softly.

There’s the heavy, hurried rumble of footsteps behind them, beside. Flashes of white and black.

“Yoongi’s back, he’s brought people. Namjoon and the rest will meet us there. We’re ready to go when you are Hannie.” Jun says from the doorway.

Jihoon follows Jeonghan out through the garage. Everyone is already suited up.

Seungcheol’s crew—minus Mingyu, who as usual hasn't opted for anything more protective than fucking flannel—are sporting bullet proof vests.

Namjoon’s men, on the otherhand, are all dressed in sleek black suits with slightly bulky underarms and little translucent coils leading from their ears down into their collars. Jihoon feels sheepish standing in his hoodie in front of them.

“Why aren’t you wearing vests?” He says quietly.

They share a chuckle.

“It’s part of our rep, we don’t need vests. Our moniker, BTS means, bullet proof boy scouts.” Jimin explains.

Jihoon scratches his head.

That—doesn’t make sense. He thinks, but politely withholds his opinion on that subject.

“You look—like you’re all going to prom.” He says instead.
“I’d prefer to think of it as—*a homecoming.*” Yoongi says, as he begins checking his weapons and loading them. Jihoon watches his hands, not just out of curiosity but with practical purpose. He does his best to track the movements and memorise the routine. Hopefully he’ll never need to hold a gun—or, god forbid, *fire* it—but it never hurts to be prepared.

Yoongi throws a quick glance at him, smiling slightly. He clearly knows what Jihoon is doing and approves.

“Shouldn’t you be suiting up?” He asks, mouth quirking with mischief.

Jihoon chokes on a laugh, bitter and grating. “Jeonghan says I have to stay. I’ll—just get in the way.”

“If you say so.” Yoongi says neutrally.

“Don’t you agree with him?” Jihoon asks above the sound of an SUV engine rumbling to life.

Yoongi spares him a quick glance, before turning his attention to the rest of Seungcheol’s crew up ahead. Jihoon wonders if he’s imagining the fond, teasing warmth that accompanies Yoongi’s expression. “Got us this far, didn’t you?”

It sounds like a non-sequitur, but Jihoon knows it isn’t. There's no accusation in the words, but the challenge is unmistakable. Yoongi isn't asking for an enlightenment. He's hoping Jihoon will step up and accept the challenge.

“Moving out.” Mingyu calls over any argument Jihoon can offer.

Jihoon pauses just outside the garage, watching as the assembled team makes for the three SUV’s that will carry them the distance to their target.

When only Jeonghan and him are left, Jihoon takes a moment to compose himself, before he approaches Jeonghan once more. “Let me come with you guys.”

Jeonghan’s busy strapping a gun to his ankle holster. "Not now Jihoon." He says, eyes piercing and quick.

“I—I could be useful. Maybe I could provide a diversion.”

Jeonghan shakes his head. “You’ll just be a diversion for us Jihoon—just stay here.” He reprimands in a hushed tone.

“Jeonghan—I need to be there. If something happens to Cheol—"

“You’ll be the first to know. We’ll contact you the minute we find him.” Jeonghan tells him, with that practiced smile of sympathy masking utterly unyielding resolve.

Jihoon watches Jeonghan climb into the front seat of one of the parked SUV’s. He stands numbly as the cars roll out of the garage one by one, and the house drops into silence.

*They’re professionals. They know what they’re doing. I don’t* 

Even the partial calm he finds is only temporary. Jihoon can feel a deep-set hysteria twisting in his chest, waiting for its moment to snap free.

If he weren’t already exhausted, so emotionally invested, maybe Jihoon could have found another way.
Maybe he could have alerted the authorities anonymously, directed them to the coordinates at the docks. Maybe if he had more time, he could have arranged a larger cash flow to facilitate a better prepared rescue crew. Maybe is there was a head of the snake left, he could have reasoned with it. Maybe he could have found another way to protect his own. Maybe it wouldn't have come down to this.

No. There's no point considering implausible alternatives.

This is what’s happening. Timing is their most important commodity right now.

Jihoon might not have the experience or the appreciation for the danger they’re facing, 

sure. But he imagines the crew facing down hundreds of enemy triggers, ready and taking aim. And despite all the talents and abilities of his people, despite Namjoon’s back-up. He knows they're heading into unknown territory and risking everything.

If it comes to it, they'll put up a good fight. They'll go down protecting each other. A handful of the crew or so might even survive.

Not just the crew, Jihoon thinks with a frantic twist of fear. His crew, his friends, his responsibility.

His family.

No, he can’t just sit back and wait it out.

One doesn't kick the weight of a lifetime of sensible and rational action off with any degree of comfort, and this feels something like giving a toddler a keyboard and letting them take a stab at putting together a flawless code. The knowledge that he is the toddler in this scenario only makes everything worse.

He turns to run back into the garage. He needs to find transport and quick.

He could take Seungcheol’s motorbike?

No. It’s a nice thought—but that thing is heavier than him and his feet don’t touch the ground without the stabilisers. He really wishes he would have let Seungcheol buy him that Moped.

He dashes through the garage, pulling the tarp coverings off the cars parked there. Several of them are in different states of disrepair, wrecks and works in progress. Nothing driveable.

The last tarp he pulls of reveals his Smart car.

It looks brand new. Almost.

Seungcheol must have had it sent here, he must have been working on it after Jihoon’s impromptu shoot-out and car chase with Dr Raine and the Masqueraders.

When you think about it—it’s practically destiny calling.

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**Seungcheol: Warehouse.**

He’s lost track of how long he’s been here. Hours, maybe. Days.

He doesn’t recognise the men Cheap Suit has brought in to torture him, but he supposes it doesn’t
matter. They’re not the ones asking the questions and running the show; they’re just the fuckers in charge of the switch.

The Decoy didn’t hang around for the fun, probably couldn’t stomach the smell of burning flesh and blood heavy on the air.

The smell is thick on Seungcheol’s tongue, still gets him every time.

He opens his eyes and lets the view distract him from the nauseous curdling of his stomach. He’s swallowed enough blood that he’s starting to feel sick, nausea roiling ominously in his gut. He clamps down hard on the feeling. His mouth is taped shut: if he vomits, he’ll most likely suffocate.

It's tempting, but he’s not willing to risk being remembered as Choi Seungcheol, the gang leader who drowned in his own puke.

“Again.” Cheap suit orders.

A switch is flipped.

Seungcheol jerks—an instinctive reaction to all the shock and pent-up adrenaline—and gags around the resultant flare of agony.

Fuck—fuck—fuck—fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

The switch is flipped off again.

He sags forward in his bindings, head curved over his knees, and stares at where the wires are clipped to his chest.

If he breathes slowly enough, if he concentrates, he’s able to suppress the trembling in his legs. It doesn’t hurt as much if he keeps perfectly still.

“Changed your mind yet?” Cheap Suit asks.

Seungcheol shakes his head weakly. He’s stubborn. He knows this about himself. It’s a good thing, he thinks, for all that Jihoon calls him impossible and unreasonable and bull-headed, along with a number of far filthier things when Seungcheol brings this particular idiosyncrasy into bed with them.

It’s part of what makes him so good at this life: the absolute refusal to stand down or admit defeat, even with his back against a chair and electrodes attached to his skin.

Cheap Suit looks set to grind his way through the floor, but instead he just raises a hand, fingers twitching under his glove, as though he is set to throttle someone if only given a target for his rage.

“Again.” He commands.

A switch is flipped on.

The pain comes from inside, ripping through his bones and blasting out to his skin, into every extremity, every hair follicle. Each shock is a thousand times worse than the previous one. It’s the anticipation of pain that is slowly killing him.

Shit—shit—shit—shitshitshitshitshit.
Seungcheol’s so tired of hurting. Exhausted from the unending pain. Cheap Suit should really drop the voltage if he's expecting coherency. But the guy believes in settling scores more than gaining ground, and pain is a very intimate matter.

Seungcheol knows if you want to hurt someone, really hurt them, you need to understand his pain from the inside out.

Pain is in the mind, they say. ‘Control the mind, you can control the pain.’

Well, fuck that shit. Those fucking theorists probably never experienced thousands of volts searing through their veins.

He breathes.

Slow and steady. Still.

He can do this.

He’s survived this much and should already be dead a dozen times over, but that doesn’t really make him feel any better about the fact that he’s going to die today, tied to a chair half naked with his blood-soaked boxers glued to his thighs.

Jihoon will be heartbroken about this. He loves these boxers, they’re his after all.

Jihoon doesn’t mind sharing. He likes this pair particularly, likes palming Seungcheol’s ass through them and mouthing up the silk-covered line of his dick, pressing close and breathing deep where Seungcheol’s leg meets his body and oh, God, this is the most inappropriate time for an erection.

He doesn’t particularly give a shit what these assholes think, but getting a hard on when you’re being tortured is bound to give off the wrong impression.

“Hit him again.” Cheap says again.

There is a slight hesitation from one of the grunts. That bleeding heart. “I—don’t think he can—“

“Hit—him—again.” Cheap Suit repeats fiercely.

The next shock is brief but more intense, like a wave of hellfire scorching through his cells. When he regains awareness, he can smell his own flesh cooking, can feel the arrhythmic drumming of his heart. Knows he won’t survive another hit.

He’s always known that this line of work would kill him sooner or later. Frankly, he’s a little surprised that it’s taken this long. There have been a lot of near misses. He’s been gut-shot, stabbed, beaten, strangled, almost blown up with a grenade. He’s thrown himself out of a third-story window with a broken leg. Time after time, he’s narrowly escaped the wrath of angry drug lords and the vengeance of dissatisfied cartels.

But, today, he is almost certainly going to die.

Opening his eyes isn’t an option after the last shock. His muscles won’t respond to his brain’s commands, too busy burning and spasming to the dance of the electrical current.

He remembers to breathe—barely. Maintains consciousness by pure obstinacy and a refusal to be less than awesome, even in this.

As Cheap Suit starts asking him questions again, Seungcheol uses the brief respite to think about
chance and stolen opportunities.

More than anything, more than he wants to kill the bastards torturing him or say goodbye to his crew or check in on his Father’s grave one last time, Seungcheol desperately wants to tuck his face into the warm curve of Jihoon’s throat and breathe him in. He wants to tumble with him to the floor and fuck him into the polished hardwood in his Seoul apartment, hipbones aching where they slam against Jihoon’s body. He wants to wake up from this nightmare and realize that the painful, constricting pressure in his chest is because Jihoon is sleeping half on top of him again and not because he’s burning out in some dank shithole and—

A left hook catches Seungcheol square in the jaw, and he lurches in the chair, choking on the gag.

Cheap suit crouches down before Seungcheol and grips his chin hard, fingers pressing down where his bruises are. Seungcheol grinds his molars down against the throbbing pain. “Now, see here, Seungcheol,” Cheap Suit begins, talking in a sing-song voice, as if to a little child. “I can keep this up all—“

Suddenly, Tweedle Dee bursts into the room, panting like he’s run a marathon. “We’ve got a problem,” he gasps out between heaves of breath, eyes wild and fixed on Seungcheol.

Cheap suit stands up straight, reaching for the rag that another guard offers, wiping his gloves free of Seungcheol’s blood.

He motions for Tweedle Dee to step forward, and the man leans in to whisper something in Cheap Suit’s ear, voice too low for Seungcheol to register.

Cheap suit looks—brooding. He orders one of the guards to stay in the room with Seungcheol before he strides towards the exit with Tweedle Dee in tow.

Seungcheol closes his eyes and thinks of his apartment in the city, the carved headboard on the king-size bed, the soft bedsheets, the way Jihoon always migrates in his sleep so that some part of him is touching Seungcheol.

Jellybean, Seungcheol thinks, and lets his head loll. With luck he can catch a few minutes of rest before the senseless torture begins again.

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**Jihoon: Docks.**

When Jihoon pulls up at the docks in his Smart car, the smell of salt air and damp wood is sharp in his nostrils. There is nothing amiss at first. Looking out through the windscreen, everything is quiet and he hears only the rush of wind and the forlorn chirping of seagulls.

Jihoon shifts nervously in his seat and takes a peek at his watch. The crew had a thirty minute head start on him at least.

He’s about to drive the car down the ramp he can see up ahead, when the sudden crack of a gunshot makes him jump, yelp, duck.

The second time, it sounds closer. The third sounds closer still, and seems to come from a different direction. By the fourth, he is cowering in the foot well vaguely disgusted with himself.

When Jihoon lifts his head up slowly, he doesn’t know what possesses him to do it with the sound of
gunfire is close, but he catches sight of a large man in a black stocking cap at the same moment he sees Jeonghan limping away.

The man steps forward, a Glock in his hand and aims at Jeonghan.

“HANNIE!” Jihoon calls out.

Jeonghan looks up, plainly startled. The skin under his eyes is bruised and swollen, like he’s taken a punch or ten. He catches sight of the shooter and throws himself to the ground as the man aims at him.

The man fires a single shot, squeezed not snapped, and then he steps back into the shadows of a building, the gun still raised, waiting.

The bullet catches Jeonghan in the leg, blood splattering his suit as he falls to the pavement.

Jihoon makes a split decision. Though if Jihoon has more than a second to think about it, he probably would have remembered that his spur of the moment ideas weren’t always his best ones. That sometimes, in fact, they went spectacularly wrong.

But he doesn’t have a lot of choice right now. Jeonghan looks dead on his feet, slumped against the side of warehouse wall; trying to stifle the blood flow of his leg wound and scrabbling to find his own gun while he does it.

He’s about to be gutted by the giant gorilla of a man stalking towards him. Jihoon has to act.

The only weapon Jihoon has is roughly a ton of steel, which he’s currently in control of.

So he makes a judgment call, and hits the gas. He accelerates, pushing the vehicle forward until it rams into Gorilla man. The man skids over the bumper, over the roof and lands behind the car in the blink of an eye.

A quick glance in the rear-view mirror determines that Gorilla man has been knocked over, but is PRACTICALLY UNSCATHED. In fact, he’s getting back up again!

What the fuck!

Jihoon slams the car into reverse and it jolts backward, rubber screaming. Gorilla man is back up on his feet when the back of his bumper knocks him down again. The Smart car bounces as he disappears under it this time.

Jihoon snaps his head forward, only to see Gorilla man is—still pretty okay, actually. Fucking SMART car has no bite to it!

“What the fuck are you doing?” Jeonghan’s voice is high, as if he can’t believe even Jihoon would be this crazy. There’s a ‘what the hell,’ and more than a little ‘are you insane,’ crammed in there somewhere too. But Jihoon is pretty much committed at this point.

He shifts into first gear again and hits the gas. He ends up spending five minutes driving the car back and forth over Gorilla man—trying to kill him, while a bleeding Jeonghan watches from the pavement.

