

Last Moon Rising

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Last Moon Rising

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Summary

Jongup doesn't go looking for trouble, but it keeps finding him anyway.

Kim Himchan is definitely trouble.

Chapter 1

Fists, Jongup reflected, moved very quickly sometimes.

He just managed to duck this one, only to have a knee knock the breath out of him. Before he could recover, the other man's leg swept his feet out from under him. He hit the asphalt hard, still wheezing, and rolled to avoid a kick to the gut. Unfortunately he was outnumbered, and the next kick got him in the kidney, so hard the pain made him queasy.

"*This* is why," the man drawled from above him, "it's usually best to *mind your own fucking business*." He reared back to deliver a kick that would smash Jongup's face in (well, worse than it already was; he'd taken a few hits earlier and could feel blood trickling down his nose and the back of his throat), but was distracted by the sound of...thunder?

No; the noise resolved itself into the sound of a loud motor, fast approaching. Jongup couldn't spare his attention to see what it was, as his eyes remained fixed on the boot that could *really* ruin his day.

The boot's owner swore, and there was the sound of footsteps as he and his friends fled the scene.

Cops? Jongup wondered. The fight had gone down on a side street between rows of windowless warehouses, but he supposed someone could have seen and called for help.

The motor cut out abruptly somewhere close by, leaving Jongup's ears ringing. Or maybe that was just his head. He slumped, the adrenaline leaving him. He heard the sound of a car door opening. A pair of feet appeared in front of him, turning to knees as the figure knelt over him.

"Well, that was stupid," the figure said. Jongup managed to look up. The man smirking down at him had a black eye forming and a split lip.

"You're welcome?" Jongup wheezed. The man laughed and helped Jongup roll into a sitting position. The world tilted alarmingly and went dark around the edges.

"Put your head between your knees," the other guy said.

"Jae?" A new voice spoke up. From between his knees, Jongup saw a new set of feet approaching from the direction of the car.

"I'm good," the guy said. He still had his hand on Jongup's back.

"Were those Kang's guys?"

"Yeah. Apparently they're still pissed about last week," Jae said. "Thanks for scaring them off. We had it covered, though."

"Clearly," the other voice snorted. "Who's the kid?"

"A good samaritan," Jae said. "Saw me getting jumped and jumped in to help."

"Probably not a great idea."

Jongup's vision had cleared and he was getting a little tired of these guys talking about him like he wasn't there. He lifted his head to glare at the newcomer, who turned out to be a young guy with big Disney princess lips, wearing a pair of blue coveralls with the sleeves rolled up to reveal skinny forearms. He grinned when he saw the displeased look on Jongup's face and said hastily, "Really brave, I mean. But seriously, I wouldn't have bothered."

"Thanks a lot," Jae said. He put his hand on Jongup's shoulder. "You okay?" he asked.

"Never better," Jongup muttered. He let the guys pull him to his feet and immediately swayed. Jae grabbed him again.

"Uh oh. We'd better have someone take a look at you," he said.

"I'm fine," Jongup said. The statement was undercut when he almost fell again. His head really was pounding.

"You're not," Jae said decisively. "Dae, get the door."

The other man opened the back door of the car and between the two of them, they lowered Jongup in carefully.

"Your names are Jae and Dae?" he said a bit blearily. "Is that like..." But he couldn't seem to come up with a suitable comparison. Jae slid in next to him in the back and a second later, Dae was behind the wheel.

"Youngjae and Daehyun, actually," he said.

"Jongup," Jongup supplied.

"Well, Jongup, thanks for the help. Even if you're probably regretting it right now," Youngjae said. Jongup kind of was. But he just lay his head back on the headrest and tried not to vomit. Thankfully, by the time Daehyun steered the car to a stop, the world had stopped spinning.

Jongup lifted his head and looked out the window. They were in a large industrial garage. When Daehyun pushed his door open, the sound of pounding bass filled the car.

Jongup looked questioningly at Youngjae. "When you said I should get checked out, did you think I needed an oil change?" he asked. Youngjae grinned.

"C'mon." He helped Jongup out of the car and smiled in approval when he was able to stand on his own this time. "This may look like a mere garage, Jongup," he said, pitching his voice loud to be heard over the music. "But it's actually our one-stop shop for everything necessary in life."

"Almost everything," Daehyun corrected, coming up on Jongup's other side. "It doesn't come with, like, girls or anything."

“O-kay,” Jongup said slowly. It was dawning on him, now that his mind felt almost clear again, that he’d gotten in a car with two men he didn’t know, and they’d taken him to a creepy garage. “I might actually—” He took a step toward the open door and the thankfully visible world beyond. Youngjae took his arm.

“Seriously, we have a guy who’s an ex-paramedic. Let him check you out, it’s the least we can do.” He sounded sincere enough, but Jongup was willing to bet he could get away with quite a bit with that face of his. Under the blood and the bruising, Youngjae had pinchable cheeks and pretty eyes.

Jongup sighed and nodded. It wasn’t like he could just go to a hospital, and he wouldn’t mind knowing if he had a busted rib. Would an ex-paramedic be able to tell that kind of thing?

Daehyun led the way with Youngjae bringing up the rear. They went up a set of stairs, passing a large grey van that seemed to be the source of the music. Jongup spotted a pair of long legs sticking out the bottom. Whoever it was was rocking out to the music as best they could while lying on their back, and they had on a pair of black and white striped socks. Jongup thought of the Wizard of Oz and smiled despite himself.

Upstairs they went down a long hall lined with flyers for long-passed shows and events. The music faded to a bearable volume as they reached the last door. Daehyun knocked lightly.

“It’s us,” he said.

“Come in, then,” a deep voice came from inside.

Daehyun pushed open the door and gave Jongup an encouraging smile. He stepped into a makeshift office of sorts. The floor was covered in threadbare olive carpeting. Two decrepit couches had been pushed against the walls, taped in a few places to keep in the stuffing that was doing its best to spew forth. A huge metal desk was up against the third wall of the room. A row of large windows let in watery light through broken slats of gray blinds, and a ceiling fan turned lazily.

The room had two occupants. The first was perched on the back of one of the couches. He had red hair that stood on end above a serious, intelligent face. He wore a pair of coveralls that matched Daehyun’s. The second man was seated cross-legged on top of the desk. His hair was short and black, contrasting a pale face with dark eyes. He’d rolled his coveralls down to his waist to reveal a plain black t-shirt underneath.

“Who’s this?” the red-haired man asked. His was the deep voice that had invited them in.

“A new friend,” Youngjae said, putting a hand on Jongup’s shoulder and coming to stand next to him. The black-haired man gave a low whistle at the sight of his injuries. “Couple of Kang’s guys tracked me, Jongup here stepped in to help out,” he said.

“Looks like he got stepped *on* in the process,” the black-haired guy said, sliding off the desk and striding over to Jongup to look at the cut over his eye.

"There was some of that, yeah," Jongup said, taking half a step back warily. This guy didn't seem to get the concept of personal space.

"This is Himchan, our medic," Youngjae said. "Please excuse his crazy eyes."

Himchan shushed him absently. His eyes weren't crazy, Jongup thought, so much as *intense*: black and unreadable.

"Kang's guys?" the red-head prodded Youngjae.

"Four of them. Neck-tattoo, Specs, two I didn't recognize, probably low-level."

"Come on, this might need stitches," Himchan told Jongup. He led him back down the hall to another quasi-office, this one smaller with an uncomfortable-looking cot in one corner and a desk with what was unmistakably a first aid kit on it.

"You can sit on the desk," Himchan said. Jongup did so, his eyes never leaving the other man. He was...interesting, somehow. There was a sharpness to him Jongup couldn't quite pinpoint.

There was a small sink in the corner; Himchan washed his hands before returning to Jongup.

"You make a habit of jumping in to get your ass kicked?" he asked as he began to carefully clean the cut above Jongup's eye.

"If it was a habit, I'd probably be better at it," Jongup said. Himchan's expression twisted into a quick grin, there and gone again, but it hit Jongup like another punch to the gut. He wouldn't have thought the man's face could light up so much.

"So who's Kang?" he asked. "Rival garage?"

Himchan smirked. He lifted Jongup's chin with a finger to get a better angle. "Something like that."

He worked on Jongup in silence for a few minutes. "You don't need stitches after all, that's good," he murmured. His voice was low, soothing. "You're awfully brave to come out here with some guys you just met."

"I hate hospitals. Is my rib broken?" Jongup said. Himchan took half a step back and looked at his torso. He ran his hands down Jongup's sides and Jongup tried not to flinch away.

"Here?" Himchan said as Jongup hissed in pain. He nodded. "Can I...?" Himchan tugged lightly on Jongup's baggy gray t-shirt.

"Yeah." Jongup grimaced a bit as he pulled it over his head. Himchan helped him so he didn't have to lift his right arm all the way.