“He’s not dying!” Jihoon screams out the window. “What do I do?”

“Go back in time to when you picked that car in the show room and pick a real fucking car!”
Jeonghan yells.

“You’re not helping!” Jihoon hollers back, running a very frustrated Gorilla man over once more.

The Gorilla Man’s face is fixed, taut, a little insane. He clearly doesn’t appreciate the inconvenience of Jihoon’s attempted hit and run. At this point, Jihoon is worried the damage to the car is more visible.

“Oh—fuck this!” He gives up trying to end the man’s life with his Smart Car; it just isn’t happening. He quickly jumps out of the car, and while the man is still groggy and disorientated, he drop-kicks him in the head as he reaches for his gun.

Jihoon stays where he is, staring down at the limp form of Gorilla man for a moment longer. Long enough to make sure he’s out cold. Then turns to look at Jeonghan.

Jeonghan’s expression is a curious mixture of annoyed and amused. It’s an expression he seems to wear disturbingly often, around Jihoon. Which he chooses to find encouraging, rather than worry about.

“I thought I told you to stay behind?” Jeonghan says, in a tone that clearly adds you idiot at the end of the sentence. He doesn’t sound angry, Jihoon had been expecting angry.

Jihoon crouches next to him, trying to check his wound while keeping an eye on the street. “I know—but I couldn’t sit back Hannie. Aren’t you glad I came though. I kinda just saved your life?” Jihoon asks, smiling despite himself.

Jeonghan snorts and rolls his eyes. “Kinda being the operative word in that sentence.” He says, with a liberal smattering of sarcasm.

Jihoon shakes his head. He wasn’t expecting anything else. “Where are the others? Did you guys get separated?”

Jeonghan blinks at him in surprise, then laughs—a hurt, almost manic sound—before his face falls sombre. “I have no idea. We were practically ambushed when we got here. They were prepared for us. We had to split up quickly. I saw Namjoon take a group up through the centre of the facility. I was meant to provide covering fire from the rooftops—I met resistance.” Jeonghan explains. There’s terrifying gravity in his eyes.

Ambush? They don’t have covering fire?

Jihoon’s pulse speeds, and the need to take action hangs like a raw weight in his chest.

Jeonghan pushes himself up to his elbows. He manages to get himself sitting upright against a wall, but he’s visibly gritting his teeth, like he’s a breath away from screaming.

“Will you be okay?” Jihoon asks, surveying the bullet wound. It’s a deep gouge along the back of Jeonghan’s leg, punctured flesh and torn tissue. Jeonghan’s probably had worse, he looks waxy but conscious, eyes fixed on the darkening stain on his trousers.

It’s not great, but he’ll live.

“I’ve been shot Jihoon, I’m bleeding out. I don’t think I’m going to make it.” Jeonghan says, his words are flat and certain.

Jihoon carefully blinks at him. “Really? You’re gonna die? From that bullet wound?”
Jeonghan’s eyes narrow in annoyance. For a moment, he looks like himself, dangerous and casually irritated. He’s looks offended by all the surprise, looking from Jihoon to his bullet wound, and back again with an unhappy scowl.

“Yes—I’ve have just been shot Jihoon.” Jeonghan says in a slow careful voice, like he’s an idiot.

Jihoon laughs, he can’t help it, one quick strangled sound. “Sorry, I just—it doesn’t look that bad. Yeah, it looks a little messy, but the bullet isn’t even lodged in there. You’re not losing that much blood either.” He says, peeling back the leg of Jeonghan’s suit to examine the wound.

Jeonghan slaps his hand away. “Oh really! You’re suddenly an expert on bullet holes are you?” he yells.

“No. no! But, you don’t seem to be bleeding much here. It looks like more of a graze, that an actual hole. Don’t get me wrong it looks painful as fuck, but you don’t look like you’re going to die.”

Jeonghan levels a hard, serious look in Jihoon's direction. “How about I shoot you and you see how it feels! I’m dying Jihoon!” he says tartly.

Jihoon squints at him, to check if he’s serious.

Jeonghan looks serious—and pissed off.

Jihoon rubs the middle of his forehead and pretends the solid huff of surprise he makes is exhaustion, exhaustion rather than frustration. “I have a first aid kit in my car. Hold on.”

He quickly runs back over to his car and rummages for his emergency first aid kit in the trunk. He unzips his hoodie, bundles it up and sets it under Jeonghan’s leg to elevate it before popping open the kit.

“This is just a basic first aid kit. I’m not sure it has all the stock necessary to treat a ‘fatal bullet wound’.” Jihoon infuses his air quotes with as much light-hearted derision as he can manage, in case that helps mellow Jeonghan out.

It obviously doesn’t. Jeonghan is scowling with murderous intent now, grumbling obscenities under his breath.

Jihoon pulls out some gauze padding, applies pressure to the area, wraps the remaining gauze around the graze. “My first aid skills are—okayish. But I think that will help hold off the worst of it. Does it feel better?”

Jeonghan releases a pained little sigh as he shifts his weight from the good leg to the bad “Yeah—that’s marginally better.” He says, voice suddenly back to its normal grumbling volume.

“Now I can pass away in agonizing slowness. Bleeding out slowly on the cold, dirty floor.” Jeonghan says, with distressing sincerity.

“Oh my god, you’re such a drama queen.” Jihoon mumbles out of the corner of his mouth.

Jeonghan eyeballs him, “What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing. Listen, I’m gonna move up a little, see if I can help the others.”

Jeonghan tilts his head up sharply. He doesn’t look happy about the idea in the slightest. “You’re going to leave me here, to die alone?” he accuses, in what manages to sound both insulted and hurt.
Jihoon puts his hands on his hips and sighs. “Seriously? Have you always been this dramatic?”

Jeonghan scowls at him for another long moment, before finally he says, shortly, “Fine.” And then “Be careful.” And then, he smiles at Jihoon. A real smile.

Which is really weird, and means he is probably going to die, that's not a comforting expression coming from Jeonghan at all, not even a little bit.

Jeonghan rests the gun on his uninjured leg and crosses his arms. “Give me your phone. I want to make a final call.”

Jihoon abstains from rolling his eyes at the use of the word ‘final’ and drops his phone on Jeonghan’s lap.

“Hold tight. I’ll come back for you.” Jihoon assures, jumping back into his tiny motor and turning the engine on.

“I’ll be dead by then. Hello—bullet hole in my leg here.” Jeonghan drawls.

“I thought you were cooler than this Hannie!” Jihoon shouts out the window as his car speeds off and down the ramp.

If Jihoon were more experienced with cars—he would have noticed the damp patch of fluid pooling at the side of his car.

The tell-tale sign of a cut break line.

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**Rescue Crew: Docks**

They’re almost boxed in.

The Masqueraders have built a make-shift barricade blocking their progress up ahead. There’s thirty, fourty, maybe more. A battalion of Masqueraders surrounding them at three sides, with fear and contempt, itchy trigger fingers and thugs just waiting for the kill order. Ready to open fire the second somebody steps into view.

Without covering fire, Seungcheol’s rescue crew can’t advance on their position.

Mingyu pops his head out of cover quickly to assess their route, and finds himself staring down more guns than he can count at a glance.

Bullets tear into the brick and metal frame they’re shielded behind, whining off the pavement when the don’t impact. Mingyu manages to send a few shots back, catches sight of the defensible plateau where the majority of shots are originating from, before he takes cover again.

“Where—the fuck—is Yoongi?” He grunts breathlessly.

“I don’t know!” Jungkook calls back. He slips out of cover, careful to move quickly and quietly until he’s shielded behind the wall next to Mingyu.

“How do you not know where one of your team mates is?” Mingyu hisses incredulously.

Jungkook fires a couple of shots at a man positioned atop the barricade, then flattens himself back
against the wall. A pause, then another couple of shots hammer the far wall, behind them. “Yoongi
does his thing—we try and stay out of the way.” He says over the sound of gunfire.

“I think I saw him accessing one of the fire escapes a little way back. He might be providing us with
covering fire.” Jimin informs everyone through the ear piece.

“Might be? That’s not exactly something we can rely on.” Wonwoo replies with, taking out a
Masquerader who tries to flank their position with the last clip in his gun. Jun hands him an extra.

"Fuck—it doesn’t feel like we’re getting any covering fire right now!” DK yells, waving Hoshi over
from the adjacent building. As he crosses the open space between the two buildings a shot splinters
the wall behind him; he drops to the ground and crawls the last fifteen feet almost on his belly, then
rolls to a sitting position just inside their secured perimeter.

“What about Jeonghan? Isn’t he meant to be providing us with covering fire too?” Namjoon asks.
They could really do with covering fire from one of the rooftops right now.

In retrospect, he supposes he should’ve anticipated that a surprise attack was not his best option in
this situation. When they arrived at the docks, he didn’t even have time to say, “Hello,” before a
Masqueraders lookout had spotted them assembling and a bullet had lodged itself in the side of his
car.

Yoongi and Jeonghan had split off to cover higher ground, while the rest of them attempted the point
blank approach and cut through the centre of the area, using the empty buildings as cover. Their
progress was cut short by the crudely erected barricade that stands in front of them now.

Namjoon chambers a round in his Sig Sauer, swings out from cover and fires rapidly, manoeuvring
closer to the barricade.

He thinks now would be a good time for something automatic or at least large-bore, even a grenade
would be nice. But he doesn’t want to risk blowing up any building Seungcheol might be tied up in;
or all of this will have been for nothing.

He slips back into cover as a volley of bullets litters the area he had just been standing in.

Jin slips into cover next to him. “We can’t stay here, they’re going to close us in. We should spread
out, cover more ground. Try and flank them, or at least get one of our guys on a rooftop.”

Namjoon shakes his head. “There’s no point, if Yoongi couldn’t do it what makes you think anyone
else will? We don’t have time to change tactics, we need to keep moving forward.” He says, in the
tone of a man evaluating options and setting them aside.

“We just need to break through that barrier.” Namjoon says, gesturing ahead.

“I’ll go back—drive one of the SUV’s through!” Jin suggests.

“No, that won’t work. It’s too wide—“ Namjoon explains, mentally assessing the width between
each building going back the way they came. “We won’t be able to drive it between the gaps in the
buildings. What we need is a small, tiny vehicle.”


“Yes! But—damn—if only such a car existed.” Namjoon laments.

( lol )
There is a squeal of tires at the top of the street, followed by the blaring of a tiny car horn.

“What the fu—“ Namjoon grabs Jin's arm and pulls him in the opposite direction as a car hurtles past, narrowly avoiding them.

“HI GUYS! MY BREAKS ARE FUCKED!” Jihoon squeals as his smart car accelerates past the group, headed straight for the barricade.

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Jihoon’s not stupid.

He's a software engineer turned anarchist hacker. And more recently, a man with a clean driving licence turned psycho hit-and-run driver.

Granted, he might not know a lot about cars, but he does know a thing or two about physics and the relative mass and speed of objects colliding.

So he's pretty sure this is going to hurt.

There are no real words to describe impact, it's like the whole world is suddenly made of noise and things breaking, and Jihoon can't help but think, suddenly, about the fact that he's really just a fragile bag of bones and blood. Before the car lurches forward, crashes into something and then grinds past it with a scream of metal.

The car scrapes along the wire fence in front, and in the next moment it’s smashing through the barricade. He slams into the side of the car door, hard enough that he wonders for a second if he's actually gone through it.

The back window of the car explodes, showering glass over the back of Jihoon’s head. There’s a Masquerader grunt pinned between the hood of the car and the destroyed barricade. His face, when Jihoon looks up from the foot-well and catches a glimpse, is furious. He raises his gun, aims it at Jihoon.

A bullet goes through the windshield, missing Jihoon’s head by what must be a few inches.

Jihoon doesn’t flinch, but he almost craps his pants.

His foot hits the accelerator on instinct. The engine shrieks, the car shudders and it pushes forward. The Masquerader's howl is a sound of pure agony, echoing violently alongside the fear in Jihoon's mind.

Outside, it’s pouring bullets and men are shouting. There's chaos around him now. Someone's shouting his name. Shouting like they've been trying to get his attention for a while, all wavering panic and screeches of metal.

More gunfire, from behind now that doesn't hit him, and then screaming—unfamiliar voices, screaming as though they're being torn apart—and a moment later the driver’s doors is being swung open and he’s being dragged out of his seat.

“Holy shit Jihoon! That was awesome!” Mingyu says, punching Jihoon in the shoulder.

It’s a friendly, affectionate gesture, but Mingyu is a mammoth guy and that punch lands Jihoon flat on his ass.
“Hey!” He protests.

“Oh shit! I’m sorry!” Mingyu laughs, grabbing his arm and hoisting him upright. “You did good Ji, good plan!”

“Uh—yeah. That. I planned that.” He manages shakily, a little disorientated as the rest of the crew climb through the barricade and take up positions to surround him. They start clearing the debris around the car to make more room and Mingyu passes something to Jun, and Jihoon registers that it's the steering wheel of his car, and he’s probably going to need that back!

Unless he doesn’t—unless he’s totalled his car. And that would be three times in the space of a year and that’s not a good record.

There’s a rush of air, then hands are tugging back his head, pulling down his eyelid, Wonwoo's clinical touch checking Jihoon's vitals, then pressing to his forehead, looking for injuries. “Jihoon—that was dangerous. I can’t believe you just did that!” Wonwoo says. There's no reprimand in the words. Just quiet worry.

Namjoon is next to clamber over the broken barricade, Jin hot on his heels.

"Jihoon," He breathes, and the name echoes with fierce relief. "Are you all right?" He asks.

“I don’t know,” Jihoon says, risking a look through the blasted back windshield, the gouged and battered remnants of his car, the bodies of the Masquerader's on the ground.

Amazingly, the pathway looks empty. They have about three feet of clearance now, enough to scuttle through. Jihoon stands up straight and brushes bits of safety glass off his shoulders.

“You did it. You got us through.” Namjoon says, slapping him on the shoulder.

Jihoon has no idea what he’s talking about. But, thank God for that, seriously, because Jihoon thinks he’s going to have to take a break from doing things for a while. He feels like he’s walking on air, or just had 500 coffee’s, though he thinks there are probably endorphins at work, or he's in shock or something.

“We have to keep moving, we need to use this to our advantage,” Namjoon says, removing his side arm from his holster and handing it to Jihoon.

Jihoon stands staring at Namjoon’s gun, cool and heavy in the palm of his hand. If there’s a greater sign of trust, respect, confidence than that—giving another man your gun in a firefight—he’s not sure what it is.

“Jihoon? You okay?” Namjoon’s tone is different now—he’s not asking about his crash. His eyes, are narrow and concerned, trained on Jihoon’s face.

But the place in Jihoon’s chest usually reserved for fear is full instead with a stark determination. Jihoon pulls himself straight and nods. “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go.”

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**Jeonghan: Docks**

Jeonghan dials a familiar number. One he has memorised, typed out countless times on his keypad but never actually called.
Except this time is different. He presses the dial pad.

He doesn’t expect a warm welcome. He expects repression, awkwardness, possibly some harsh words.

It rings four times, long enough for him to resign himself to voice mail, before someone picks up.

“Hello?” Joshua’s voice is thick with sleep and the surge of palpable want overcomes him. He hadn’t even realized how tightly Joshua’s absence had twisted beneath his skin.

“Hi Joshua, it’s me. Hannie,” he says, keeping his tone light and easy.

There’s a pause. Then Joshua’s voice comes quiet, close to the receiver. “Just a minute.” There’s some rustling, movement. Another man’s voice, sleepy and interrogatory.

Another man.

The realization twists unpleasantly in Jeonghan’s gut. Jeonghan may prize himself on his smoothness of mind in stressful situations, but this is so unsettling that he’s tempted to hang up.

Joshua says something muffled, and there’s the sound of a door closing. When he speaks again, he’s in another room. Somewhere smaller, by the sound of it.

“What do you want?” Joshua says, voice tinny but brisk and professional as ever.

“Did I wake you?” Jeonghan snaps, illogically jealous of another man sharing Joshua’s bed, like it doesn’t matter that they haven’t spoken in three years. “I should apologize for ringing you at such an early hour. Please apologize to your friend.”

Joshua is quiet for a moment. Jeonghan can hear him breathing, a little unsteadily. He thinks he’s gone too far. Joshua might take this as a threat, and hang up. When what Jeonghan wants is to just talk, to just hear his voice a little.

He waits for the polite dismissal, the dial tone. “Jeonghan—who—what do you want?” Joshua repeats instead.

Jeonghan sighs, “I’m sorry. I don’t have the right to be jealous. Not after what I did.” His voice is so soft that for a second he’s sure Joshua hasn’t heard him.

“Are you drunk?” Joshua says, voice full of sharp accusation. “Cause if the first contact I get from you in three years is a drunk call, I’m gonna be really pissed off.”

Jeonghan smiles faintly. He can hear a faint whistling sound over the line, remembers the apartment too close to the train station. Still living in the same place, then.

“I’m not drunk Joshua.” Jeonghan says.

Joshua is quiet, waiting for the punch line. “Are you,” he swallows. “are you hurt?”

Jeonghan says nothing. He counts slowly to five.

“Oh my god—“ Joshua starts, sounding horrified.

Jeonghan closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Joshua please, don’t.”

“What happened?” Joshua’s clearly panicking.
“I’ve been shot in the leg, there’s—there’s not much time. I’m bleeding out.” Jeonghan says seriously.

The line is quiet for a moment; Joshua probably crying his eyes out, Jeonghan reflects.

“Really? Cause—you don’t sound like you’re bleeding out.” Joshua says with characteristic sensitivity.

Jeonghan gapes. “Uhhm—excuse me? Do you know what people sound like when they’ve been shot, when they’re bleeding out?”

“Yeah—I’m a paramedic. They’re usually a lot less coherent, and breathless. You sound fine. It’s probably just a flesh wound.” he dismisses.

Jeonghan flusters for a solid minute. “It is not just a fucking flesh wound. I’m bleeding out on the cold, hard, dirty floor. I’m going to die!”

“You’re going to die?” Joshua repeats tonelessly.

“Yes—I’ve been shot in the leg. There is blood everywhere.”

“There’s blood everywhere?” Joshua says, in that same flat yet strangely menacing voice.

“Is there a bloody echo in here? Yes, you heard me!” Jeonghan snaps. “Is this how you treat people who ring emergency response for an ambulance? You question the validity of their injuries?”

Joshua makes a sceptical noise, clearly not buying it. “Okay, okay. Where exactly on your leg have you been shot?”

“My calf.”

“Hmm—that’s a meaty part of the leg. I’ve treated a lot of non-fatal bullet wounds in that area.” Joshua reflects, sounding unconvinced. “Can you walk?”

“I’ve been shot! Of course I can’t walk!” Jeonghan snaps, indignant.

Joshua sighs. “Has the leg been fractured? Is the bullet still lodged inside?”

Jeonghan thinks that over for a moment, scratching idly at his three-day stubble. “I can’t see—there’s too much blood. Or maybe my vision is getting blurry, from all the blood loss and impending death.” He gasps.

“Sure, sure.” Joshua says, attempting to humor him. “How painful is it on a scale from 1 to 10? 1 being the lowest, 10 being the highest.”

Jeonghan shuts his eyes and lets his head fall against the wall. “8000.” He answers, as calmly as possible.

“Yeah, you’re going to be fine.” Joshua says, a smile in his voice like he knows absolutely everything. Jeonghan refuses to admit out loud that he just might.

“I—this—ghaa! I didn’t call you for your medical opinion. I called to speak to you. To spend the last few minutes of my life—with you.” Jeonghan whines.

“That’s rich. Since you didn’t want to spend your actual life with me.” Joshua says stiffly.
Jeonghan has no idea at all, what the right answer to that is, honesty, evasion, crying his heart out.

“That's, that's not true Joshua. I think about you every day. I still love you.” Jeonghan tells him quietly. He doesn't mean to be so honest but it has been a thought tumbling round his head since he all this shit with Jihoon and Seungcheol snowballed.

“Okay, I did NOT need to hear that. May I remind you that you walked away from me. You didn’t come home one night and I stayed up for weeks worrying about you, you son of a bitch! I was in agony. Not just some fake ass bullet wound either. Real, emotional, pain and loss. So, you can’t just call up, three years later when you feel like it and say shit like this.” Joshua pauses mid rant, then calls to someone off the phone. “It’s nothing sweetie, just ordering pizza! Go back to sleep.”

Something about that thought makes Jeonghan’s chest tighten. “So, the blood loss wasn’t making me hear things. You’ve met someone, haven’t you?”

There's hesitation. The kind that usually precedes a lie, in Jeonghan's experience.

"No, I--" Joshua says. Then falls quiet in a way that sends a shiver along Jeonghan's nerves.

Jeonghan tries to wait out Joshua’s silence. Perhaps Joshua is simply gathering his thoughts. Perhaps he has some point to make that's too delicate to rush. But as the silence persists, Jeonghan realizes there's nothing tactical about this hesitation.

"Shua, please.” he whispers when he can no longer stand wondering.

Finally, Joshua says, “Yeah, I did actually.”

Of course Joshua’s got another boyfriend. It's been three years. Of course he has. Of course Jeonghan doesn’t.

If he wanted to pry he could probably find out more. Where the guy lives, where he works, where he shops, how many broken fingers it takes for him to fuck off out of Joshua’s life.

But that’s not fair. They haven’t so much as spoken in three years. Strictly speaking, they’re not even friends.

“And for your information, he’s super rich, super hot and super smart. He’s got a huge dick and I’m going to marry him.” Joshua adds another blow.

Jeonghan says nothing for a moment, it must be the blood loss, but he can feel Joshua’s frustration, his anger, radiating through the voice.

He clears his throat twice. “He sounds dreamy—“ He observes dryly, surprised at how easily wry humor creeps into his voice. It’s weak, but he’s bitter as fuck and he adds. “Nevertheless, I hope you have a nice life together. Despite what you might think, and how things ended up between us, I want you to be happy.”

There’s another pause, longer this time, long enough for him to feel his neck start to itch. “You’re such a fucking asshole, Hannie. I can't believe you're calling me after all this time.” Joshua sobs quietly, and Jeonghan doesn't think he'd let that thread of desperation creep into his voice for anyone else.

“I’m sorry Shua—I,” Jeonghan stops again, because he can't think of any way to explain. He'd been about to say I want to make it up to you, as if they were in some badly-scripted Lifetime movie. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn’t think you could survive this—life I have.” He sounds far
calmer than he feels.

Perhaps it's his own veneer of calm that sets Joshua on the defensive, because Joshua’s tone is clipped and unhappy when he responds a moment later. “You didn’t give me much of a choice Hannie, you could have at least let me make that decision myself. Instead you walked out—like a coward.”

Jeonghan doesn’t bother to deny it. Just as Joshua is drawing in breath to speak, Jeonghan interrupts “Look, you’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t call to upset you. I just—called to hear your voice. And now I have. Now I can rest in peace.”

“Oh my god, stop acting like you’re dying.” Joshua groans. His tone is teasing, but there's an undercurrent of worry to the words.

“I am though. I feel myself—slipping away.” He says, with a faint air of grief.

“You’re not dying.” Joshua says dryly. He might be smiling – but then, he might not. Jeonghan can’t tell, anymore.

“Shut up, yes I am.” Jeonghan bristles. Then tries for a sombre tone once more. “My body—is—so cold.” he says slowly, as he massages feeling back into his frozen fingers.

He’s always had cold hands, but this is definitely a sign of rigor mortis setting in. He’s sure of it.

“Stop it.” Joshua says he says with the air of someone who's heard the it all before.

“My eyes—are getting—so heavy.” Jeonghan mumbles, really laying it on thick.

“Maybe cause it’s almost 5am in the morning, and you've obviously been up all night getting shot at.”

Jeonghan continues as if Joshua’s said nothing. “I’m fading away, Shua. I’m—walking—towards the light.”

Joshua snorts. “I thought you said you couldn’t walk.” His voice is free of censure. If anything, idle amusement glints behind the words.

“It’s a figure of speech Shua! For fucks sake.” Jeonghan says helplessly.

“Oh, I do apologise. Please continue.” Joshua’s tone says exactly what he thinks of Jeonghan’s theatrics.

“Just—remember—once last thing for me Shua.” The words shake out of him between bursts of air.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

He closes his eyes. “Always—remember—Paris.” He finishes faintly.

Joshua snorts. “That’s a stupid thing to remember; we never went to Paris.”

Jeonghan’s eyes snap open. He hopes he has a good incredulous voice, because he's about to sound very incredulous over the phone. “Hey! I bought you those tickets for our anniversary. Booked you that fancy hotel! How can you forget that?”

“We never went to Paris Hannie.” Joshua says, sounding strangely bored now, “We never made it because a certain somebody,” He coughs. “you—was on the no-fly list and was wanted by Interpol.
So instead of a romantic getaway, we had to make a quick escape from the airport after that somebody—“He coughs again. “you—faked travel anxiety!”

It’s probably a good thing that Jeonghan is going to die, because Joshua is going to be insufferable about every little detail of their relationship. “You knew about that huh?”

Joshua sighs, loudly, like Jeonghan has just proven conclusively that he is an idiot. “I knew that you didn’t have a clean record Hannie, I wasn’t stupid or as naïve as you liked to think. I knew a lot more than you were willing to share.” He says, and gives a weak, humorless chuckle. “I guess I was just—waiting for you to share it.”

Jeonghan frowns at the sky for a long, quiet handful of seconds.

There are a lot of wounded, betrayed places inside Joshua and he suspects he's just hit another one. “I'm sorry Shua. I didn’t call to drag up memories, I—guess I just needed a reason to let myself reach out to you again and it took standing at death's door to push me.”

“Except you’re not dying. You’ve just got a flesh wound.” Joshua says tartly.

Jeonghan makes an aggravated noise. He wants to hang up in a dramatic rage, but he's a little busy trying not to die from injuries that he's not entirely sure of the extent of yet. “This is unbelievable. I’ve been shot—in the leg—and nobody gives a shit.”

“Where are you?” Joshua asks suddenly, interrupting Jeonghan’s mental figuring of the odds that he could make it to his parked car without acquiring any more significant damage to his person.

“I, “ Jeonghan falters, thrown by the question, then admits, “I can’t tell you that.”

“I can hear seagulls—you must be near the docks.” He ponders. “Hang tight, I’ll be there in 20 minutes.”

“No, I’m not—,” Jeonghan draws up short. “Wait, what? You’re coming?”

“You’ve been shot Hannie. I’m coming out to check on you.” Joshua says. The words come out soft, almost hesitant.

“You shouldn’t do that. I’m fine. I’m at the beach actually!” He lies.

Joshua mutters something that sounds like, stubborn son of a bitch, and then, louder but just as inexplicably, he says, “I just heard a dock horn Hannie. You’re at the docks.”

“No, I’m not Joshua.” Jeonghan growls.

There’s a dull sound over the line, like something covering the receiver, and then Joshua’s voice, muffled. He comes back a moment later and says, “I just sent my friend the number you’re calling from, he traced your cell phone single and—Oh, would you look at that—you’re at the docks.”

Jeonghan pouts. “How did you—”

“Will you just—trust me.” Joshua says.

His words hang like absolution over Jeonghan's head, just within reach, and Jeonghan wishes he knew how to reach out and accept them.

“But,” Jeonghan starts, and finds that he’s got nothing to say. His need for Joshua runs so deep he's not sure he'll ever untangle it. Even if he knew how to put it into words, Jeonghan doesn't think he
could bear to see him again, knowing he couldn’t keep him.

“I’m coming.” Joshua repeats when he’s too long in responding. “If you move from where you are, if you leave again. I’ll hate you for the rest of my life.” He says seriously.

Jeonghan smiles. “That’s a lot of responsibility and guilt for a dying man to shoulder.” He laughs breath caught up tangled and sharp.

“I forgot how dramatic you could be.” Joshua says gustily over the line. Jeonghan can practically hear the accompanying eye roll. “Elevate your leg and don’t move pineapple head.”

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**Seungcheol: Warehouse**

The warehouse is quiet save for the lone guards heavy breathing and Seungcheol’s blood pounding in his ears.

Cheap Suit has been gone an *awful* long time. Seungcheol hopes he’s dead.

He’s had enough alone time time to think about how everyone will react to the news of his death.

Namjoon will be devastated when he finds out, probably. They’ve had their rough patches, but they’ve been friends for a long time.

Mingyu might shed a tear. He’s not the crying type usually, but Seungcheol is the closest thing Mingyu has to family, the bossy and overprotective older brother he never had. Wonwoo will be furious with Seungcheol for being so careless, for letting his guard down. Jeonghan, though, he’ll blame himself. He always does.

DK and Hoshi will crack jokes when Jeonghan tells them; that’s what they do, rain or shine. They’ll cry at the funeral though, sloppy hiccupping sobs, when it all becomes too real and final.

*If there is a funeral. If they find my body. If there’s a body to find.*

Vernon and Dino will be crushed. Dino’s young and Vernon’s never lost anyone close to him before, neither of them have personal experience with the grim risks of the world they’ve lured them into. His death will put Junhui and Minghao off work for a while. They might go back to China. Not forever though. This is home for them now, and they’re too involved with the crew to stay away.

His brother has been a no show in his life for the last seven years. He’ll never know.