"Jesus," he muttered. Jongup chanced a glance down at himself and saw his torso was mottled with bruises. Himchan found the sensitive spot and probed it very gently. "Cracked, I think, not broken," he said. He opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out a roll of gauze. "Not a lot to do with a cracked rib but bind it up as best we can. Try to take it easy for a

while," he said. Jongup nodded and the older man began wrapping the gauze around him. He grimaced at the pressure. "I have to make it tight or it won't do you any good," Himchan explained. He paused and his fingers ghosted over his lower back. "You get kicked?" he asked.

"Yeah. Bad?"

"Looks painful. After this let's make sure you're not pissing blood." He resumed wrapping Jongup's torso. After a few turns he simply wrapped his arms around Jongup to pass the gauze around his back. Jongup held his breath, staring at the other man's face, so close to his own. There was a tiny mole on his cheek, under his eye. Himchan's expression was serious, focused. Finally he finished wrapping and secured the end with some medical tape.

"Lots of medical supplies for a garage," Jongup commented.

Himchan smiled slightly. "We have some clumsy mechanics," he said.

"I'm not stupid," Jongup said quietly. Himchan's eyes met his, narrowed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful, just--I know a gang when I see one."

"Know a lot about gang life, do you?" Himchan said. "Is that how you got those bruises? I'm not stupid either--half the ones on your chest are old."

Jongup flushed and had to look away. "Can I have my shirt back?"

Himchan handed it to him and he pulled it over his head gingerly.

"Take a piss," the medic said, pointing to a door in the corner. "If there's blood you may need to re-think your position on hospitals."

Jongup did as he was bidden, glad to be away from the other man's gaze for a minute. Something about him made him feel like spilling everything.

He peed, then peered apprehensively into the toilet. Blood-free. At least something was going his way today.

"Where do you live?" Himchan asked after he stepped back out and gave him a thumbs up. Jongup frowned at him and he rolled his eyes. "Dae can give you a lift home. It's the least we can do."

Jongup tensed at the thought. "I'm fine," he muttered. Himchan shrugged.

"Suit yourself." He went to the door and called Youngjae's name down the hall. A moment later, the other man appeared.

"You're next," Himchan said.

"I'm fine."

"Stop being stubborn and let me at least wash the blood off."

"You're leaving?" Youngjae asked Jongup, watching him edge toward the door. He nodded. "Let us take you. This isn't a great neighborhood. I mean, obviously."

For a gang, Jongup thought, they were awfully considerate.

The red-haired man appeared in the doorway. "Thanks for what you did," he said. "I haven't seen you around before." It was almost a question. Jongup shook his head. "I work in the warehouse district a few days a week," he said. The red-head nodded. "Anyway, I should go. Thanks for--thanks," he said, glancing at Himchan. But the medic was rummaging through his supplies and didn't look back.

Jongup said an awkward goodbye to Youngjae and then he was out of the garage as quickly as possible without running. Now he just had to hope no one had seen him.

He had enough problems.

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He took the long way home, doubling back and making a few false turns along the way in case he'd been followed. By the time he mounted the creaky staircase in his building, he felt ready to drop.

But collapsing here would land him between a pile of cigarette butts and a used condom, so he made his weary way up to the third floor.

His apartment was a studio, which he'd learned was just a fancy word for *room*. Everything was cramped together, the fridge just a few steps from the toilet, which was only blocked off with one wall. Jongup had hung a shower curtain where the bathroom door should have been. He'd shoved a mattress in the opposite corner, under the room's only window.

It was okay. He was used to cells. At least this one was his alone.

He forced himself to stay standing, plucking the battered kettle from the tiny two-burner stove. He flicked on the faucet, watched dully as the water sputtered out in uneven bursts, first black, then rust-colored, and finally running clear. He filled the kettle and put it on to boil.

Taking off his shirt hurt worse than it had the first time; his muscles were stiffening in protest at the day's activities.

He forced himself to look in the mirror. It only showed him from the chest up, but it was enough. The cut above his eye was deceptively small, considering how much it had bled, but the bridge of his nose had swollen to nearly twice its usual size and was the color of a smashed blueberry. He probed it gingerly and winced. He was lucky it hadn't broken.

His chest was half-covered by the bandage, but bruises bloomed out around the edges. He gingerly pressed the space above his heart and Himchan's dark eyes flashed through his mind.

The kettle whistled. Jongup pushed the other man from his thoughts and set to work with his own supply of bandages and ice packs. Lucky he had some experience.

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Himchan hesitated in the doorway until Yongguk glanced at him over his laptop. He was wrapped in his enormous black hoodie and had on the glasses he never wore outside of this office, and somehow managed to look incredibly young and about a thousand years old all at once.

"You're lurking," he observed. Himchan shrugged, leaning against the wall just inside.

"Didn't want to bother you."

"First time for everything," Yongguk said. He didn't crack a smile but Himchan barked a laugh and held two beer bottles aloft.

"Busted," he said, kicking the door shut behind him to block out Junhong's music, still blasting at top volume. "Take a break, Bbang."

No one could have gotten away with this but him, or, more to the point, no one else would have tried. Bang Yongguk had the whole intimidation thing down, half thanks to that voice of his, half down to his reputation, cultivated lovingly over the years.

If they think you're capable of anything, you don't usually have to go too far, Yongguk had said once.

He was still capable of quite a bit. He'd been outthinking everyone around him since he and Himchan were kids, making trouble in their apartment block. All the other boys were in awe of Yongguk, but Himchan sensed early that he wasn't trying to impress anyone, and wasn't looking for slavish devotion from his friends. He liked a mind at work, and had always been as willing to hear Himchan's schemes as to make up his own.

Some things didn't change.

Himchan slid one of the bottles across the desk to his friend and took his usual seat in a teal vinyl monstrosity Youngjae had found on the side of the road and dragged back to the garage. That had been years ago, after Himchan took his place by Yongguk's side, after Junhong but before Daehyun. Youngjae had been new and eager to please.

Some things *did* change.

Yongguk closed his laptop halfway and flipped the cap off his bottle on the side of the desk. Its edges were worn and scratched from years of such abuse.

"How's Jae?" he asked.

"He'll live," Himchan said. "Be sore as hell tomorrow, though, so prepare yourself for the complaints." Yongguk snorted into his beer and Himchan grinned briefly. "But honestly? He'd lucky that Jongup guy stepped in when he did."

Yongguk nodded.

"Kang's either getting bolder or more careless. Sending two of his most recognizable guys..." Specs and Neck Tattoo were widely known for obvious reasons.

Himchan considered. "So either they don't care we know it was them," he said. "Or they meant to kill him."

His tone was calm but his guts clenched at the thought. He'd been the one to find Youngjae. He'd been barely more than a kid then, with a reputation for pissing off the wrong people with that sharp tongue of his. He was too smart for his own good, never knew when to shut up.

Himchan had liked him immediately.

More than that, he'd seen his potential. Jae had a way of seeing into the heart of a person at a glance, and now he was one of their deputies, alongside Daehyun.

(Daehyun was the one who insisted they be called *deputies*. He liked naming things, and was roundly terrible at it. Himchan was certain he was to blame for the fact that *Bang's Boys* had caught on as a name for the gang. Never mind they weren't all boys; it sounded stupid. But somehow, every time he meant to tell Daehyun this in no uncertain terms, he wound up drinking one soju too many, laughing too hard, and having a great night with the younger man. One of the many powers of Jung Daehyun.)

He and Youngjae were the guys on the street, talking to the dozens of members of the gang, making sure everyone had what they needed to do their jobs. They were the faces of the group, and an attack on one was an attack on Yongguk. This would not stand.

"We need more muscle," Himchan said.

"We have a good group now," Yongguk said immediately. He didn't like new people. "I'll take care of it myself."

Himchan scowled. He hated it when Yongguk said that. He knew his friend could send a message to Kang that would make him think twice before messing with them again. But even after all these years, it made him uncomfortable to realize what his best friend was capable of.

Early on, he'd asked Yongguk why he always aimed for the kneecaps. It made Himchan's skin crawl, watching the guys writhe on the ground in agony while Yongguk just *watched*, impassive. A killing shot would be kinder.

I always think of their families, Yongguk admitted. Himchan had waited until they were both half-drunk to broach the subject. *Their friends. Half the time they don't really know who their guy is, you know? Everybody's got someone out there who loves them.*

This had struck Himchan as almost quaintly naive, not to mention easily disprovable. He thought of his own parents, long gone, and his sister. She'd changed her number somewhere

in the middle of his slow suicide. He got the message.

I don't, he'd reminded Yongguk. His friend looked at him in surprise.

Of course you do, he said. *You've got me*.

One thing you could say about Bang Yongguk was he was as good as his word.

Five years ago now, after he'd found Himchan, after Himchan had lobbed an ashtray at his head and slurred at him to *ge' th'fuck OUT*, he'd stayed.

He'd stayed and torn through Himchan's apartment until he found every last stash of pills and flushed them down the toilet.

He'd stayed and cleaned up the vomit when Himchan couldn't make it to the toilet in time. He'd wrapped him in blankets as cold sweats wracked his body. Made countless pots of ramyun and cups of tea. Taken every bit of verbal abuse as Himchan could no longer mount a physical assault.