Creditors, criminals, other gang leaders will gossip about his messy end, speculating on the misstep that brought him down, relieved that it wasn’t them.

That’s it, really. No one else will notice. No one else even knows he exists technically.

No one except Jihoon.

Seungcheol doesn’t know what Jihoon will do.

He just hopes Jihoon can forget him.

Somewhere beyond the boundaries of his awareness, there is trouble: heavy footsteps, shouting in panicked voices. A crashing roar in the distance, the glass in the windows trembling in an answering
shockwave.

The guard startles. “What the fuck was that?”

Chapter End Notes

1) Do you see where I just can't handle heavy moments. Sorry. lololol.
2) Somebody wanted more Jihan. I will expand when I can.
3) Jeonghan is so dramatic, I can imagine him.
4) Thanks for reading. Hope you enjoy! Feedback appreciated.
A paramedics job means you’re expected to operate consistently outside the realm of the usual nine-to-five, but Joshua knows only a very select few paramedics who are willing to make house calls after midnight.

But he can’t, in good conscience, leave Hannie to fend for himself at the docks.

It’s strictly a professional duty. An ethical obligation to help.

That’s it.

It’s not like he’s still in love with the guy.

That would be—*ridiculous*.

He arrives at the docks within twenty minutes of ending his call with Jeonghan, wearing his uniform (just in case people start asking questions) and carrying his home emergency kit.

It’s stocked with several items that most people would struggle to get their hands on, *unless* they worked in a hospital and *unless* they stole from said hospital.

Joshua knows from experience that the drugs they use in the A+E wards do much more than what your average jo can buy in a pharmacy and luckily, a hospital nurse owes him a not inconsiderable favour.

He parks his car near the footbridge, jumps out, rounds the corner of a warehouse only to find Jeonghan ‘bleeding to death’ on the pavement.

Jeonghan looks pale and trapped, his gaze flitting to the floor where blood is dripping around his sock foot, and the whole left side of his leg is so covered in blood that Joshua can't even begin to pinpoint the actual injuries, which is usually something he's pretty good at.

He quickly kneels at his side and he makes sure the first thing he says is—"Jesus Christ, Hannie – what happened to your hair?"

Jeonghan’s laugh is just a huff of breath, an expressive jump of eyebrows. “Hello Darling.”

“Don’t call me that.” Joshua snaps.

“Then what should I call you?”

“My name—*Joshua*—and if you’ve forgotten it because the shock has settled in, Sir would also be appropriate.”
“Sir? Sounds kinky, I hope your new squeeze doesn’t get jealous.” Jeonghan snarks, making a visible effort to bite off the rest of whatever it was he wanted to say.

Joshua takes a moment to level a particularly exasperated look in Jeonghan’s direction, but it’s quite obviously lost on him as he’s tipping his head back against the wall behind him and shutting his eyes.

He watches Jeonghan’s Adam's apple bob up and down. He's put on some weight since Joshua saw him last, but obviously hasn't had a chance to update his wardrobe - his shirt looks tight around the collar, his suit-jacket stretched in the middle.

Obviously, he hasn’t got a boyfriend to impress. Joshua is spitefully glad for reasons he doesn’t want to focus on.

He r ummages in his bag for gauze, tweezers, silk suture and wonders if maybe he should have called this in—or at least sent somebody else in his place. That might have prevented this little recidivism problem he’s having now. Maybe love is like a stubborn weed: it’ll keep growing up through the cracks in the pavement of Joshua’s heart unless he can pull it up by the roots somehow.

He slides the kit off his lap and rolls up his sleeves, thinking that probably the real mistake was letting Jeonghan ever take root in him in the first place.

When he looks back at Jeonghan, he finds himself reaching up and sweeping a thumb over his cheek, brushing away flakes of dried blood.

Jeonghan turns his face into the touch, and when he cracks an eye open to look at him, Joshua pulls his hand back instinctively. “The sweating is a sign of shock, probably from the injury—not the minimal blood loss.” He says, casual as he can make it, which he fears is not very.

Jeonghan’s brown eyes flicker over his face, quick and curious, and then his brows come together. “Do you really not like the hair? I’m not quite sure what look I was going for, but I fancied a change and cut it all off. Haven’t landed a single date since, and I’m beginning to think people just wanted me for my hair and not my super charming personality.”

“No argument here.” Joshua says dryly.

“You’re mean.”

Joshua rolls his eyes. “Yes, you were more handsome with longer hair, but that’s not the reason I fell in—” Joshua pauses, then clears his throat and amends, as coolly as he can manage, “That’s not the reason I dated you.”

Jeonghan smiles at him lazily and he barely resists the urge to smile back. “Now please stop talking and let me have a look.” He says, prodding the deep graze on Jeonghan’s calf, taking a certain malevolent satisfaction in the undignified squeak the action elicits.

He applies pressure to the wound, creating a pile of soggy gauze in his wake. “Are you alone out here?” he asks without looking up. He needs to restock; he’s almost out of Betadine.

“No, I came with friends. We were having a nice picnic by the docks when a seagull shot me. I didn’t want to spoil the fun so I limped over here to die.”

Joshua huffs through his nose, focused on measuring out the iodine. “Fine, don’t tell me.” He says, drawing up the disinfectant solution into a syringe.

Jeonghan sighs, “There’s a group of us. The rest of them are inside—we’re—rescuing my
boss—fuck, ah, shit, that stings – he was kidnapped by a rival gang.”

Joshua isn’t sure what to make of that. He squirts another syringe of disinfectant over the graze on Jeonghan’s leg. “Your boss—is he a—good man? Worth saving?”

“He’s my oldest friend. He doesn’t deserve to die.” Jeonghan whispers.

“And I suppose calling the police for help is out of the question?”

“Absolutely.” Jeonghan agrees easily. “Wouldn’t want to see me behind bars, now would you Shua?” He says, eyes warm in his blood-smeared face, and Joshua smothers a smile and jabs him a little harder than he needs to with the needle.

“Ahh—fuck!” Jeonghan blinks at him, looking comically surprised and a little bit betrayed.

“Stop whining—it’s just a graze.” He dismisses applying a neat row of butterfly stitches and gauze to the area. He glances up from the now sluggishly-bleeding wound to find Jeonghan watching him, smiling a little, with that knowing look that always made Joshua want to yank down his pants and suck on his dick.

“Always the boy scout with your little first aid kit. Did I ever tell you how cute you are with your little back pack and uniform? Little wannabe doctor—Ow!” Jeonghan yelps when Joshua lifts one hand in order to thump him in the shoulder with his closed fist, hard enough to hurt.

“I didn’t come out here for you to ridicule me.”

“You need to work on your people skills. Jesus—can’t you take a joke?”

Joshua lets out a deeply unflattering snort. “I’ll let you know when I hear one.” He snarks, and his heart warms at Jeonghan's humoring chuckle.

He patches Jeonghan up quickly and efficiently, hands steady with years of practice. Jeonghan is quiet, for once, letting him work. After a while, his hand comes up to settle lightly on Joshua’s waist, a damp heat through the cotton of his uniform shirt.

“Shua—I’m sorry-“

“Hold this please-“ Joshua continues to pack his bag, not the least bit interested in excuses, though he’s sure that Jeonghan has used the better part of three years to assemble quite the collection.

“C’mon—let’s get over to me car.” Joshua adds, jumping up on his feet and reaching down to pull Jeonghan up.

“I don’t think I can walk.” Jeonghan laughs ruefully and turns to face him, straightening up from the wall now.

“Let’s find out shall we.” He says, holding Jeonghan’s elbow to guide him away from the wall.

Jeonghan takes one step with a hiss, then as he’s bearing weight on his injured leg, he crumples to the ground.

At least Joshua's depth of experience lets him know exactly when he should step forward to catch him before he brains himself on the hard cement floor.

Jeonghan laughs and leans into him, a solid weight, smearing blood and iodine all over Joshua’s shirt. Joshua lets him, helps him down to the ground again.
“Told you I couldn’t walk. Maybe you should stop trying to fix broken people and grant a dying man his last wish.”

All he manages is a breathy “And what would that be?” before Jeonghan surges forward, takes his face between his palms, and kisses him, hard and fast and adoring.

Joshua manages for all of a second to keep his hands to himself, and then he's gone. Turned on and distracted and running his hands along Jeonghan's back, because Jeonghan is a goddamned filthy kisser.

The kiss is smooth and deep and hungry as he plays Joshua like a well-tuned guitar, and all Joshua can do is groan and suck on Jeonghan’s tongue, taking Jeonghan’s lean face in his hands to keep him from pulling away too soon. To keep him close until he has had his fill, because he's pretty sure this is a dream or a trick or a fluke, and he's never going to have this again.

Reality comes crashing over him in a wave, and Joshua lets go of Jeonghan in a startled instant. There's nowhere for his hands to land except Jeonghan's shoulders, but it's better than the alternatives — better than his dick, or his chest, or the soft fluff of hair at the back of his neck, all the places Joshua wants to keep touching and never stop.

"'m sorry," Jeonghan slurs, "just had to…” he says, breaking away, spots of colour erupting high up on his cheekbones. His expression is strangely neutral apart from the self-satisfied sparkle in his eye.

Joshua tries to ground himself as he swallows and reluctantly meets Jeonghan's eyes. “Dammit Hannie.” He says, voice airy and little breathless.

His heart is in his throat, now — from terror or joy or giddiness, he can hardly tell. He slumps further to his knees and faces Jeonghan, shaky with want.

“Shua..” Jeonghan cups his cheek and leans back in for another kiss, slower this time.

“Damn you.” Joshua gives in now, with a soft breathy noise, his arms come up and circle Jeonghan’s neck; it’s like coming home, except their home used to be a lie and now there’s nothing left to hide.

Seungcheol almost misses the creak of the warehouse door. He doesn't miss the low slant of light. The way a wide shape blocks it out a second later and a long shadow pushes through the room.

It’s probably meant to be intimidating, but it works in Seungcheol’s favour — he can tell the bastard is alone, and he can keep his head down and still know exactly where he is, counting off steps until he can duck his head and swing it back up for a swift heat butt…

“Careful, gorgeous,” a familiar voice purrs, pushing Seungcheol’s head back – too slow, dammit, “I wouldn’t want you to break my nose again before I can get you out of here.”

It’s the Decoy, looking a little worse for wear; anxious and sweaty as he tucks a gun in his back pocket.

“What are you doing?” Seungcheol mumbles.

“Shh—keep your voice down.”

Seungcheol watches him begin to fiddle with his restraints with a ball of tension in his stomach. Wait
“It out, he tells himself. Wait it out and see what he wants.

“I hear gunfire earlier. Trouble in paradise?” Seungcheol asks, the words wet and iron-tinged on his tongue.

The Decoy’s replying chuckle is a little choked with panic, “You could say that. Being in charge ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. And if I hang around—I don’t think I’ll be calling the shots much longer. But I got it under control—you’re my ticket out of here. I’m gonna let you go and—“

The man jerks forward, suddenly, like he’s been shot. He crumples against Seungcheol, dead weight, pinning him to the chair, and the agony is indescribable: the pressure on his open wounds, the grinding of his shattered bones.

Seungcheol screams, raw and soundless.

Cheap Suits’ laughter echoes off the walls and ceilings, vengeance a dark light in his gaze.

“I’m afraid that offer no longer stands.” Cheap suit says, pulling the slumped figure of the Decoy off Seungcheol and tossing him to the floor.

“Never liked him anyway—too soft.” Cheap Suit chuckles, chambering a round in his Makarov and sliding the safety off.

Seungcheol barely manages to stifle his shout of pain when the butt of a gun comes down hard, a glancing blow across the smattering of others from before.

There’s something brazen and dangerous in his expression, his posture, the slant of his shoulders. Something wicked with intent in his eyes as he strolls over. “You really are more trouble than you’re worth—ya know that? Gonna do what I shoulda done back on that rooftop.”

Seungcheol swallows, forcing down the dread slicing at his gut like a knot of splintered rope, and ignoring him. If Cheap-suit is ready to wipe him out, it had to mean he felt too vulnerable to do anything but cut his losses and run.

Seungcheol doesn’t close his eyes this time when Cheap Suit raises his gun, instead he turns his head to the side—listening to the distant sound of gunfire and approaching footsteps.

One of the Tweedles bursts through the door, closely followed by his twin. They both look like they’ve seen better days. “One of them just drove a Smart car through the barricade.” Tweedle Dee croaks.

Cheap suit flails his arms about. “Well take them out! It’s just a handful of guys!” He yells, spittle spraying Tweedle Dee full on the face, his features purpling in livid fury.

“There’s too many of them—more than we expected.” Tweedle Dum chimes in, his voice comes out garbled and Seungcheol notes he’s nursing a bullet wound. Gunfire sounds somewhere to the right of their building, and dust trickles down from the ceiling as people shout outside. No one talks for the moment, eyes fixed in the direction of the noise that silences a moment later.

“It’s not just his crew out there. I’m pretty sure I saw Min Yoongi with a sniper rifle on the rooftops” Tweedle Dee murmurs, voice tremulous.

Having backed against the brick building, Tweedle Dum is staring into the distance at nothing, eyes wide, curling into a ball and starting to hyperventilate. He’s trying to breathe, but having trouble.
Tweedle Dee actually crosses himself. “We’re dead. We’re so dead.” He whimpers.

_A Smart car?—_Seungcheol thinks, and a secret smile creeps onto his face.

“Oh—_god._” Seungcheol chuckles.

Cheap Suit turns to stare disbelievingly at Seungcheol for a second.

Seungcheol grins sharply at his interrogator, his bruised jaw aching as he takes in the way his face reddens in anger at Seungcheol’s amusement. He then rounds on one of his men. “You said the other factions wouldn’t interfere!” he accuses, seething.

Tweedle Dee nods, frantic. “I did, and they _shouldn’t_, I don’t know why!”

Another burst of gunfire, closer this time, followed by one thud and then another. The dull sounds of bodies hitting the floor.

Cheap Suit looks around the shadows of the warehouse frantically, like he’s searching for the sodding boogeyman. He drops his voice to a quiet murmur and starts to relay orders into a walkie talkie.

“Station men at the back exit, call for the car. We’re relocating.” He says, then begins to untie Seungcheol’s restraints.

“But Boss—”

“It’s a little late for that fellas.”

The smooth baritone cuts through the room and makes the Tweedles cease their whimpering. As a group, they all turn their heads to where Min Yoongi materializes out of the shadows like a goddamned spy movie, suppressed AR-15 rifle held loosely in front of him and trained on Cheap Suit.

Cheap Suit straightens up like someone’s driven a metal rod into his spine; his face twisting up in what Seungcheol can’t be sure is panic or rage. It's likely both.