Had gently relayed the message from Himchan's job when they "suggested" he not return to work unless he wanted them to launch an official investigation into the pills that had gone missing on his watch.

Yongguk had stayed. Himchan didn't know now how long the storm had lasted. He didn't have the courage to ask.

It had taken him over a week of true sobriety before he asked.

What are you doing here, Bbang?

Yongguk had looked at him, and it was this look that sealed his fate. There was no pity or disgust or any of the thousand things he deserved. What *was* he? He felt completely hollowed out. But Yongguk looked at him directly, even fondly, just as he always had.

I missed you, he'd said simply, and then smiled a little. *And I need you*.

He needed Himchan because he'd *sort of kind of accidentally somehow* attracted a mostly-teenaged following in Seoul, like a troop of criminal angry ducklings.

They're like we were, Channie, meaning somewhat lacking in adult supervision, meaning somewhere on the edge of expulsion or jail time, meaning in desperate need of a leader and/or purpose.

That *had* been them, once. Himchan had temporarily risen above it all, and he'd left Yongguk behind to do so.

And look where that got him.

So he returned to the fold, returned to his best friend's side. Yongguk was good at inspiring people, almost by accident. The loyalty he garnered through sheer conviction was a sight to

behold.

But people made him tired. He lost his words sometimes, needed to hole up in the dark and *plan*, in silence.

Himchan was good with people, and he never ran out of words. He could pick up where Yongguk left off, could cover when his friend needed a break. They became a gang almost by accident, once Himchan was there. Yongguk had the vision but Himchan could handle the minutiae.

It worked; Yongguk's disappearances lent him a certain mystique, and Himchan found it easy to fill in the gaps where he was needed, or to find others to do so.

Now they had a main crew of five, each an essential if unlikely piece of the puzzle making up the group's leadership. Of course Yongguk would be reluctant to add someone new.

"I still think we need a sixth," Himchan pressed. "For the garage. We should be able to pair off. Kang's not the only one out there."

It seemed like every other week there was a new crew trying to press in on their territory. Some, they'd managed to absorb into Bang's Boys (*dammit, Dae*). Others were still out there, drunk on their own delusions of grandeur. It had been spreading the group too thin; normally Youngjae wouldn't have been out on his own.

Yongguk sighed and nodded. They drank. Himchan let him think. He knew Bang Yongguk well enough to know when to push and when to let him ruminate in silence.

"Did you have someone in mind?" his friend said finally. Himchan blinked. For a fraction of a second, the kid from earlier, Youngjae's good samaritan, flashed through his mind. "You *do* have someone in mind," Yongguk said, sitting up a bit straighter.

Himchan dismissed the thought and Yongguk's words with a careless shake of the head. He'd seen Jongup with his shirt off so he knew muscles wouldn't be a problem, but he was still an unknown quantity, not to mention he looked barely older than Junhong.

(Except his eyes. Himchan wasn't sure if he'd meant to, but Jongup had been staring at him the entire time he patched him up. Himchan hoped he'd never see that much suspicion in Junhong's eyes.)

"We'll ask Jae and Daehyun," he told Yongguk. "See if they know someone we could bring in."

Yongguk nodded grudgingly. "In the meantime," he said, "we should change our drop point again."

Only a fool would keep their money nearby where anyone could get to it. It had long been one of Himchan's jobs to do the drops. Yongguk told him how much to take and he figured out where to stash it. He sighed. He'd already been venturing farther and farther afield in recent months as other crews tightened the ring around them.

They needed more muscle, *soon*.

Chapter 2

"What happened to *you*?" Park's breath was hot on the back of Jongup's ear. He forced himself not to flinch away. He turned from the manifest he was checking to face the older man. Park's eyes rested on his nose, still chaotically colored and swollen, then flickered down as if trying to see under Jongup's clothes.

His gaze made Jongup's skin crawl, but he knew how to hold his expression in a perfect blank.

"Fight," he said simply. "Guy wanted my wallet."

Park frowned. "It's dangerous out there on your own. Why don't you come back? Somebody'd always have your back."

Jongup remembered too well what it was like to have Park watching his back. Now he just watched him, period--from a distance, unless he wanted something.

"No thanks," he said. "I'm good."

Park's look of faux concern darkened. He glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard. But the warehouse was as loud and busy as ever. They probably had another minute before the foreman noticed two of his workers weren't moving.

A forklift rumbled by, temporarily distracting him, and Jongup moved down the row to check the next manifest. His chest burned with every breath. He was lucky he hadn't been assigned to the loading crew tonight, because he was certain he would have collapsed by now.

Park followed him.

"There's a job next week," he said. Jongup's heart sank. He hadn't healed from the last one yet; the previous day's fight had simply layered new bruises over the old. He barely remembered how it felt not to hurt all over.

"But you look like you need a break," Park continued after a pause. Jongup's chin jerked toward him before he could stop himself, and the older man smirked. "Rest up for the next one, Jonguppie," he drawled. "Something big's coming; I'll need my best man on it." He clapped Jongup on the shoulder hard enough to make him gasp as painful reverberations sounded through his chest. "Be in touch."

And, ominous bombshell dropped, he left Jongup alone to remember how to breathe.

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"He's perfect, right?" Daehyun enthused.

Himchan looked up from the carburetor that had been vexing him all damn morning and followed Daehyun's gaze to--well. A giant, really. He was talking to Junhong, and the

maknae was looking a bit confused, possibly because he hadn't realized humans came in a size even larger than him.

Himchan remembered the days when Choi Junhong had been shorter than him--he had the photographs to prove it. In the intervening years the boy had the audacity to keep growing long past the point most people would have looked around and thought: *good enough*.

The guy Daehyun had brought it stood almost a head taller and half a body wider.

"I don't think so, Dae," Himchan said. The younger man's mouth dropped open in indignation.

"You said muscles," he reminded him. "Have you ever seen more muscles on one person? He'd add to our *legend*, you know? People would call him--The Enforcer, or something--"

"What have I told you about naming things."

"C'mon, hyung, seriously, if he was out with us on the street, no one could *touch* him."

"That's true. How long do you think it would take someone to figure out they could just *shoot* him without even needing to get close?"

"He is kind of a walking target," Youngjae agreed, appearing out of nowhere as he was wont to do. Daehyun gave him an injured look.

"I'm thinking of *you* here," he said. "I'm thinking of your pretty face!"

Himchan snorted at the outraged look on Youngjae's pretty face, which in truth was no less pretty with its fading bruises from the week before.

"We go out with that guy it'll look like we're overcompensating," he argued.

"No, it'll look like if you mess with Bang's Boys, we will bring the full power of The Enforcer down on your *head*," Daehyun snapped.

"We don't need the full power of The Enforcer," Himchan reminded him mildly. "We have Yongguk."

This had the effect he'd intended. Daehyun deflated. He knew better than to question the vengeful power of Bang Yongguk. Just three nights before, he and Himchan had tracked first Neck Tattoo and then Specs to their respective safehouses.

Well. Not so safe, it turned out.

They had done enough damage that both men would need new nicknames if they'd survived the night; Neck Tattoo's ink was somewhat damaged and Specs wouldn't be needing his glasses anymore.

Himchan saw Daehyun's disappointment and softened a bit. He only wanted to help.

"Go get Bbang, see what he thinks," he said.

Yongguk would veto the choice, of course; he liked flying under the radar, hated being obvious. It was the reason they were all here. No one would suspect their baby-faced maknae of being a perfect shot, or guess at the sheer depth of knowledge in Youngjae's brain. Daehyun's charm could topple cities.

As for Himchan...well. He could do what was needed and never flinch. If he suffered a little insomnia for it, that was a small price to pay.

"Okay," Daehyun said, but he sounded somewhat less confident than he had a moment ago.

Himchan and Youngjae watched him jog up the stairs.

"Hyung'll say no," Youngjae said.

"Yep."

"Kang's gonna want payback for Specs and Tattoo." Youngjae's face was set, solemn. Himchan ruffled his hair and he ducked away with an indignant yelp.

"Let me and Bbang worry about that," Himchan said. "Just--stick close to the garage until we say so, all right? I'm out tonight; finally found a new drop point."

"You should sleep, then," Youngjae said immediately. Besides Yongguk, he was the only one who knew the true depths of Himchan's insomnia. "At least go rest your eyes."

Himchan shook his head and motioned at the carburetor. "I need to finish this."

Youngjae shouldered him aside.

"I'll do it."

"You mean you'll get Dae to do it," Himchan corrected, smiling. Daehyun was their best mechanic and it drove Youngjae crazy.

"Yeah, yeah. Go try to rest, seriously."

Himchan sighed and surrendered the carburetor to the younger man. He could stare at the ceiling for an hour if it would make him feel better.

*

The drive took all night, as expected. Himchan didn't mind. He liked being on the road; it made his mind go quiet for once.

The sun was just cresting the horizon when he spotted a sign for a diner outside the city. His stomach let out a well-timed growl.

"Okay, okay," he muttered, pulling into the lot. He could use a cup of coffee before hitting Seoul traffic.

He let out a small groan as he unfolded his body beside the car. His joints popped as he stretched.