Seungcheol raises his head to get a better look at Yoongi. He looks completely unruffled except for the bright red dash of someone else’s blood on his sleeve and the very, very bored look on his face.

Classic Yoongi.

Yoongi tosses a two-way radio at Cheap Suit’s feet. “You’re waiting for your men to ride to the rescue. Don’t bother.”

Tweedle Dee has his hands up, projecting waves of submission. Tweedle Dum has already passed out on the warehouse floor. “We’re—”

“Shut up.” Yoongi barks, then raises the rifle at Cheap Suit. “You, step away from him.”

Cheap suit narrows his eyes, shuffles a few steps away from Seungcheol’s chair but proves himself to be Not Bright when he starts talking.

“You shouldn’t have interfered with—_fuck_!” Cheap Suit keens like a dying goat, hands clamped around his left knee, which is now sporting an impressive bullet wound.

“Yeah, it hurts.” Yoongi shifts his aim a few inches higher. “Next one is going to hurt more.”
He waits patiently for Cheap Suit to compose himself. Impressively, the man manages to stay more or less on his feet, until Yoongi snaps forward and slams his fist into his face, knocking him to the ground.

Yoongi looks over the rest of the Masqueraders and, satisfied that they won’t interfere, shifts the rifle to one hand, pulls out a knife and starts cutting the rest of Seungcheol’s restraints without looking.

“You alright?” Yoongi asks, with alarming earnestness.

“Uhh—I guess.” Seungcheol mumbles. “I’m just a little confused as to why you’re here—rescuing me.”

“I’m a little confused too. But you should be aware of how convincing your boyfriend can be. He may be small—but boy is he intimidating.”

Seungcheol blinks at him. “Jellybean?”

“Yeah—do you know he gave me Chlamydia?” Yoongi says incredulously.

“What?”

The warehouse doors burst open seconds later, Mingyu and Jun flanking each side of the door as they run in.

Seungcheol is relieved to see most of his crew are here, mostly unharmed.

When Jihoon comes into view, he catches sight of Seungcheol and relief blossoms on his face. There are shadows under his eyes and he looks exhausted, and something in the strain in his delicate features tells Seungcheol another story.

Just the sight of Jihoon standing there, surrounded by a small militia and holding a gun like it’s a banana could make Seungcheol cry. He makes a shattered sound, and Jihoon goes to him without hesitation.

Jihoon drops to his knees beside him, let out a little strangled sound, mouth dropping open. “Oh god—Cheol.” He cries, dotting Seungcheol’s flushed cheeks with brief, soothing kisses.

Seungcheol’s nose is broken, crushed under the scarred knuckles of the hired muscle. He breathes, carefully, through his mouth. “Jelly—bean.”

“Easy,” Jihoon’s voice says in his ear, “easy, easy,” and Seungcheol realizes belatedly that he’s coughing, choking for air, lungs spasming in phantom panic. “You’re all right, just breathe, Cheollie, breathe for me, please—“

“Sorry,” Seungcheol says, ridiculously, a strangled hiss of sound between convulsions, and Jihoon lets out a loud, choked noise that might be a sob.

“There’s nothing to apologise for baby. Just breathe for me.” Jihoon soothes, when Seungcheol makes a grab for his wrist. He wants to tell Jihoon he loves him, because it fucking hurts, but he’s put off by how swollen his jaw feels and then he’s caught up in another coughing fit, and for a while all he can do is slump in the chair and try to breathe, for Jihoon.

“I’ve got you—it’s okay. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

The details of their surroundings filter in slowly, leaking in around the overpowering awareness of
his broken ribs and the ache of his fingers where they’re clenched in Jihoon’s hoodie. The dim room, grimy windows, peeling paint and cement floor.

“I—” Seungcheol forces out when he can breathe again, and Jihoon has the kindness not to say anything about the drool that runs past his split lip and down his chin, just daubs it away as gently as he can. “I love you.”

Cheap Suit tilts his head back and laughs, the sound mirthless and hollow. “Aww—loverboy come to your rescue. That’s touching.”

Something slides, shadowy, across Jihoon’s face. Half-concussed as he is, Seungcheol’s not sure if it’s pity or anger.

He tries to reach for Jihoon again, but Jihoon spins around in an instant and the gun in his hand gleams as darkly as his eyes.

“You—you.” He seethes, pointing the gun at Cheap Suit.

“You—don’t!” Seungcheol croaks.

Jihoon freezes, his instinct to protect at war with the sudden, furious screaming inside his head.

“Cheol,” Jihoon says, slowly, “He deserves it. He hurt you.”

Seungcheol shakes his head weakly. “It doesn’t matter Jihoon. It’s done. Pulling that trigger—it’s a slippery slope. You’ll never be the same. I don’t want that for you.”

Jihoon’s brain doesn’t seem to be working properly; he feels dazed, almost numb, like he’s been drugged or wrapped up in cotton wool – but unstable as well, thrumming with repressed energy. One false move and he might fly apart.

Jihoon's hand is shaking, he can feel it. But Seungcheol isn't watching that. He's still watching Jihoon's face, head shaking, one leg braced against the floor, slumped in the chair, still making pained sounds of protest, or anger.

He fights to keep his voice level. “He doesn’t deserve mercy Cheol.”

Seungcheol wonders if it’s the same as before, if it’s a cycle on the cusp of repeating itself.

Jihoon like himself, with his focused intent and his finger shaking around the trigger, staring down somebody he wanted, needed to kill. Seungcheol, like his father, with the same death-gray skin, the same bloodshot eyes, the same barely controlled despair in his words.

“Don’t—please.” He pleads, and suddenly his father’s last words make all the sense in the world.

He doesn’t want Jihoon to repeat his mistakes.

He'd tried to do the right thing, to walk away before they'd gotten in too deep, but they'd already passed the point of no return. Evidently they passed it some time ago and failed to notice until they were on the brink of giving everything for one another.
Killing for each other.

Seungcheol closes his eyes and wonders what he's done to deserve this kind of love. He's never thought he'd care about somebody so much, to be lucky enough to fall so hard for a person who loves him back with the same abandon.

But Jihoon ...

Seungcheol feels he can’t even breathe in the face of so much emotion, the open adoration he sees on Jihoon's face. Seungcheol feels naked all the time; as if Jihoon's taken the measure of him, laid his heart bare, and maybe that's exactly what Jihoon's done.

“Jellybean.” Seungcheol whispers again and he sees Jihoon’s grip tighten fractionally on the gun, but instead of launching into a killing spree he lowers it instead.

Jihoon returns to his side, presses his forehead against Seungcheol’s and they just hold each other.

Seungcheol senses the other hovering, bewildered. Yoongi is standing near them, prepared to cover if there is a threat, but otherwise he lets them have their moment.

“That’s touching Seungcheol—really.” Namjoon says, patting him gently on the shoulder. “You don’t want Jihoon to get his hands dirty, but do you have a problem with Yoongi killing the guy?” He says, tipping his head at a sputtering Cheap Suit.

Seungcheol grins and shrugs his uninjured shoulder. “Help yourself.”

Namjoon turns and nods at Yoongi.

“No—wait-“ Cheap Suit tries to protest, just as a sniper round slams into his neck.

Yoongi’s good at his job, the shot doesn’t kill Cheap Suit instantly—instead he chokes and gurgles around mouthfuls of his own blood until the light dies in his eyes. A fitting, slow, agonising death.

Seungcheol doesn’t let Jihoon watch, he hugs him close, tucks Jihoon’s face into his neck and breathes him in. Jihoon’s shaking beneath his hands, heat bleeding through his sleeves and into Seungcheol’s palms, and Jihoon’s sobs echo unsteadily in his ears.

“Can you stand?” Namjoon asks, hooking an arm around his back.

“Yeah.” Seungcheol lies, delirious with relief as he moves to bear his own weight on very shaky legs.

“Look at you—getting all soft and domesticated. I had to see it to believe it.” Namjoon chuckles fondly.

Seungcheol’s sure he says something, possibly disparaging, because Namjoon laughs, but Seungcheol doesn’t hear what he says in response, because as soon as he’s vertical, his pulse surges in his ears, and a tingle rushes from his fingertips, washes his body with numbness. He clings to consciousness, ragged and disjointed, but his legs give out beneath him. He's falling, and he doesn’t remember how to catch himself.

The next time Seungcheol is properly conscious, he’s lying in the backseat of Namjoon’s jeep and Jihoon is dabbing the blood off his face with a bit of gauze.
There’s a strangely familiar paramedic hovering over him, shining a pen light in his eyes. Seungcheol can hear his low, steady voice, but not what he's saying.

“Who the fuck are you?” He asks the paramedic. Then to the car at large. “Who the fuck was stupid enough to call the paramedics?”

“That would be me.” Jeonghan speaks up, poking his head from the front seat. “Seungcheol—Joshua—Joshua—Seungcheol.” Jeonghan nods through introductions.

‘Joshua’ cleans the cuts and bruises, puts pressure bandages on the worst of them, and wraps Seungcheol’s broken wrist. It’s all finished with a handful of what Seungcheol’s pretty sure are illegal painkillers and a half a bottle of water.

“That should knock him out for a bit—don’t expect much coherency for the next few days—they’re pretty strong drugs.” Joshua says, snapping off his surgical gloves.

“Shouldn’t we take him to the hospital?” Jihoon’s voice wavers.

“No—no hospital,” Seungcheol mumbles.

He can hear them talking from what seems like far away, and he’s having trouble breathing now, trouble keeping his head from dropping to his chest.

Seungcheol doesn’t remember much from the next 48 hours. What he does recall is Jihoon waking him up at unrecognizable intervals to ask him long streams of meaningless questions while carding gentle fingers though his hair; and at one point leaning over a basin, with a cold cloth on the back of his neck, thinking he was going to die.

He’s suffered some kind of concussion obviously, but when he regains consciousness again, he’s lying in a bed in the safe-house.

“How are you feeling?” He croaks hopefully.

“I’m here Cheollie!” Jihoon’s voice murmurs, hand closing suddenly, affectionately on Seungcheol’s arm, soft fingers wrapping around his uninjured wrist.

With the most critical details accounted for, Seungcheol takes a moment to assess his own state. It’s not promising. His arm is in a cast, immobilized in a sling, bound up close against his chest. His legs are tangled in the sheets, aching and itching with sweat.

He’s been undressed and redressed, all his cuts cleaned and bandaged. He aches all over: his eyes, his fingernails, his bones.

He turns his head and finds Jihoon, folded in an armchair pulled up close to his bed, eyes wide and anxious.

Seungcheol frowns. “Why,” he tries, not quite a question. His throat is dry.

Jihoon leans over, kisses him on the forehead and scoops something up off the bedside table – a pill bottle, which he rattles enticingly in Seungcheol’s direction. “Think you can manage these?”

Seungcheol nods and Jihoon helps him lift his head enough to swallow down a couple pills, followed by a bit of water. It seems to take far more energy than it should, and Seungcheol slumps
back against the pillow when he’s finished, exhausted. “Why are you sitting over there?”

Jihoon brushes the hair off his forehead. His fingers are cool on his skin. Soothing. “Cause I didn’t want to leave your side.”

“No, I meant—why aren’t you in bed with me?” Seungcheol croaks.

“Joshua said you were concussive and somebody has to keep an eye on you as you sleep.” Jihoon murmurs, running his fingers over the newly-formed bruises. Seungcheol feels the heat of blood rising to the surface, the slight tenderness beneath the pads of Jihoon’s fingers, each bruise—obliterated beneath Jihoon’s careful attentions.

“Well—I’m not concussed anymore.” He huffs

The first brush of lips over the bruise on his jaw is barely noticeable. Seungcheol can feel a shiver rolling across his flesh, goose bumps pushing to the surface.

“I don’t want to roll over on your injuries.” Jihoon says, laying his lips lightly on the darkened skin.

“Fuck that!—You won’t, you’re tiny.” Seungcheol’s arm is aching, but he lifts it slowly, reaches a hand up to cup the back of Jihoon’s head. “You’re making everything feel better. All I wanted the last few days was to hold you. So, please—“ he says, holding his arm open with effort.

Jihoon slides out of the arm chair and slips onto the bed, settling in the crook of Seungcheol’s good arm. Seungcheol wraps an arm around him and tugs him close, Jihoon’s leg alongside his, Jihoon's cheek on his shoulder. Not quite spooning, but close.

“Tell me what happened. How did you end up leaving Namjoon’s Villa?”

Jihoon takes a deep breath, “Well….

“And then I kept running over the guys and he just wouldn’t die Cheollie. So, I got out of the car, kicked him in the head, left Jeonghan by the side walk and drove into the docks. My breaks must have got fucked up when I ran that guy over—cause they stopped working once I rounded the corner and I drove straight through this barricade. This guy started shooting at me—but then he died—then everyone was patting me on the back and congratulating me. It was very confusing.” Jihoon finishes.

Seungcheol smiles, despite himself. He knows Jihoon’s driving well enough to imagine that scene. “That’s not an explanation, that’s a romantic comedy gone wrong.” He says, and pulls away to look at Jihoon’s face. “You know you could have told that story a little differently and made yourself out to sound a lot cooler.”

Jihoon smiles sheepishly. “Ah, but I wouldn’t lie to you. You’re safe now, that's really all that matters.” He whispers. He curls even closer beside him and drapes an arm over Seungcheol's chest, protective warmth, so disconcertingly careful.

The fingers of his good hand fit neatly under Jihoon’s ass and it takes no strength at all to tug Jihoon up, bring his mouth in close, and kiss him. Jihoon’s hands immediately land on skin, and Seungcheol leans into the touch, everything about it familiar and comforting.

“I’m sorry I put you through this,” Seungcheol whispers, barely audible, and Jihoon’s hands still for
a moment; it needs to be said, even if Jihoon never seems to need to hear it, but Seungcheol feels better. He's profoundly grateful for everything they've found with one another, and sometimes they both need to be reminded.

Seungcheol kisses Jihoon with purpose, hoping it conveys everything they don't often say. “Thank you for finding me.”

Jihoon breathes out a laugh. His smile is softer, less brittle than it was an hour ago, and Seungcheol realizes it's starting to sink in. He's home. With Jihoon. Exactly where he belongs, where he's always belonged.

“Of course I did, Cheol.” His hand strokes lightly down Seungcheol's side, mindful of his cracked ribs, coming to rest on his hip. “You came for me.”

Seungcheol chuckles, drowsy. “I'll always come for you, Jellybean,” He says, tone low and lascivious as he attempts to wiggle his eyebrows.

“I can’t believe,” Jihoon grins, “you've managed to turn a romantic moment into cheap innuendo.”

Seungcheol’s answering laughter is cut short by—“Ow—hurt—ow hurts to laugh—ow.”