His phone buzzed before he reached the diner's door. He veered off to the side of the building to answer. His stomach grumbled again. The crisp morning air smelled of grease and coffee.

"*Where are you?*" Yongguk.

"Almost back. Stopping for a bite and some coffee," Himchan said.

"*Everything went okay?*"

"Would I be stopping for breakfast if it hadn't?"

Yongguk just grunted.

"How's it there?" Himchan asked, meaning, had Kang showed up yet. Another attack was coming eventually.

"*Loud*," Yongguk said after a pause. Himchan snorted. When he'd left the night before, Youngjae and Daehyun were arguing over a list of potential new musclemen, the giant having been dismissed as Himchan had predicted.

Take me with you, Junhong had pleaded as Himchan went to the car. He'd laughed at the look on his face. But money drops were a one-man job.

Now he could hear a pounding bass over the phone.

"Is that Junhongie's music?"

"*I think he's trying to drown them out*," Yongguk said. "*They've been at it for hours. Already.*"

Himchan stifled a laugh. When Youngjae and Daehyun got started with a debate, they wouldn't let a little thing like normal sleep patterns interrupt them for long. "Come to think of it, I'll probably be more productive if I just hang out here and work for a few hours..."

"*Don't you dare. Eat and then come home.*" His friend's voice was equal parts threat and plea, and Himchan grinned.

"Try not to kill them before I get back."

"*No promises.*" Yongguk disconnected.

Himchan slipped his phone back into his pocket and shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck with a grimace as it twinged and reminded him *you're getting too old for this, pabo*.

He paused as he turned to go in, his attention arrested by movement along the side of the diner. One hand instinctively reached for the piece stashed in his jacket's inner pocket. He relaxed as he saw it was just a kid in an apron. But then--

The figure turned and Himchan saw he wasn't quite a kid after all. Saw the shadow of a bruise across his face. He didn't have to search too hard for the name.

"Jongup?"

**

The diner paid shit, but the owner was a decent enough guy. Jongup got a meal comped every shift, and until he could get full time hours at the warehouse, he needed every last *won* he made washing dishes and waiting tables.

It was a bitch with a cracked rib, though.

Chef Kyung had taken one look at Jongup's battered face and scowled.

"You up for this?" was all he'd asked. Jongup was relieved he didn't have to make up some story. He'd just nodded and gotten to work. His face had healed, more or less, over the week. But there was still a stinging in his chest when he breathed and a sharp pain every time he lifted a bus tub full of dishes.

It was still a cake walk next to the warehouse.

Today, he'd downed several painkillers before trekking across town to the diner. He took his first break after the early rush. He crouched in the alley, too exhausted to care about the thick stench of garbage and cooking oil that permeated everything.

When he heard his name, he thought it must be Kyung, come to drag him back in. He didn't expect to find the handsome medic from the week before staring down at him in a puzzled kind of way.

Jongup rose quickly--too quickly. He grimaced as his ribs objected. The other man--Himchan, he recalled--frowned and took a few steps toward him.

"What are you doing here?" Jongup said. He'd thought he remembered Himchan's face, but once again he found himself *fixed* by those eyes. The medic was studying him.

"Rib still bothering you?" he said, ignoring the question. Jongup gave half a shrug. "I told you to take it easy."

Anger flared in Jongup's chest. "I've still got rent to pay."

Himchan took another step forward and his frown deepened, only now he looked more concerned than annoyed.

"How bad?"

Jongup shrugged again.

"I've had worse."

"Hm." Himchan pursed his lips. He closed the distance between them and one hand hovered over Jongup's side. He tensed. "Can I?"

Fuck off, Jongup would have told anyone else. He wasn't sure why he didn't say it now, why instead he nodded and let the older man tug at the hem of his t-shirt until his bandages were revealed.

"I thought you didn't like doctors," he said. It took Jongup a second to answer. Himchan had the most perfect nose he'd ever seen. He blinked a few times.

"I don't."

Himchan met his eyes and once again, Jongup was transfixed. "You rewrapped it yourself?" He sounded mildly surprised.

Not trusting his voice, Jongup just nodded. It had taken him almost an hour to get the bandage tight enough.

Himchan let his shirt drop. His expression was unreadable.

"Wait here." He turned away, disappeared around the corner. Jongup looked at the door that would let him back into the kitchen, but something held him in place until the other man returned. He had a plastic baggie in his hand. Jongup could see a cluster of white pills inside. Himchan tossed it and he caught it reflexively.

"Muscle relaxers," Himchan said. "When we get hurt, the muscles and tissues surrounding the injury tend to...seize up, to try to protect the wound. Makes it more painful. Take one of those before you go to sleep."

Jongup studied the pills, then the other man. True, he didn't seem especially threatening. But Jongup wasn't sure he was desperate enough to take a random pill from a man who was clearly high up in the local gang scene. It could be anything.

He could see Himchan read this in his face. He looked amused. "You see the code on the pills?" he said. Jongup narrowed his eyes at him and then pressed one of the white oblongs against the plastic bag. He could just make out **IG-283** stamped on it. "You can look it up online. It is what I say it is." Jongup swallowed and looked back up at Himchan. He didn't especially want to point out that he didn't have a computer, and his phone was a ten-year-old flip job that barely got reception.

Himchan shrugged at his hesitation. "Or don't." He turned to go.

"Wait."

He glanced back.

"I don't take charity," Jongup said. "I'll pay you for them."

Himchan turned back fully and cocked his head to the side.

"You've got rent to pay," he reminded him, his tone lightly mocking. Jongup shook his head and he sighed. "Look, it's not charity," he said, more seriously. "We still owe *you* for helping Jae. This makes us square."

Jongup looked at the pills again, then up at Himchan.

"Okay," he said slowly. "Thanks, then."

Himchan just shrugged and winced slightly. He rubbed at the side of his neck and Jongup's eyes caught there on the long smooth column. There was a small hook of a scar just beside his Adam's apple.

Jongup lost his voice, and before he could find it again, Himchan was gone.

*

"I think I'll kill Daehyun hyung today," Junhong said conversationally.

"As long as you clean up after," Himchan said absently. He was going over the accounts, or rather, he was trying to. Junhong was pacing in front of him, radiating irritable energy.

"I'm serious, hyung. I'll be quick, just one shot to the head, *bang!*" Junhong made a finger pistol to take out his absent hyung.

"Very merciful."

"*Hyunnnng.*" Junhong was nearly whining now, and Himchan was transported back five years to a time when the maknae was still in the throes of adolescence. Every other day had seen him suffering some new tragedy. It had been enough to test even Yongguk's patience, which was usually limitless when it came to their youngest member. Years of worshipping at the altar of Bang had taught the boy to keep his emotions in check, thankfully.

But they'd been cooped up in the garage for days. Himchan had been jumped by three of Kang's guys on his way to the corner store, and while it hadn't been especially difficult to fight them off, Yongguk had decreed that none of them were to go out alone until the matter was settled.

This rule apparently didn't apply to Yongguk himself, who had disappeared two days ago. If it weren't for his nightly phone calls, Himchan would have worried.

It wasn't the first time they'd been on lockdown, but Himchan had forgotten how quickly they all went stir crazy living on top of each other like this. Thus the murderous maknae.

"Try to remember you love him, really," he told him. "Deep down."

"He never shuts up. I left him working on the van and when I passed by an hour later, he was talking *to* it."

Himchan had no trouble believing this. Daehyun swore that talking to things as he fixed them made him a better mechanic.

Tell Dae what the problem is, he'd say to the engine he was working on. *What's troubling you? Ahh, no wonder you're not feeling well--don't worry, we'll get you shipshape.*

Himchan found it endearing or insane, depending on his mood.

Today, he could sympathize with Junhong's desire for quiet. He leaned over and rifled through the desk drawer until he came up with a set of earbuds, which he tossed to the maknae.

"Go work on the bikes," he said. "Put on your music and leave Dae alone."

"I'll still know he's *there*," Junhong said darkly. Himchan passed a hand over his face, hoping the younger man would never guess how amusing he found his bad moods. They happened so infrequently Himchan couldn't help but enjoy them.

"Live with it," he said shortly. Junhong pouted and *growled* a little, which was seriously too cute for anything.

But still. Himchan sighed and snapped his laptop shut. "I'm going out."

"What? You can't!"

He fixed the boy with a glare and Junhong faltered.

"I obviously can't get any work done here," Himchan said.

"But Yongguk hyung said--the city's not safe right now," Junhong objected. Then he brightened. "Or--I'll come with you!"

"No," Himchan said. "I know a place. Kang's guys won't be anywhere close, I guarantee it."

"But hyung--"

"Stay out of trouble. Stay here. I have my cell. Do not, under any circumstances, try to kill Daehyun."

Junhong's protests followed him downstairs until he cut them off with his car door. Himchan waved at him cheerily as he pulled out of the garage.

It was good to be the hyung.

*

On Wednesdays, Jongup worked the swing shift, afternoon through close. It was a luxury, not needing to be awake in the dark, still hours of earliest morning to get to work. But the hours always dragged, so he supposed it was a toss-up.