When Seungcheol wakes up hours, maybe days, later, to the sound of Jihoon singing in the shower – his voice is actually pretty good, which is no more surprising than anything else about his Jellybean – he feels almost human again; which is to say that he still feels like shit, except it’s manageable, instead of crippling.

He also smells like the inside of a Hoshi’s laundry hamper, and so – because he’s done minimizing his risks where Jihoon is concerned, he works his way gingerly out of his clothes and heads for the shower.

Even with the lovely sedatives pumping through his system—he feels like a walking bruise. A glance at his reflection in the bathroom mirror confirms that he looks like one too.

Jihoon, to his credit, only screams bloody murder a little when Seungcheol pulls the curtain back and startles him.

“Jesus Christ Cheollie—what did I tell you about shower surprises? There is a reason Psycho is on my no watch list of horror movies.” He pants.

There’s shampoo in his hair, sticking it up in fins, and Seungcheol is irrationally jealous that Jihoon is making soap hairstyles without him.

Jihoon braces his hands on his hips and looks very disapproving to see Seungcheol out of bed. “What did I tell you about doing out of bed? Hmmm? Do you know how many drugs are floating around your system? Enough to tranquillise a bear—you need to be horizontal.”


The disapproval melts of Jihoon’s face instantly, and he presses a kiss to Seungcheol’s forehead. “Yes, of course baby.”
Step one is a dry-cleaning bag and a whole lot of waterproof first aid tape around Seungcheol’s cast; a process that isn’t exactly unfamiliar to Seungcheol, who broke his arm in tenth grade.

His entrance to the shower is less than graceful – he almost trips over the lip of the tub, but Jihoon catches his arm and boosts him over.

The water is hot enough that it feels like it’s stripping off the first layer of Seungcheol’s skin. It feels amazing. Seungcheol tips his head back against the generous stream, and Jihoon makes a soft noise in the back of his throat like maybe he’s choking. He puts a hand, flat and warm, at the small of Seungcheol’s back, pushes it up until his fingertips curl over Seungcheol’s shoulder, and holds it there, as if to keep Seungcheol in place.

His bandaged hand feels heavy and helpless, but he puts his good one through his hair, which is crusted with so much old hair gel that it makes him shudder – or maybe it’s the way that Jihoon’s hand slides across his back, from one shoulder to the other, fingertips kneading at muscle.

“Sit down, I’ll fill the tub and you can have a nice bath.” Jihoon encourages, voice an easy lull against Seungcheol’s ears.

“It’s fine I can stand,” Seungcheol says.

Jihoon gives him a sympathetic look, as if to placate a child, leans up to whisper in his ear. “I wasn’t giving you choices.”

Seungcheol breathes a heavy sigh and turn slightly to face him. “Fuck me,” he says.

Jihoon’s voice cracks, “What?”

“I said – fuck me. I want to feel something other than pain.” Seungcheol leans forward, pressing his good hand flat against the slick shower wall and closes his eyes, listening to the roar of the water, feeling it beat against his back.

Jihoon leans over him, a line of slick skin and heat, with his half-formed erection nudging between Seungcheol’s cheeks. He presses his lips to the back of Seungcheol’s neck, almost too lightly to be a kiss. “Not that I don’t appreciate the offer, Cheol, but you’re a wreck at the moment.”

“I’m not.” Seungcheol huffs.

Jihoon puts a hand on Seungcheol’s hip, fingers pressing lightly against a deep bruise. Seungcheol hisses through his teeth, the shocked inhalation sending a fresh spear of pain through his ribs.

Jihoon’s hand on his shoulder holds him still, keeping him from curling in on himself as Jihoon whispers, “Easy, Cheol, easy now,” until Seungcheol can control his breathing enough that it doesn’t ache so damn much.

“Okay Jellybean,” he concedes finally, “you may have a point.”

“Amazing how that happens,” Jihoon laughs, kissing the back of his neck again. “Now let’s get you washed. And when you’re feeling better—I promise, I’ll fuck you through the mattress.”
patter into the warm, shallow bathwater. Seungcheol is a mess of bruises, so much so that it must hurt just for Jihoon to touch him, but he’s not objecting.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Seungcheol announces, suddenly.

Jihoon dips the sponge again, tries carefully to clean a stubborn streak of something that looks like motor oil from the back of Seungcheol’s neck. “You think I’m gonna let anyone else wash your naked ass? Don’t worry about it, Cheol. I always wanted to be a nurse.”

Seungcheol’s eyes flit away from the dripping faucet and lock on Jihoon’s face, “That’s not what I—wait—really?”

“No,” Jihoon laughs, “I actually wanted to be a classical pianist.”

“And how close did you come?”

There’s little he can do but shrug, "I was set for three different auditions in my final year of high school."

"And?" Seungcheol presses, obviously deeply curious now.

“There was no ‘and.’” Jihoon replies flatly, setting the sponge aside and reaching around Seungcheol for the bottle of shampoo on the bathtub ledge. “I didn’t go. I got nervous—stage fright. My parents were furious. But I believe everything happens for a reason—because shortly after, I met Dr Raine, and eventually, I became the criminal hacker you know and love.” He grins.

Seungcheol is silent for a beat, seemingly considering that.

“A lot of people think their future is already written and you only get a say in the—minor choices. Honestly—I don’t give a shit.” Jihoon says with a shrug. “I just do what makes me happy and—it has yet to fail me.”

Seungcheol snorts softly. “True. But, what I meant was—you don’t have to leave the city. It’s probably best that I do—but if you wanted to stay...”

“Cheol—“ Jihoon interrupts sternly. “I want to be with you. Wherever that takes me. If that’s another city, another country—the middle of a fucking forest—I don’t care.” He says, reaching up to grab the shower head.

Seungcheol’s brow forms hard creases, and Jihoon uses a hand to shield his eyes from stray shampoo bubbles, running down from his hair. “I just know you have better work opportunities here. I don’t want to be the reason you stop having a life and a career.”

“You’re not. Don’t even think it.” Jihoon says softly, stroking a hand down Seungcheol’s arm fondly. “I can freelance, I can start my own business. My job is mobile and I can even live without it. But, if the last two weeks have taught me anything—I can’t live without you and I don’t want to ever try again.”

He expects a counter argument at best, uncomfortable silence at worst. Something in keeping with the surreal tone of their exchange: confessions and retreats and Seungcheol’s stubborn, restless stillness.

But this time, Seungcheol simply nods in acceptance, and Jihoon thinks he can see his smile reflected in the bathtub faucet.
The bath water turns cold far too quickly. Seungcheol winces as Jihoon gives him an arm to boost himself out of the tub, hands him a towel once he’s steadied himself. Whatever drugs that paramedic left for him have taking most of the shine of fever out of his eyes, but it’s easy to tell that he’s not all there, and won’t be until he’s able to wean himself off.

By the time he’s wrapped in a towel and shuttled back to the bed with a glass of water and another handful of pills, Seungcheol is clearly tired.

Jihoon safely perches him on the edge of the bed, and starts looking for fresh clothes to wear, but Seungcheol catches him by the wrist and reels him back.

“I was so scared, Jellybean” he says, looking painfully serious about it in a way that makes Jihoon’s heart run just a little too fast. “I thought I’d never get to see you again.”

“Me too. But that didn’t happen—we’re here now.” Jihoon says, confidently.

Jihoon gets into bed with him, pulling the blankets up around his shoulders and tucking him in like a little boy, running his fingers through Seungcheol’s damp hair when Seungcheol rests his head on Jihoon’s thigh.

“So, if we’re not staying here, where shall we go?” Seungcheol asks sleepily, holding back a yawn.

“I hear the southern tip of the country is very mild this time of year. I could find us a nice little house by the beach where we could eat ice cream every day and fuck into the wee hours. How’s that sound?”

“Awesome,” Seungcheol can’t hold off his yawn this time, and afterward he has to smother an equally wracking groan against Jihoon thigh. “I want all of that. The small house by the beach. Somewhere urban, but quieter than the city. Somewhere you can do computer things and I can—actually be a mechanic or something. We can go on bike rides and get a dog and I’ll finally get you that moped. You get started on that Jellybean.”

By the time he falls asleep, Jihoon already is.

They spend the rest of Seungcheol’s convalescence laying low in the safe-house while Jihoon makes some immediate short term and long-term plans for both of them.

Seungcheol gives up on the analgesics Joshua supplied after three days of almost non-stop complaints about how it makes the soles of his feet itch, and thereafter makes due with over the counter medication and Jihoon’s slow, attentive blowjobs to help him forget that he feels “like someone stuck a straight razor up under his ribs.

He sleeps a lot, because it speeds up recovery and he’s not much help with packing when he’s got a fibreglass cast, heavily medicated, and his bruises won’t really let him lean anywhere comfortably yet.

Jihoon hovers, like he thinks Seungcheol might fall over at any moment, like maybe he never wants to leave the house again, which is kind of awful. Seungcheol feels like a terrible boyfriend.

“Jellybean?” Seungcheol shifts on the bed when he hears Jihoon enter, scrubs his hand across his
face and smothers a yawn to spare his ribs the effort. “When did you get in?”

“Half an hour ago. Hungry?”

“Famished.” Seungcheol pulls himself up on the pillows, a little unsteadily, and accepts the takeout container and a pair of chopsticks from Jihoon.

He’s not doing a fantastic job of eating with his broken hand. But he has an acceptable enough chopstick-to-mouth ratio that he’s going to consider it workable.

Jihoon obviously doesn’t think it’s workable, and almost immediately takes over, tucking a napkin into Seungcheol’s T-shirt and feeding him.

“Any word from Dr Raine yet?” He asks once he’s finished eating.

Jihoon shakes his head, “Nothing. But he can take care of himself.”

Seungcheol picks a bit of rice off his grubby T-shirt. “Still—he did help us out. We should make sure he made it out okay.”

Jihoon snorts, closing the empty takeout container and tossing it towards the garbage can. “It’s his fault we got into this shit in the first place, so frankly I don’t-“

“Jellybean.” Seungcheol drawls, deliberately cloying, and is briefly comforted by the scowly little furrow of Jihoon’s brow. “We’re okay, we’re safe. The guy helped us out in the end.”

Jihoon sets his teeth into his lower lip, just a little, like he’s uncertain or maybe worried. His eyes blink twice, owlish through the lenses of his glasses “Yeah—I know. Just—hate seeing you like this and I need to blame somebody.”

“Everybody who deserves the blame is long dead. And it’s not so bad, I feel better every day.”

Seungcheol smiles moving to sit up in the bed—which he’s suddenly aware has 300% more pillows than it did before he fell asleep.

In fact—he’s certain there are more pillows in his bed then there should be in the entire safe-house. It’s almost as if somebody went out and bought a whole pile of pillows and then double stacked them along the edge of the bed.

There’s extra blankets too; heavy ones tucked in around his legs effectively cocooning him in. He’s like a fucking caterpillar about to metamorphasize here.

He gestures vaguely to the pillow/blanket structure around him. “What—what’s this?”

Jihoon seems to be carefully—deliberately not looking at him. “Can you be more specific?”

Seungcheol releases a pained little sigh as he shifts his weight from the good side to the bad. “Did you build a pillow fort around me?”

Jihoon looks towards the window, actually blushing, “I wouldn’t call it that—it’s a neat arrangement of cushions that keeps you in place while you’re sleeping and shields you from the horrors of the outside world.”

Seungcheol’s laughter is painful, but worth it, “So—in other words—a pillow fort?”

The colour along Jihoon’s cheekbones gets deeper, “Yes. Okay—maybe.”
Seungcheol shakes his head in bewilderment. Although he must admit he is feeling safely cocooned and cozy, “Why, on earth—“ he begins to ask.

Jihoon’s face scrunches up adorably. “I had to go out for a bit, I didn’t want you to roll off the bed and injure yourself.”

Seungcheol blinks at him. “Because I do that a lot?”

“Well—you do get yourself in all kinds of trouble and serious injuries. Who knows what you’re capable of in your sleep. I had to be sure you wouldn’t roll off anywhere while I’m not here to watch you.”

Seungcheol laughs, thumping his head against the pillow. “So what? You’re planning on treating me like precious glass for the rest of my life?”

Jihoon raises his eyes sharply at the question, catching Seungcheol in a hard stare. “Yes. Yes, I am. That’s exactly what I’m planning on doing Seungcheol.” He says, dark-edged, deliberate. Each syllable matching the movement of his body as he unfolds from the armchair and stalks over to the bed.

“When you’ve recovered, I’m going to wrap you in cotton wool. Then in a whole pile of bubble wrap. I’m going to get padded walls and ceilings and floors and build pillow forts around you for the rest of your fucking life. I’m going to get you fitted with a tracking collar, so when you leave the house I’ll be able to trace every step you take, that’s even if I let you leave the house again. I might keep you under house arrest, or better yet—restrain you to the bed.” He warns, his hands are on the edge of the headboard, effectively bracketing Seungcheol where he’s slumped against it, and his eyes are unrelenting but surprisingly soft. Almost sympathetic. “There’s nothing I won’t do to keep you safe Seungcheol. Have you got a problem with that?”

Seungcheol makes a very small, very timid sound. “No Sir.”

For a tiny bespectacled man, Jihoon does an impressive imitation of a thundercloud.

“Good. Now, lie back down in your pillow fort.” Jihoon says, placing a hand on the centre of his chest.

Seungcheol slides down in between the pillows, in no real position to argue.

Jihoon, so he’d heard, had the balls to bankrupt Min Yoongi and give him pretend Chlamydia when he disrespected him. He’d also told Kim Namjoon to go fuck himself, then roped everyone together in their search effort to find him. Despite being told he couldn’t partake in the rescue mission, he’d shown up anyway and ran a man over several times with his car, then proceeded to save everyone from a very sticky situation in the docks by driving his car through a barricade to clear a path.

He did all that to save Seungcheol, and he didn’t even have to fire a gun.

Seungcheol’s never felt so fucking claimed before, and God, he wants it, wants to belong to someone, wants to allow Jihoon liberties he’s never given anyone.

Once he’s comfortably nestled back into the fort, Jihoon settles across his hips, with one hand braced on Seungcheol’s chest. Seungcheol grins up at him, equal parts fond and predatory.

“Is this the part where you restrain me to the bed and we have sexy times?”

“No,” Jihoon responds; but he’s biting back a smile as Seungcheol’s mouth curls into an unhappy
pout. “I’m going to smother you with a pillow.”

“All for the best, I’m sure.” Seungcheol nods magnanimously. “Put me out of my misery.”

“Oh shut up!” Jihoon silences him with a kiss, both hands seizing in his hair, and Seungcheol’s laughter humming against his mouth.

Jihoon’s hand barely rubs over his rapidly hardening cock when they’re interrupted by a sharp burst of knocking.

“Knock—knock—*Oh my god, get a room!*” Namjoon says from the door, shielding his face with a bouquet of pink roses.