He came in through the employee entrance and gave Kyung a wave, then tied on the half apron he wore on serving shifts.

"Busy morning?" he asked the cook. Kyung shrugged.

"Normal. Table six probably needs another coffee refill. He's been here an hour; see if you can get him to order some actual *food*, yeah?"

Jongup nodded and grabbed the coffee pot. Kyung never kicked anyone out if they wanted to linger; not unless they needed the table for other customers. But they didn't make much profit over nothing but coffee, either.

He turned to table six and stopped dead.

Himchan sat behind a laptop, a small frown on his face as he focused on the screen. Today he had on a leather jacket and--*oh*--a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

Jongup contemplated all the ways he might avoid the table, but any of them would involve questions from Kyung, and he didn't want that, so he approached on legs that felt suddenly watery.

Himchan didn't look up as Jongup refilled his mug.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"You're welcome." Jongup's voice sounded slightly hoarse and Himchan glanced up.

"Oh, hey," he said, his lips twisting into a half smile that made Jongup's toes curl.

"Hi."

"How's the rib today?"

"Better. That stuff you gave me really helped. Thanks." It had, in fact, felt like nothing short of a miracle, smoothing out the pain so Jongup could sleep deeply for the first time in weeks.

"Drugs work wonders," Himchan said, his tone slightly sour. There was a faint bruise on the corner of his jaw. Somehow, this discoloration only enhanced the perfection of his features. Jongup swallowed and made himself look away.

"Are you hungry?" he blurted out. Himchan arched an eyebrow. "I'm--supposed to ask if you want food."

The other man's eyes flickered to the kitchen. "I always want food," he said with another of his half smiles. "I was just trying to get some stuff done first."

"What are you working on?" Jongup wasn't sure why he was asking. He wasn't a chatty person as a rule, but for some reason he wanted to keep talking to Himchan. Besides, there was no one else in the restaurant.

Himchan rolled his head from one side to the other and Jongup heard his neck pop softly. "Just going over last months' accounts for the garage," he said. Jongup wondered if he was lying. The garage was almost definitely a front for whatever the gang really had going on, but it had looked like they did real business, too.

"We make sandwiches that pair really well with accounts," he said. Himchan's smile widened.

"Sold," he said.

*

"Just go sit with him already," Kyung said in exasperation. Jongup gave him a questioning look. "Table six," the cook clarified. "You've been over there all day anyway."

Jongup thought this was an exaggeration. There had been a few other customers throughout the afternoon, and he had been out in the dining room serving them, plus refilling salt and pepper shakers, wiping down tables, refilling napkin dispensers.

And, fine, checking on Himchan...

It was getting easier to talk to him, particularly when Jongup had something else to occupy him. He still found his face distracting.

"Sorry," Jongup told Kyung guiltily. But the cook waved him away.

"It's dead today anyway. Go on, have some coffee. You never know; we might get a dinner rush in an hour."

Jongup did as he was bidden, hesitating next to Himchan's table until the older man looked up.

"I've--I'm on my break," Jongup explained, feeling stupid. He'd already interrupted Himchan's work enough, probably.

But the other man smiled again. He smiled more than Jongup had expected, and now he was having trouble recalling the intent, serious look of their first two meetings.

"Good," he said. "Distract me. I'm bored."

Jongup smiled a little and slid into the booth across from him. He pulled the ceramic tub of sugar packets to himself and began doctoring up his coffee.

"Jesus. You're gonna vibrate out of here," Himchan observed, looking at Jongup's pile of sugar wrappers with wide eyes.

"I have a sweet tooth."

"Looks like you have a few."

"I just like things to taste good," Jongup said, eyeing Himchan's black, bitter, disgusting coffee.

"*Ha!* Okay, if that's how you want to think of it," the other man said, snorting. They both took sips of their coffee and made exaggerated sounds of enjoyment, laughing at each other. Jongup liked Himchan's laugh, which was undignified and unrestrained and not what he'd expected. He felt himself relax, *really* relax, for the first time.

"So," Himchan said. "You work here, you work at the warehouse."

"Yeah..."

"Opposite ends of the city; that can't be easy."

Jongup almost laughed again. He'd done *easy*. Easy was a 12x12 cell, no eye contact with the guy next to you and lights out at 10. Or maybe a monthly allowance and weekly meetings with a caseworker telling him where to go and when, a metal anklet making sure he didn't stray from his allotted zone.

Easy was overrated.

"*You* came all the way out here," he pointed out.

"You have no idea how much I needed a change of scenery," Himchan said. "And it's not the same as coming out here for work every other day."

True enough. Jongup had to catch three separate buses to make the trip. "Well. It can't be easy running a--garage, either," he said.

Himchan's eyebrow twitched and he gave Jongup a look both assessing and amused.

"I'm not the guy in charge," he said. "I'm just good with details."

"And bandages."

The smile returned, making Jongup's stomach flop. "And bandages."

"How'd you get into that? Jae said you used to be a paramedic."

"Jae talks too much," Himchan muttered. "Yeah, I was for awhile. Not really my thing, it turned out."

He looked uncomfortable. Jongup supposed the transition from paramedic to--whatever he was in their gang now--might not be the nicest story. Before he could contemplate how to gracefully change the subject, however, the bell over the front door gave a ding as a family entered the restaurant.

"I should--" Jongup said, gesturing. Himchan smiled and nodded.

"Go on," he said.

Jongup hastened to greet the customers with a hunch that the unsettled feeling in his stomach wasn't completely thanks to the coffee.

*

Himchan returned to the garage feeling refreshed. He must have felt more cooped up than he'd realized to feel so much better now.

Yongguk returned shortly after. The five gathered in the office upstairs.

"It's handled," Yongguk said without preamble.

"Kang?" Youngjae said. The leader nodded.

"Try not to wander off alone, but--you can all get some fresh air," he said, smiling slightly. Junhong let out a whoop and allowed Daehyun to hug him.

"Yah, don't stay out all night!" Himchan called after them as the three younger men dispersed. He shook his head at Yongguk. "You've got good timing; I don't think they'd've made it much longer."

His friend looked nonplussed. Himchan gave him a questioning look in return. "What?"

"I was expecting a lecture."

"When do I ever lecture?" Himchan demanded. "Well--I mean, not *you* at least." The youngers still benefited from a well-delivered lecture now and again.

"You're not mad I went off on my own?"

Oh. Normally it *would* have annoyed Himchan, being kept in the dark. He was supposed to be the second-in-command, after all. But he felt suffused with a sense of well-being. He must still be riding his caffeine high from the diner. "Since when would my being mad matter to you?" he said. Yongguk studied him.

"You're in a mood," he said finally. Himchan shrugged. There was no need for his friend to know that he'd actually left the garage for most of the day. It had made all the difference.

Jongup's face flashed briefly in his mind. His *laugh*, so bright from someone who generally seemed so world-weary.

"I had a good day," he said simply. "C'mon, Bbang. Let's get a drink."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

TW for some blood at the end.

"Mail call." A thick manila envelope was slammed onto the table next to Jongup's cutting board. He stared at it for a beat before looking up at Kyung, who was glaring at him expectantly.

"I might have put the restaurant down as my address," Jongup confessed. "When I was still-- between apartments."

It always struck him as safest not to give out his true address if it wasn't completely necessary, but he'd forgotten this particular order.

Kyung shrugged off the excuse. "So, you gonna open it?" he said. Jongup wiped his hands off slowly on his apron and picked up the package, which was dense and heavy.

"I already know what it is," he said.

"Yeah, but *I* don't, and you had it sent to *my* restaurant, so."

Jongup sighed and ripped open the padded envelope, slid the workbook out and held it for his boss to see.

The cook took it from him and studied it, then him.

"You never said you were taking your entrance exams," he said. Jongup shuffled and picked up the chef's knife again. These potatoes weren't going to cut themselves.

"I haven't even started studying yet," he muttered. The whole thing felt vaguely embarrassing--who was *he*, really, to think any school would want him? To think he could even hope to qualify? He had kept up his studies while in the group home until Lee found his practice book hidden in his mattress and ripped out all the pages. That had been the end of that.

Then, a few weeks ago, he'd seen the advertisement for the college entrance exams fluttering on the community bulletin board in the warehouse. He'd passed it a dozen times before finally calling the number at the bottom to order a prep workbook. Then he'd promptly forgotten.

Now his moment of hope stared up at him, a reminder of his own foolishness. He waited for Kyung to scoff.

"You can study here," the cook said instead. Jongup looked up at him, startled. "After your shift," he clarified. "We'll keep you in coffee and food, kick your ass if you get off track."

Jongup blinked a few times. He had worried he might not be able to focus at home. The only place he really had to sit was his bed, and once he was down, he tended to fall asleep within seconds. The warehouse had long picnic tables where they all took their breaks--they *had* actual breaks at the warehouse--but the last thing he wanted to do was let Park in on the fact that he was studying. Any sign that he was attempting to extricate himself from their arrangement would not be looked on kindly.

"Okay," he said, because Kyung was still waiting. "If you don't mind."

Kyung dropped the book back on the table.

"Nah," he said. "Good for you, kid."

*

The boy Youngjae had brought in shifted nervously in front of Himchan. He had his snapback in his hands and kept clenching it compulsively. If he didn't let up soon, he'd snap the bill in half.

"I can do whatever you guys need," he was babbling.

Himchan had his doubts. He was dressed the way all the kids on the street dressed, but his hair gave him away--it was too neat, too short. He wasn't hard like the others, he was just a boy. Probably a good student, never up to much trouble.

But Youngjae never brought anyone in without a reason, so Himchan didn't send the kid packing just yet.

"Your parents are gone?" he said. The boy--Hyunjoo--nodded.

"Yes sir. My mom's always been kind of--in and out, and--she hasn't been home now in a couple...weeks." Hyunjoo lifted his chin slightly in defiance as though daring Himchan to say something about this. Himchan was tempted to smile. Maybe this one wasn't so different from their kids after all.

"You got siblings?"

"Brother and sister. Younger."

Himchan met Youngjae's eyes briefly. Jae knew the brief; Yongguk and Himchan had always been clear on this point. They didn't mean to keep control over their territory by force alone, nor by fear. Kang's crew could fear them--Kang's crew *should* fear them--but the people who lived among them should know they could come to them for help when they needed it. Himchan and Yongguk both remembered what it was like to have nowhere to go, to be a kid alone in the world. At least they'd had each other. If they could help the kids who were like them now, they would. A boy like Hyunjoo wasn't destined to be one of their crew, but if they could help him feed his siblings, well that was good for the neighborhood, too.

"I'll find something for you close by," Himchan told him. "You're still in school?"

Hyunjoo nodded. "I don't have to go, though," he added hastily, though Himchan could see this idea pained him. He shook his head.

"Keep going," he advised. "Keep setting an example. We'll hook you up with work in the evenings."

"It's just--thank you, but--it's just our landlord's saying he'll kick us out," Hyunjoo said. Himchan sighed.

"So you need money now," he said. Hyunjoo nodded apologetically.

"How much?"

He told him. Himchan looked at Youngjae again.

"We need someone to fill in for Snail over on the south side," his friend said. "His leg's in a cast for another couple weeks."

Himchan fixed Hyunjoo with a glare. "Looks like you'll need to miss some school after all," he said. The boy wilted but nodded. "We'll get your rent paid up front. You fill in for our boy for two weeks or til he's back on his feet. By then we can get you in somewhere that works around your schooling, all right?"

Hyunjoo nodded again, his expression lightening. "Thank you," he said, bowing. Himchan grunted and waved him out.

"Dae's downstairs, he'll hook you up with details," Youngjae instructed, clapping the kid on the back as he went. He closed the door after him and turned back to Himchan.

"That was nice of you."

"Didn't do it to be nice."

Youngjae rolled his eyes. "Right, right--*if it's good for the neighborhood, it's good for us.*"

"You disagree?"

Youngjae shrugged, but with him that wasn't the real answer. Himchan waited. Youngjae questioned everything. It had taken some getting used to when they first brought him on--by then he and Yongguk had gotten used to instant obedience--but they soon found that Youngjae's questions didn't mean a challenge to their authority. He just liked to come at a thing from all angles.

"I get why we do it," he said. "People around here respect us for it; it makes it feel more like a community."

"So what's the problem?"

"I just think you and Yongguk hyung *like* being nice," Youngjae said.

"Don't ever let anyone hear you say that."

Youngjae grinned and collapsed in the other chair, knitting his fingers together across his body.

"You old softy," he teased.

"You know I could kill you and just make up an excuse to tell Yongguk later, right?"

"Pah." Youngjae waved a careless hand. "Hyung's having a hermit day, then?"

Himchan leveled him with a glare. "He's working," he said shortly. It was one thing for the younger men to tease *him* sometimes, but Yongguk was off limits. He wasn't the type to govern by fear, but there was nothing wrong with a certain level of respectful intimidation. Himchan knew Youngjae didn't mean anything by it, but he wasn't about to let him make light of the fact that their leader occasionally couldn't handle being around other people.

Youngjae's expression grew contrite. "Sorry," he said quietly. "I just meant--we shouldn't expect to see much of him today?"

Yongguk had locked the office door. This wasn't unusual in and of itself, but when he wouldn't open it for Himchan--well, Youngjae wasn't far off with his hermit diagnosis.

"We'll see him when he wants us to see him," Himchan said. These days used to scare him, the way Yongguk would just disappear. He'd done it since they were kids. Himchan still didn't know where his friend had gone when he just vanished from their apartment block for days at a time. But he always came back, so at some point Himchan decided it wasn't worth stressing over.

Much.

"Well then," Youngjae said, standing. "You working today?" He meant in the garage. They worked every day.

"Nah, you're with Junhong," Himchan said. He glanced at his phone to see the time and stood up to. "I'm going out for a bit."

"Where?"

"Just--out. Need to make sure the new shipment's working out okay on the south side, and check on Snail, see how he's healing up."

"Let him know you've got someone to take over his spot in case he's milking it?" Youngjae guessed dryly. Himchan gave him a humorless smile.

"You know Snail." The younger man had been working with them for years. The nickname was a misnomer, as he was absurdly quick on his feet. Not so quick with his eyes, though, as

he'd misjudged the distance to a car bumper while on the run from two of Kang's crew. He did seem to be taking a long time to heal. Snail was the type to get a little too comfortable.

Himchan thought it was about time to remind him what it was to be uncomfortable.

"What else?" Youngjae pressed.

"You don't need my full itinerary."

"It's just--you've been gone a lot these past few weeks," Youngjae said. "Usually someone knows where you are, but there've been like five times nobody could find you."

Himchan narrowed his eyes.

"You keeping tabs on me for a reason, Jae?"

"I notice things," Youngjae said unapologetically.

"That's true," Himchan agreed. "But hey, you know what I like about me?"

"What?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

Youngjae took the hint.

No one questioned Himchan as he left the garage, but he felt unsettled. Youngjae and his *noticing*. Now that he'd had to go and bring it up, it felt like a *thing*. And it definitely wasn't. At all.

So *technically* Himchan had been out more than usual. He'd taken to bringing work with him to Jongup's diner a few times a week. It was amazing how productive he was without the constant pulse of Junhong's music giving him a headache, or the frequent interruptions from the other members.

Plus the diner had good coffee and was far enough from the heart of the city that Himchan didn't feel the need to constantly watch his back. It was almost relaxing.

Besides which, he lived and worked in the garage, lived and worked with Yongguk and the others. It was nice having somewhere to go that was separate from all this.

It was nice to talk to *someone* who was separate from all this.

Hell. Now he was justifying it to himself.

He pushed these thoughts away. He had work to do.

*

The diner was quiet by the time he got there, between the lunch and late night crowds. He'd learned they did a modest dinner service at most, and if he wanted to work for a few hours, he

had a long window of quiet.

Himchan recognized the chef by now, who was behind the long counter today and waved him over.

"Himchan-ah," he greeted him. He had slightly bulging eyes and an overly familiar way of speaking that Himchan would normally have hated, but somehow didn't mind.

"Kyung," he nodded back.

"You eating today?"

"Come twist my arm in an hour."

The cook snorted. "Go take your usual spot, then. Someone'll be by in a sec with coffee."

"Thanks." But as Himchan turned to his favorite table, he saw it was already occupied.

Jongup had changed out of the messy oversized clothes he normally wore under his apron to work, and had on a simple white v-neck t-shirt and jeans. His hair was wild as though he'd been running his hands through it. He was staring fixedly down at a book open in front of him.

Himchan experienced a small burst of pleasure at the sight. He'd assumed the younger man would already be gone for the day. He went to the table and Jongup glanced up as he got close. For a moment, his eyes were dark, suspicious, then his expression relaxed into that not-quite-smile that was somehow *totally* a smile. Himchan grinned back and slid into the booth across from him.

"Thought you'd be gone by now," he said.

"What are you doing here, then?"

"Me? I'm here for the coffee."

Jongup shook his head, his not-smile growing fractionally. Himchan had come to enjoy his infinitesimal expression changes. Jongup was normally so implacable it felt like a triumph to incite any kind of reaction from him.

He peered at the younger man's book. "What are you reading?"

Jongup hesitated, then slid it across the table for Himchan to see. He turned it so he could see the cover: *PCSAT Workbook*. His eyes darted up to see Jongup looking fidgety.

"I remember studying for this," he told him, sliding it back. Jongup wouldn't meet his eyes. "How old are you?"

He'd been wondering for a few weeks now. Jongup *looked* young, except for his eyes.

"Twenty two," Jongup muttered. "I know I'm too old to be taking this, really, I just--"

"Of course you're not," Himchan said dismissively. He felt oddly relieved; part of him had wondered if Jongup was somehow even younger than Junhong. Not that it mattered. Jongup gave him a hesitant smile, the merest curve of the lips.

"You doing the accounts again today?" His eyes went to Himchan's backpack.