“We *are* in a room.” Jihoon points out.

“Oh—well—then at least put a sign up. Warn a brother or something.” Namjoon says, when he finally collects himself and manages to stop looking flabbergasted.

“And should Seungcheol *be* partaking in extraneous extra-curricular activities?” Jeonghan tuts, joining him in the doorway.

Jihoon gives him the middle finger as he climbs off Seungcheol, barely contrite at Jeonghan’s stern expression and crossed arms.

“You look remarkably better? How are you feeling?” Namjoon asks.

“Better every day—Are those flowers for me?” Seungcheol asks.

“Yes, they are—Is that a pillow fort?” Namjoon replies.

Jeonghan rolls his eyes. “Namjoon simply insisted on stopping to buy a get-well gift. I told him to buy the basket of mini muffins. He decided to buy you flowers. Pink flowers.”

“Fuck off with your genderization of colour.” Namjoon snaps, comically offended by the criticism.

“I know you guys what to have a private chit-chat.” Jihoon speaks up, heading towards the door. “But, keep it brief—Cheollie needs his rest.”

Seungcheol sits up with awkward stiffness, sliding towards the head of the bed so he can lean against the wooden headboard. “I’m glad you guys are here, so somebody else can witness Jihoon going Stephen King’s *Misery* on me and forcing me into this pillow fort.”

Namjoon deposits the bouquet on the table, shrugging in a way that clearly indicates he can't argue with Jihoon's logic. “I wouldn’t argue with him Cheol. Look at this way—at least somebody gives a shit about your wellbeing unconditionally, and at least he hasn’t tried to break your ankles with a sledge hammer to keep you in bed.”

“Can you not give him ideas? He gives me really dark looks every time I try and leave the bed.” Seungcheol whispers.

Jihoon grins, allowing them past him into the room and then pulling the door behind him. But not before throwing Seungcheol a look over his shoulder that perhaps suggests there will be *even more* pillows in the pillow fort the next time he sleeps.

“Shall we get down to business?”
The thing about talking business with Namjoon is that he takes an unholy amount of pleasure in ironing out the details, even ones that aren’t any of his concern.

“Why can’t you just tell me where?” Namjoon asks for the nth time.

“Cause, I don’t know yet—I’m leaving that up to Jihoon.” Seungcheol explains calmly.

Namjoon’s looking at the floor, mouth set, eyes hard. “What if you want to get back in the game? You’ve been doing this for so long, civilian life might not suit you.”

Seungcheol takes a moment to consider his answer—to genuinely, carefully think it through.

“I won’t.” He says clearly, then continues, raising his chin just slightly. “I’m tired Joon. I want a life. A family. And I don’t want to look over my shoulder every five minutes worrying that my business ventures are out to harm them. I want out—permanently.”

Taken aback at hearing it stated, Namjoon straightens, looking cautious and surprised. “Alright. If that’s what you want.”

Seungcheol nods.

“Then consider it already taken care of.” Namjoon says seriously.

He’s in contact with someone—Seungcheol thinks, he’ll sell on Seungcheol’s businesses or perhaps even take them on himself. Yoongi’s always been looking to branch out, maybe he’ll take over his territory.

Seungcheol doesn’t ask. He isn’t going to stick his nose in where it doesn’t belong anymore.

His circle has officially spun out. He’s out of the game and Namjoon is entitled to process his assets any way he likes.

He's lived in this life long enough to know that it’s not easy to turn away from this, but there are ways around the system if you're willing to lay out a few bribes, apply pressure. He owes Namjoon—for his life and for a hundred other things. He isn't sure how to thank him for that, and he isn't sure how to feel about him in light of everything else.

Namjoon holds his hand out. “Take care Cheol.”

Seungcheol shakes his hand, squeezes it briefly, and waits a beat before saying quietly, “Likewise.”

Once Namjoon leaves, Seungcheol and Jeonghan are silent for a beat. Seungcheol shifts to lean back against the headboard and folds his arms.

“That was close. Too close.” Jeonghan says.

Seungcheol considers him, the soft musing tone of his voice. “Yeah.”

“Really puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?” One ankle crossed over the other, Jeonghan looks at his shoes, speaking quietly, as if half to himself.
Seungcheol hums in agreement. “It sure does.”

Jeonghan lifts his head to look at him. “I always knew the dangers of this life, but this time I really felt it. I nearly died Seungcheol.”


Jeonghan merely crosses his legs, leans back in his chair, and doesn’t so much as blink. “No. I meant me. I—got—shot. Didn’t you hear? Look.” He says, lifting his trouser leg up to show off his —frankly—non-existent bullet wound.

“Looks like a graze.” Seungcheol drawls, making sure his fibreglass cast comes into view as he covers his mouth to yawn.

“A GRAZE?” Jeonghan yells incredulously. “See this here?” He points to a neatly stitched wound on his calf. “That’s where a bullet—nearly ended my life.”

Seungcheol’s eyes roll into the back of his head. “Oh god.”

“I was on death’s door Cheol.” It’s amazing how Jeonghan manages to sound almost genuinely offended.

“Jesus, Hannie, get over it.” Seungcheol says pettishly.

“The angels had left heaven on their way down to collect me, but fate intervened. There is renewed purpose in my life.” Jeonghan says with distressing sincerity.

Seungcheol tosses his head back and laughs, even though it hurts.

“Don’t laugh Seungcheol. I looked death in the face. I know—no fear now.”

Regarding him, Seungcheol laughs softly. “Maybe I did die in that warehouse and this is hell.”

Jeonghan throws his hands in the air, then pelts Seungcheol with a pillow which he catches before it can upend the bouquet of flowers.

“You’re looking pretty dressed up.” Seungcheol remarks, tucking the pillow behind his back. “Please don’t tell me you put on your best suit to come visit me—that’s kinda lame.”

“This isn’t for you ya dick.” Jeonghan snaps. Then bites his lip, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m going on a date actually.”

“Yeah?” Seungcheol affects a grave expression and tone. “Well—good luck to that guy.”

Jeonghan gives him a good-natured shove and sits down on the bed next to him. “I’m getting a second chance and I’m going all out. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

Seungcheol quirks an amused brow at him. It’s a funny sensation, knowing that Jeonghan’s finally cashing in his chips in this game they can’t stop playing. Seungcheol has always thought Jeonghan would go all-in to the last, if it came to that.

“Let’s just get this out of the way. I’m going to miss you.” Jeonghan says after several silent, stifling minutes. The admission is impossibly soft, and Seungcheol forces himself not to flinch away. There’s too much history between them for this to be anything like simple.

“I’m not dying Hannie. We’ll see each other again.” He assures.
Jeonghan sighs. “I know—but it will be different. You’ll be—god knows where. And I won’t be able to talk to you every day like I’m used to.”

Seungcheol affects a thoughtful expression. “Yanno, there’s these—small things that fit into the palm of your hand. I believe they’re called—phones. I could be wrong—but I think—I think, people use them to call each other, even over great distances. Jihoon can show you how to operate one.” He says dryly.

Jeonghan levels him a look that suggests he’d like to suffocate Seungcheol in his pillow fort. “Would you shut the fuck up—I’m trying to have a moment here.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Seungcheol rolls his eyes and reels him into a hug, Jeonghan embraces it and holds on tightly. “I’m gonna miss you too. And, you’re right. We’re both getting second chances, even—third chances in my case. Let’s not fuck it up.” He tells him, and he can feel Jeonghan’s answering nod against his shoulder.

Seungcheol moves to lean out of the hug, but Jeonghan pulls him in again. “He loves you so much, Seungcheol. Remember what he would have done for you before you ever think of breaking that promise you made him.” Jeonghan remarks in a low voice, breath warm against Seungcheol’s ear.

“I know.” Seungcheol lets out a breath.

He’s healing—at least on the outside—but he can't help feeling his world’s shifted sideways, that whatever he does from here on is different because of Jihoon. It scares the shit out of him.

Jeonghan shifts back and takes hold of Seungcheol’s chin. His eyes look greener in this light, wet with tears. “Bye.”

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Jihoon checks his emails while he waits in the living room for Seungcheol, Namjoon and Jeonghan to discuss business.

He’s about to log out of his account when he gets an email from an anonymous sender, with the subject titled ‘Sorry’, but the apology isn’t for anything Jihoon might suspect.

The text reads Sorry I didn’t hang around, but I know everything went according to plan. Took Anna out of the city, moving back home. It’s for the best. Take care of yourself. Dr. R

Jihoon tracks the email back to its source using an IP address (it’s not sloppiness on Dr Raine’s part, he thinks, though he could be wrong) and traces it to an address at the other end of the country.

It’s not much to go by, but Dr Raine’s transparency lets him reads between the lines.

Farewell.

He hears the door open down the hallway, then close shut, and one set of footsteps emerging from the room.

Namjoon appears at the mouth of the corridor with his hands in his pockets.

Tortured soul, Jihoon thinks as Namjoon looks at him and nods in polite greeting, a brief hint of apprehension in his eyes until Jihoon nods back, sombre.

He understands the shadows in Namjoon's eyes now: heavy loss, empty spaces enough to drown a
man. Kim Namjoon has spent a lifetime making dangerous choices. Jihoon, of all people, knows the heavy toll those choices have cost him. He’s grateful that he can’t say the same about Seungcheol.

“I stand corrected.” Namjoon speaks up, coming to stand next to his desk. “You were right about him keeping his promise to you.”

“Guess I know him better.” Jihoon says abruptly, and Namjoon gives a short, shocked bark of a laugh, brow raising in surprise.

“I’d tell you to take care of yourself, Jihoon—but you’ve proven to be very capable of doing that on your own.” Namjoon replies. He’s gazing at Jihoon with sober focus that should be unsettling, but isn’t. That quiet, intelligent regard seems to look right into him.

Jihoon nods. “Sure am. Still—it’s nice to hear.” He says, offering his hand.

Namjoon shakes it with a grin, then his eyebrows raise as he registers the memory stick Jihoon has placed in his palm.

“What’s this?” He asks, examining it curiously.

“A thank you gift. For helping us out.” Jihoon points out with a brief shrug. “I know you didn’t have to, and I know the risk involved in involving yourself and your crew in helping pull Seungcheol out. I also know he owes you a lot of favours and even though you can’t put a price on saving somebody’s life—a lot of people died for the code on that memory stick, it’s gotta be worth a lot for a guy like you.”

Namjoon nods, gives Jihoon an evaluative look. “Won’t you need it—to start afresh?”

“It’s just money.” Jihoon makes an effort not to sound flippant. “Besides—I can just make my own.”

It starts with a gorgeous morning, the room soft with early light and a deliciously cool breeze sneaking in through the open window. Seungcheol lazes about in bed and debates the merits of joining Jihoon in the shower.

He loves showering with Jihoon—slick skin under his tongue when he licks water off of Jihoon’s shoulder blades, and the way Jihoon patiently allows Seungcheol to play with his shampoo-frothed hair while discussing their packing and moving plans—but he’s still not quite awake, and the thought of dozing just a tad longer is too tempting to ignore.

He rolls over onto his stomach and smothers himself with Jihoon’s pillow. Oxygen deprivation is a worthy sacrifice to make in exchange for the spicy-crisp scents of Tom Ford and overpriced hair gel.

Feeling relaxed and largely pleased with life, Seungcheol lets his mind drift from one random thought to another. Breakfast, motorcycles, Jellybeans, packing, sexy times with Jellybean, and—banana milkshakes for some unexplained reason.

And somehow his mind trips onto a half-forgotten path, a string of memories from his youth.

He heaves himself up out of the bed, and rummages around in the bedside table until he finds what he’s looking for. His father’s gun.

He drops back onto the edge of the bed, inspecting it.
He thinks about those years after his father died, the rootless free-for-all that his life became. Staying out late into the night, the bloodshed, the violence, wired on drugs and possibilities, before coming back to his apartment and sleeping the sunlight away.

At the time, he believed he was living life to the fullest, had thought that shaking hands with criminals and wiping blood off the barrel of his gun every night was a grand adventure.

Christ, he’d been such an idiot.

The shower cuts off and Seungcheol jolts, the abrupt change in ambient noise as good as a claxon call to his paranoia-trained senses.

He sits motionless, muscles aching with tension, heart thudding a heavy percussion to the soft sounds of Jihoon stepping out of the stall, humming to himself as he dries off.

_Jihoon._

The unexpected star at the centre of his orbit. His beautiful Jellybean, who is the strongest person Seungcheol has ever met, who wants to live on and be happy with him despite his fucked up past.

Seungcheol looks down at the gun in his hands, that part of his life that’s snared in the memories, wraps it tight with a thick layer of _don’t go there._

That isn’t who he’s going to be, not today. Not ever again.

“Jellybean?” He calls out, removing the clips from the gun, and safety-ing them.

“Yeah babe?” Jihoon replies from the bathroom.

“I wanna go for a ride—will you come with?”

“Of course.”

“Awesome. And maybe we can also get banana milkshakes after.” Seungcheol adds.

Jihoon’s laughter echoes throughout the room. “*Sure.*”

Seungcheol smiles, tucking the gun into the leather jacket draped over the armchair and pads over to the bathroom.

He’s got history to erase, but first, he’s going to harass his lover while all that lush, silky hair is still wet and adorably floppy.

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They take a motorcycle ride a little ways out of the city, to a cliff overlooking a quiet nature reserve.

Seungcheol manoeuvres to bike into a parking position like familiar territory and, hesitating only a moment, turns off the engine.

They both climb off the bike and walk over to the edge of the cliff, looking out.

Seungcheol has been—oddly quiet all morning.

Jihoon wonders if today heralds a particular anniversary, or if the ghosts of his past have simply
caught up with Seungcheol once more.

Quiet and patience are the best tactics when it comes to dealing with Seungcheol when he’s like this, —especially when he's wearing that rough edge of intensity about him like a cloak—but Jihoon's mouth opens anyway, and he hears himself ask, "What're you thinking about?"

“My dad used to bring me and my brother here.” Seungcheol says, voice wavering as he looks out over the cliff.

“Beautiful view.” Jihoon remarks.

Seungcheol nods, takes a deep breath and pulls something out of his jacket. Out of the corner of his eye, Jihoon recognises the gun in his hand as the one his father owned, and he watches Seungcheol’s fingers running along its smooth handle.

He doesn’t know how Seungcheol held on to that gun for as long as he did, how that perversion didn’t eat at his heart every time he looked upon it.

He can sympathize a little better, now, with the hopeless need that must have driven Seungcheol to carry on his dead fathers legacy. There’s a cold comfort, following in a dead mans footsteps, trying to be him, trying to repair his reputation.

But, Seungcheol is not his father, and it’s just possible his father never wanted him to try in the first place.