"Nah," Himchan said, sliding his laptop out. "Just making the schedule for the garage." It was only a half-lie. True, they needed the garage staffed during their business hours. The five of them all worked shifts, as did half a dozen of their people, anyone Yongguk wanted to keep a closer eye on. But the real schedule of money transfers and drug deliveries needed to be planned down to the second, with just the right number of people involved in everything. It would be so much easier if Himchan could just do it all himself, but Yongguk insisted he *delegate*.

Jongup watched him for a beat, then turned back to his book as Himchan booted up the laptop.

They worked in silence for a time. Someone brought over coffees and they tutted at each other's taste preferences.

"Sugar fiend," Himchan sighed.

"Grown-up," Jongup shot back.

They worked. It worked. Himchan felt himself relax. Here there were no bickering members barging in to get him to break a tie or answer a question. There was just the scent of coffee, the ambient sounds of the kitchen, the soft music playing over the speakers. Jongup, so still across the table.

Himchan *should* have been able to get a ton of work done.

Instead, his eyes kept flickering over the younger man. He wasn't sure why, except something about Jongup was nice to look at. It turned out he had a great nose once the bruises faded. There was a funny little dot on the side that disappeared when he laughed and his nose crinkled. Plus it was just *interesting* the way there always seemed to be so much going on under the surface. It had taken Himchan a few times to see it, to see anything more than just another wary kid who knew how to take a punch. Now he thought Jongup's stillness hid a big churning mess underneath, and for some reason Himchan wanted very much to sort through it.

"What," Jongup said, not-smiling again. He didn't look up from his book. Himchan blinked. "What what?"

"You're watching me."

He didn't bother denying it. "Writing the schedule is boring."

"And watching me isn't?"

Himchan considered a joke, something about how watching paint dry sounded interesting in comparison to his work.

"No," he said instead. Jongup's eyes lifted to meet his. He didn't look annoyed or freaked out, maybe because he had a habit of staring himself. Himchan had caught him at it a half dozen times before he stopped looking away. Now he propped his chin in his hand and studied Himchan right back.

They stared at each other for a long minute before the absurdity hit Himchan and he grinned. Jongup smiled back easily, one of his rare visible-from-space smiles this time.

"This is ridiculous."

"Mm hm."

"I should be working."

"I should be studying."

"So get back to work."

"You first."

Himchan propped his own chin in one palm, mirroring Jongup's pose back at him.

"Don't wanna."

"Okay," Jongup said agreeably. "So tell me something."

Himchan raised an eyebrow expectantly. Jongup hesitated, then said, "Is your garage really a garage?"

Himchan nodded slowly.

"Is it *just* a garage?"

Himchan nodded again. Jongup sighed.

"I don't believe you."

Himchan nodded a third time. Jongup was no fool. He was looking at him through narrowed eyes now. Himchan wondered if he was about to be told off. He had trouble imagining Jongup angry. He supposed it probably happened--those old bruises on his chest--but he'd never seen him more than wary.

"Tell me something true," Jongup said.

Himchan thought this over. There were lots of true things he could say if he never wanted Jongup to speak to him again.

"I used to want to be a cook," he said finally. Jongup's eyebrow quirked.

(His eyebrows seemed to move independent of each other or of his face in general. The left one in particular seemed to have a lot of energy; Himchan had caught it twitching away to its own beat on more than one occasion.)

"What's your specialty?" he asked.

Himchan gave him an outraged look. "I can make anything."

"Pancakes?" Jongup asked keenly.

"Easy," Himchan said. Jongup shook his head.

"No, like--" he nodded towards the kitchen. "Like we have here."

Aside from all manner of eggs and surprisingly good coffee, the diner served what Himchan took to be a vaguely American-style breakfast, complete with pancakes with syrup. He almost laughed at the hopeful look on Jongup's face; apparently his sweet tooth encompassed more than the unholy glop he made of his coffee.

"You can't get them here any time?" he said.

The younger man glanced at the counter. Kyung was talking to a customer while he wiped down the counter. The afternoon lull had arrived.

"They're terrible," he confided. "Or maybe I just don't like them in general?"

"Don't they get drenched in syrup? Trust me, you like them," Himchan said, rolling his eyes.

"I had this...roommate," Jongup said carefully. "He spent like ten years in America when he was a kid, before his family moved back. And he never shut up about the food, he used to make us all crazy talking about it, you'd just, like, hear stomachs growling around the room. Pancakes were his favorite. I always wanted to try them."

It was one of just a few tidbits of personal information Himchan had heard from the other man. He wondered how much of it was true. Jongup wasn't an especially gifted liar, or maybe Himchan just spent so much time with liars that he could spot the tells from a mile away.

That was okay. He'd done some quiet asking around in the past few weeks, and Jongup's name and description hadn't flagged any recognition on the street. It seemed he really had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time--or the right place, depending on how you looked at it.

So Himchan let him think he didn't see the way his eyes flickered away when he said *roommate*.

"Was this in school?" he couldn't help asking, just to see. Jongup's eyes darted away again.

"Yeah," he said. Lied. "A few years ago now. I dropped out."

"But you want to go back?" Himchan prodded, nodding at the workbook. Jongup nodded.

"If I can get more hours at the warehouse, I should be able to save enough for school eventually. I just need to be able to get in." His eyes stayed steady on Himchan's face now. Truth, then.

"You will," Himchan said with confidence. Jongup not-smiled at him.

"You think?"

"I know things."

"Hmm." Jongup studied him. "Why didn't you do it? Become a cook?"

"Oh." Himchan waved a hand. "It doesn't really pay much," he admitted. Jongup gave an understanding nod, his expression rueful. "Sorry," Himchan offered.

"No, it's true," Jongup said with a shrug.

"Listen," Himchan said, then hesitated. Jongup tilted his head expectantly. "I was just gonna say--" he broke off again, grimacing. He did this all the time, so why did it feel so awkward now?

Maybe because Jongup wasn't like Hyunjoo, wasn't standing before him, cap in hand, asking for help. He'd told Himchan he didn't take charity, and Himchan respected that. But he felt compelled to make an offer anyway.

Maybe Youngjae had been right about him after all.

"Himchan?" Jongup said.

"Mm?"

"You know you *haven't* said anything yet, right?"

Himchan roused himself. "Yeah, look, I was gonna say--if you really need money, we might be able to find work for you in the garage, or somewhere else closer to town, even. I've got some business connections that might help."

Jongup frowned. "I don't ta--"

"Take charity, I know, I know. That's not what this is."

"What is it, then?"

Himchan sighed and gave Jongup a tired smile. "Being your friend?" he said. Jongup looked at him uncomprehendingly and something twisted in his heart.

"Look, just think about it," he said. "I know you've got your jobs already. It's just I might be able to help if you wanted to make money a little faster."

This was evidently the wrong thing to say, for the suspicion was back in Jongup's eyes and he was looking at Himchan like he was a stranger.

"I'm fine on my own," he said stiffly. Himchan frowned.

"I didn't mean--"

His phone rang. He sighed and glanced at it. Yongguk. If it had been anyone else he'd have ignored it. He gave Jongup an apologetic look.

"I have to--Yeah?" he said, answering.

"Where are you?"

He frowned at his friend's voice. "What's wrong?" he countered. Whatever he'd told Youngjae about Yongguk coming out when he was ready, Himchan hadn't expected to hear from him until at least tomorrow.

"We need you here."

"What happened?"

Jongup's face was doing something interesting again, seemingly warring between suspicion and concern.

"Trouble."

*

Jongup couldn't concentrate.

Himchan was gone. His face had gone hard when he got the phone call.

I have to go, he'd said, not bothering to come up with an excuse. Jongup told himself he was glad. He'd been stupid to let his guard down; Himchan just wanted to *recruit* him. Jongup just *bet* he had some ways to help him make a quick buck. It probably came with as many bruises as Park's methods.

Except.

Jongup couldn't shake the thought that he had it wrong. Himchan wasn't Park. He'd been nothing but kind--well, and indifferent, at first. But then he'd started showing up at the diner to work on his laptop. He never seemed to mind when Jongup couldn't help sidling over to his table to chat. In fact, he'd sort of seemed to *like* it. Had almost seemed like he was showing up just to hang out with Jongup.

Jongup had no idea what to make of this.

And then Himchan had to go and call himself Jongup's *friend*, and all Jongup's brain could do was flash a giant red alert screaming *TRAP*.

Park had called himself his friend, too.

But now Himchan was gone and Jongup didn't feel relieved so much as unsettled and anxious and regretful.

This was bad. He wasn't supposed to have attachments. He was always, always, always safer on his own. He wasn't sure why he was having so much trouble labeling Himchan a threat.

He finally admitted he wasn't going to get anything more done. He packed up his things, gave Kyung a cursory goodbye, and set off for home. Today was stupid anyway.

*

Himchan had seen Snail only hours before, but he hadn't been quite so covered in blood at the time. Now he appeared to be bleeding out on Himchan's desk.

"No one thought to bring him to the hospital?" he asked irritably, stripping his jacket off and leaning over him.