“Actually, that’s a lie. He only brought us here once. Just once.” Seungcheol says more tightly, gripping the gun firmly. “The plan was to go camping for a week and we lasted two days before he had to be called back to—resolve something with work.” He says—a tad bitter over the memory.

Even standing by his side, Jihoon can see the lines deepening in Seungcheol’s forehead. He looks more vulnerable than he ever has with a dozen bruises.

Seungcheol’s quiet again for some time before murmuring. “Even though it was cut short—it was a nice few days.”

Jihoon tries for a comforting smile, though of course Seungcheol’s not looking at him. Jihoon tries to follow his line of sight, but he doesn’t seem to be focused on anything, just gazing blankly at the scattering of rock and plunge of water over the cliff.

“I don’t want to carry this gun around anymore. I thought I could—leave it here. This is where he gave me my first gun—taught me how to shoot.” Seungcheol whispers.

Jihoon places a comforting arm on the small of his back. “Seems a fitting place for it.”

“Yeah.” Seungcheol says, nodding once before pulling his arm back and tossing the gun over the edge.

Watching the gun disappear in a splash into the river makes the fist that's been wrapped around Jihoon’s heart the last two weeks unclench a little. Seungcheol is going to be okay, Jihoon will make sure of that.

He knows all his bruises, visible or hidden, will heal in time.
They walk back to bike side by side, and to Jihoon’s surprise Seungcheol cups his elbow as soon as they reach it, turning him around and kissing him soundly.

Jihoon immediately pulls Seungcheol to him, hands slipping around his neck. There is an unusual urgency in the hitch of Seungcheol’s breath, but his kiss is thorough, searching, and Jihoon responds in kind.

Then Seungcheol’s mouth is on his with crushing force, and Jihoon clutches at the collar of his leather jacket with desperate hands as he opens for the hard thrust of Seungcheol's tongue. His eyelashes flutter as Seungcheol presses him back harder, pinning him to the bike seat now not just with hands, but with the full forward press of his body. Hard muscle holds Jihoon in place as Seungcheol plunders his mouth, impossible heat and unyielding strength.

He gasps aloud when Seungcheol releases his mouth, and Seungcheol leans in to press possessive kisses to his throat instead. Jihoon moan out loud at the first teasing hint of teeth, but Seungcheol catches the sound—of course he does—and bites down harder, sucking a deliberate bruise that Jihoon will never be able to hide.

Jihoon is fast on his way from interested to achingly hard, and he tilts his head back when Seungcheol noses at the underside of his jaw, baring more of his throat for that maddening mouth, letting Seungcheol mark him. He's suddenly past caring how it will look against his pale skin.

Seungcheol's hand at his hip loosens then, but only to slip back between Jihoon and the bike, cupping the swell of his ass. Jihoon's hips shift against him, rocking forward.

"Jesus Christ,” he gasps when Seungcheol thrusts back against him, rough friction as denim slides against the fabric of Jihoon's pants.

Seungcheol surprises him again when he abruptly breaks contact and spins Jihoon around to face the bike.

“Cheol?” Jihoon breathes, but Seungcheol is already answering, voice gone husky with intent as his fingers find Jihoon’s belt buckle and start slowly unclasping it.

“Promised I’d fuck you out here for everyone to see. You know I keep my promises Jellybean.” Seungcheol says, his fingers are nimble and warm, and Jihoon is finding it difficult to breathe even as his pants loosen and is shirt is pulled free.

Seungcheol’s fingers are going for Jihoon’s fly, undoing it with practiced ease and tugging his pants down his hips just a bit. He pulls down his underwear just enough to expose Jihoon’s rapidly hardening cock, and the curve of his ass.

Jihoon doesn't even have a chance to point out that there’s a squirrel watching them from a tree, before Seungcheol is grabbing him again, bending him forward over the bike seat.

“Yes!” Jihoon gasps aloud in excitement, doesn't resist as Seungcheol crowds close behind him. Jihoon's arms are braced against the handle bar and the bike seat—leather still warm from their journey here.

He can hear the clink and slide of Seungcheol's belt unbuckling behind him. There's a muted thump, leather jacket hitting the ground, and then the unmistakable sound of zipper and fabric giving way.

He can feel the naked nudge of Seungcheol’s cock between his legs, then the momentary distraction of Seungcheol's teeth at his shoulder.
It’s a relief when Seungcheol finally slides spit-slick fingers into him.

It has been too long. Jihoon shudders, the back of his head gently hitting Seungcheol’s shoulder as he tilts it back, closing his eyes. “God,” he moans. “Cheol.”

Jihoon’s body is already a disaster of hungry impatience, and though Seungcheol's blunt fingers inside him only add to the cacophony, they’re also the promise of exactly what Jihoon needs. What they both need.

Seungcheol’s touch twists and curls, teasing and rough by turns, sending jarring pleasure through Jihoon every time he hits just the right spot.

“So tight baby, always so tight.” Seungcheol hums and slips another finger inside, and Jihoon quivers, a sound caught in his throat.

He’s already making the kinds of embarrassing sounds he’ll staunchly disavow later and Seungcheol hasn’t entered him yet.

After an eternity of torment, Seungcheol slips his fingers free and bends him over the bike, ass in the air.

Jihoon’s breath comes in jarring shudders, his senses overwhelmed, his entire body alive with the giddy thrill of Seungcheol holding him down, about to fuck him out here in the open for anyone to drive by and watch.

Then Seungcheol is surging forward, curling along Jihoon's back as the wide head of his cock nudges between Jihoon's thighs.

Jihoon tries to spread his legs wider, anticipation alive beneath his skin, but his boxers are still bunched above his knees, and he can only spread them so far.

Then Seungcheol fucks forward, cock driving in hard and deep. His huge palm covers Jihoon’s hand on the seat, interlacing their fingers as Jihoon throws his head back with a sharp cry that claws up from his chest as his hole opens up for Seungcheol.

Seungcheol fills him perfectly, crushes him against the bike seat, takes Jihoon relentlessly with a single greedy thrust.

His free arm snakes forward, curling around Jihoon’s stomach in a possessive grip that aligns their bodies perfectly. Jihoon lets go of the handle bar and grasps at Seungcheol’s arm instead. Seungcheol’s muscles are bunched tight with the control it takes to hold still, and if Jihoon could do anything other than moan he would tell Seungcheol to fucking move already.

“Fuck—yes Jihoon—need you so much.” Seungcheol growls in his ear, voice going straight to Jihoon’s already leaking dick.

"Fuckin' beautiful like this, you know that?" Seungcheol’s voice is a taunting purr, violent gravel rumbling in every syllable. "Goddamn perfect. Wanted you the minute I saw you on the side of the road with that flat tyre. Knew I was going to have you one way or another—knew you were going to save me."

“Seungcheol.” Jihoon gasps.

Seungcheol's hips draw back, slow control, then snap forward again roughly, re-seating his cock so deeply Jihoon's whole body aches.
Seungcheol whines against the side of his neck, then roll his hips, shifting his cock inside of Jihoon without pulling out.

“Oh god—yes—yes—yes.” Jihoon cries.

There’s no resisting the wall of muscle restraining him, and Jihoon hums a broken sound that he thinks—maybe—sounds like a plea. “Seungcheol please!”

Seungcheol kisses the side of his neck, then surges to motion. In the span of a second, he revs from total stillness to fucking Jihoon in earnest.

Seungcheol’s length rocks roughly in and out, over and over again in a gorgeous rhythm that sets off sparks behind Jihoon's closed eyelids. Seungcheol's hand disappears from his, curls around the front of Jihoon's thigh instead. The position offers more leverage and allows Seungcheol's thrusts to snap even harder into the slick, aching heat of Jihoon's body.

It hurts, but the pain is good. It's perfect counterpoint to the mounting swell of emotions twisting in Jihoon’s chest.

It brings everything into sharp focus: the force of Seungcheol's cock inside him, the feel of strong hands pinning Jihoon to the bike, the slide along his own dick as Seungcheol finally begins stroking him in earnest.

Jihoon comes with what should be embarrassing swiftness. Seungcheol stroking his spent, softening cock until Jihoon, sobbing and oversensitive, slumps into Seungcheol’s arms.

Seungcheol comes soon after, tumbling over the savage edge of his own orgasm, sinking his teeth into the meat of Jihoon's shoulder nearly hard enough to draw blood.

He falls against Jihoon with shaky breaths, panting. Dishevelled, they hold each other upright as Seungcheol slides out and tugs his jeans back up.

Seungcheol surprises him for a final time, when he kisses him again, slower this time, more like fondness and less like staking a claim. Jihoon opens for Seungcheol's mouth, rests his hands on Seungcheol’s shoulders, and when the kiss ends they both stare at each other for several taut seconds.

“I love you.” Seungcheol murmurs, resting his forehead against Jihoon’s.

“Dammit—I wanted to say it first this time.” Jihoon grumbles and Seungcheol chuckles. His voice a fucked-out rumble that sends shivers along Jihoon's skin.

“I love you too, Cheollie.”

Packing doesn’t take as long as expected. When you’re looking to start over—you don’t want to be lugging about ancient history that weighs you down.

They don’t want to make more than one journey to the coast, so they fill the trunk and backseat of their car with possessions they can’t live without—which turns out to be not a lot when they have each other.
The safe house keys are handed over to Hoshi, and Jun will visit them shortly and drive Seungcheol’s bike over on his way.

Closing up the garage is harder for Seungcheol. It was that one part of his job that made him feel normal, even if it was just a scam.

For Jihoon, it’s the biggest and most unforgivable crime. All those sleek expensive motors just parked up, and Seungcheol hadn’t fucked Jihoon against a single one of them.

The entire crew gather to say their goodbyes. Mingyu cries like a giant puppy and clings to Seungcheol until his breathing evens out.

They make promises to visit, but most importantly, they make promises to—do something else with their lives.

Seungcheol has always been proud of his people, but he's overwhelmed by the even stronger rush of pride he feels now. There's genuine hope there, in their words, in the thoughts behind them. Hope and determination, and the idea that the future is something worth salvaging.

His voice feels tight, his chest raw with emotion as Seungcheol finally says, "Take care of each other."

They pull out onto the highway with the windows rolled down and the spring air rolling in.

It’s a pretty perfect day.

Seungcheol’s injuries have healed up rather well.

In the four weeks since his recue from the Masquerader’s warehouse, all but the worst of Seungcheol’s cuts and bruises have healed.

There are still some yellowing bruises, particularly along the left side of his jaw and over his ribs, but he doesn’t need the painkillers anymore, except when his wrist acts up. That particular injury is going to take longer to heal – the brace he has to wear frustrates him to no end, but he manages well enough.

There’s a scar just over his brow where some thugs ring cut deep into the tissue. The resulting mark flared, mottled and multi-coloured, on Seungcheol’s brow for weeks, but settled into a think pink scar.

“Poking at it won’t make it any better,” Jihoon tells him, when he catches Seungcheol prodding it.

“Pretending that it’s not there won’t either.” Seungcheol grumbles, frowning at his reflection in the car’s rear-view mirror and saying, “I’m so hideous.”

Jihoon sighs—frowns—and tries to look generally disapproving as he pulls the car out onto a nostalgic, deserted stretch of road.

Seungcheol is actually a massive drama queen if you humour him. Jihoon remembers the good ol days when he used to disappear and lick his wounds in manly stoic isolation.

“It’s a tiny scar Cheol—barely noticeable, and you’re so lucky considering. Stop being so dramatic. Fucking hell, you’re almost as dramatic as Hannie.”
“Shut up, I am not.” Seungcheol says, but there is no rancor in it. “You fell in love with this face. Don’t pretend like you’re not upset that I’ve got this massive scar on it now. I look like the phantom of the opera.”

Jihoon can’t contain the laughter that bubbles up his throat at the melodrama. “That’s the gayest things you’ve ever said.”

“I’ve said plenty of gayer things—you’re just too fucked out to take note of them.” Seungcheol laughs richly, and then he tips his head, “Hold up—what was that noise?”

Jihoon stiffness, holding the steering wheel too hard. His eyes quickly dart over the dashboard and he swallows thickly.

He puts his eyes back on the road where they belong, reaching up to straighten his glasses and wonders why his precisely buttoned collar feels suddenly too tight.

“Uhmm—nothing.” He murmurs, trying not to notice the way Seungcheol has shifted in his seat and is now staring intently at Jihoon’s profile.

“Whaddya mean nothing—the car’s slowing down.” Seungcheol says pointedly, just as the exhaust begins to sputter and choke.

“It’s nothing, chill. I got this.”

Oh shit.

This is bad.

This is embarrassingly bad.

Seungcheol is never going to let him live this down.

He’d gotten distracted, what with the packing and the moving sex and all the emotional goodbyes.

“Jellybean.” Seungcheol drawls, turning so that he’s sitting almost sideways in his seat, seatbelt straining.

Jihoon pulls the car into the side of the road and turns of the engine.

He shuts his eyes and inwardly curses himself for a few minutes, then forces his eyes to open so he can see the fond look on Seungcheol’s face. There's something too knowing there, too bright and sure and eager.

“Alright—fine, I may have forgotten to fill the car with gas, but before you say anything Cheol—shut the fuck up!”

The End.

Chapter End Notes

1) That's all folks. Another story finished. Thank you for reading Check Engine light.
2) As you know I don't get to finish many stories because of my short attention span, but I did my best and I hope the ending wasn't to cheesey.
3) Tried to give you some Jihan there, hope it was satisfying.
4) Thank you to everyone who read, commented and followed the fic. Special thanks to Raine! (Blehgah) Who really helped me improve my writing from the start of this fic till the end. Thanks buddy!
5) Please let me know what you think. Feedback is always appreciated :)
6) I have compiled my playlist for this story below. I use music for inspiration for particular chapters.

The song that inspired this AU: Seventeen-Boom Boom
Chapter 1: Silverchair-Slave
Chapter 2: Black Betty-Ram jam
Chapter 3: Queen-Bicycle
Chapter 4: Mogwai-Take me somewhere nice
Chapter 5: Pearl Jam-Black
Chapter 6: Funeral Suits-All those friendly People
Chapter 7: Silverchair-Tomorrow
Chapter 8: Audioslave-Like a stone
Chapter 9: Patrick Wilson-Lighthouse
Chapter 10: NIN-Closer
Chapter 11: Filter-Hey Man, Nice shot.
Chapter 12: Cinematic Orchestra-Build a home
Chapter 13: Pearl Jam-Once
Chapter 14: Soundgarden-The day I tried to live
Chapter 15: Nirvana-Heart shaped box
Chapter 16: Slipknot-Duality
Chapter 17: Murder by death-I'm coming home.
Chapter 18: Drop Kick Murphy's- Shipping off to Boston
Chapter 19: The Verve-Bittersweet Symphony

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!