"We can't," Daehyun said tersely. He'd gone pale. Dae didn't do so well with blood.

Himchan just grunted and pulled carefully at the makeshift bandage on Snail's torso. He'd already bled through it, of course. Stomach wounds bled like a bitch.

"Jesus," he muttered, taking in the mess underneath. Snail let out a whimper. "Stay with me, man," Himchan said. Youngjae came around the younger boy's head and put his hands on his shoulders. "*Jesus.*" Snail's stomach was chaotic with cuts. Himchan took one of the sterile bandages Yongguk placed beside him and dabbed carefully at one of the wounds, clearing away some of the blood so he could see.

"Doesn't look too deep, that's good," he murmured. He frowned as his ministrations revealed more of the cuts. "The hell?" he said, looking up at Yongguk, whose expression was grim.

"That's why we couldn't take him to the hospital," Youngjae said. "The doctors *might* have had some questions. Unless we stabbed him ourselves to get rid of it." Snail let out a whine of protest and tried to twist away in alarm. Youngjae gave his shoulder a comforting pat.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Himchan said absently. The blood had already begun to clot in places and it was mostly a matter of cleaning it up. The more he wiped away, the better they could see the attacker's handiwork. "Is that..." Himchan said slowly, tilting his head. Snail lifted his own head, trying to see. "Is that a phone number?"

"And a smiley face," Junhong added helpfully, tracing a finger just above the crooked grin that had been carved below Snail's belly button.

"The *fuck*," Himchan said, looking around at the others in bewilderment.

"I think it's safe to say there's a new player in town," Yongguk said.

Chapter 4

There were three of them. They'd descended just after Himchan left Snail.

"I thought I'd go check on my corner, see how my boys were doing. I've got crutches now so I could make it on my own," the boy explained, a trifle guiltily.

Himchan had stopped the bleeding, or at least slowed it to a manageable trickle, and was applying a fresh bandage to Snail's wreck of a torso while the boy told his story. Himchan's unease grew as he listened. The timing of the attack suggested they'd been watched. The idea felt like a stranger's breath on the back of his neck.

"They came out of nowhere," Snail was saying. "Dragged me down the alley. Two of 'em held me down and the third pulled out the knife, I thought I was dead. Managed to get one of 'em pretty good on the nose--he had a mask on but he bled through it." The boy puffed out his chest a little in pride and Himchan bit back a smile. Snail could be a pain in the ass, but he was *their* pain in the ass.

"Did they ask you anything?" Yongguk said.

"No." Snail's eyes were very wide. "No, they were like *creepy*-quiet, you know? Third guy started cutting and I just started praying, boss."

"Didn't think you were religious," Youngjae said dryly. Snail gave him a lopsided smile.

"Just hedging my bets."

Yongguk and Himchan retreated to Yongguk's office and shut the door. The leader took his phone out of his pocket and set it on the desk. They both stared at it for a beat.

"How d'you want to play this?" Himchan asked. His friend shook his head.

"Fuck it," he muttered. He picked up the phone and dialed the number from Snail's torso. He set the phone back on the desk and they listened as it rang once, twice, thrice.

A click, then an unfamiliar voice.

"*I was hoping you'd call.*" The guy sounded amused, whoever he was. Himchan could only assume this was because he couldn't see Yongguk's face now, which was a cold mask. He met Himchan's eyes and nodded once.

"We got your card." Himchan said lightly. "Points for originality."

"You're *not* Bbang," the voice said. Yongguk flinched and Himchan went cold at the sound of his nickname for his friend. Not even the others ever called Yongguk Bbang. "*I take it I'm talking to the handsome second in command?*"

"Handsome? I'm blushing," Himchan said. "And who am I speaking to?"

"All in good time, Channie. We'll be seeing each other soon, I promise."

"Very cryptic. I hate cryptic," Himchan complained. The voice on the phone laughed in apparent delight.

"Don't worry, it won't take long. We're all going to be very close, you'll see."

"I kind of doubt it," Himchan said. "You're already boring me."

"Bbang's not bored, though, is he," the voice said slyly. *"I know you're listening in, Yongguk."*

Himchan rolled his eyes at his friend, who just shook his head irritably.

"If you say so," Himchan said. "Look, just let us know when you get your shit together. And hey, just a word of advice--you generally don't want to go carving your phone number into people's stomachs *until* you have a plan for when they call you. That's just common sense."

"I like you," the voice said, though he sounded slightly less pleased now. Good. *"Can't wait to meet you in person."*

"That'll be a treat," Himchan agreed. "See you soon."

Yongguk disconnected the call.

"What do you think? Wrong tone?" Himchan asked. His friend's expression relaxed into a half smile.

"I do like watching you work," he said. Himchan laughed shortly.

"He's been watching us," he said. Yongguk nodded, his smile fading. "Must've gotten close, too, if he knew to call you Bbang."

"Hm."

"I hate when they go for the theatrics," Himchan added. "Like, have some self respect." In his not-so-humble opinion, this kind of thing was generally a front to hide incompetence.

(Except, if he was honest, he didn't think they'd run across *this kind of thing* before, and judging from the way his stomach was flipping, he didn't care for it.)

"I'm sure you'll tell him that when he shows up."

"Bet your ass." He wondered if Yongguk was feeling any nerves. Not so much, judging from his face, which was as serene as ever. But Yongguk could be tough to read, even for him.

"We might need to go back on lockdown," he said.

Himchan grimaced at the thought. "We barely survived last time. Junhong was two hours away from shooting Daehyun."

Yongguk gave a small conceding nod. "I'd worry more that *he*--" He nodded to the phone. "would see and think he had us running scared."

"Pair up, then?" Himchan said. He smiled slightly. "We'll put Junhong with Jae. Safer for everyone."

"More fun for us to put him with Dae, though," Yongguk said seriously. Himchan stared, then laughed. The laughter was a relief, a much-needed release of tension.

"You're diabolical," he said. His friend nodded as if to say *of course*.

"You know they probably saw you with Snail," he said. Himchan's smile faded.

"Probably."

"They might've had someone tailing you after. Where'd you go next?"

Himchan hesitated.

"Just--did some work in a diner. No one followed me." He was almost sure. The restaurant was so far out there; he'd have noticed someone following him from the city. Right?

If they had, though. They'd have seen him sitting with Jongup. The thought of the cool, amused voice from the phone knowing about Jongup made Himchan's guts twist anxiously.

Yongguk was giving him an odd look, perhaps sensing there was something Himchan wasn't telling him. It wasn't his habit to hold back with his friend.

"I guess they wouldn't have seen anything useful then anyway," Yongguk said.

Jongup. Jongup. Jongup.

"Nope," Himchan agreed. No one had followed him. He would have seen. He *would* have. It was probably a good thing he'd pissed off the younger man, really, because no way he could go back to the diner again. He might need to make a call, though.

"I'm starting to think we might want to use Dae's Enforcer after all," he added.

*

Jongup still felt fretful and irritable the next day when he entered the diner. For once he was glad to be working dish shift, as there was something very satisfying about banging heavy trays of pots and pans around. He could drown out his own thoughts--kind of--and didn't have to smile at anyone.

It was a busy morning, and it was hours before things slowed enough for Kyung to pause at the dish tank.

"Hey," he greeted Jongup. "Was there something you wanted to tell me?"

Jongup frowned at him blankly. The chef sighed.

"Your friend called," he said, and all the thoughts Jongup had been trying to tamp down all day came surging up. Himchan *called*?

"What friend?" he said, sure his boss must be mistaken.

"Table six? i.e, the only customer you've ever given the time of day?" Kyung said dryly.

Jongup took his time wiping his hands dry on his apron. "What'd he say?"

Kyung was frowning. "He just said to tell you to be careful for awhile. That mean anything to you?"

Jongup could think of several possibilities, the first being the horrifying thought *he knows*. But then he recalled the stony look the older man had gotten when he'd taken his phone call the day before. Obviously he was into some not-so-safe business, but what did any of it have to do with Jongup?

"I guess I'll ask next time he comes in," he told Kyung.

*

It took a week for him to admit that wasn't going to happen. A week to admit to himself the reason his heart sped up a little every time the chime sounded over the door and then slowed in disappointment when he saw the new customer. A week to understand he'd been right and Himchan had only been interested in him as a possible new recruit for his gang.

This hurt more than Jongup would've liked.

He'd returned to his routine--but what did that mean, exactly? Nothing had ever changed.

He just *felt* different. He'd never stopped to name his loneliness, had never been bothered by it. Lonely was safe, and safety was everything.

Not anymore, it seemed.

He didn't mean to do it, but Kyung's words echoed in his ears: *He just said be careful for awhile*.

It had been six days and no sign of Himchan. And no matter how many times Jongup told himself he shouldn't be surprised, stupid, he'd driven him away pretty handily, he couldn't get the warning out of his head, or the look on Himchan's face when he got that phone call. Something had happened.

He could be dead for all Jongup knew.

So after working third shift at the warehouse, he took a detour on the way home. It took a few tries to find the block with the garage--all the warehouse district was a maze of concrete and metal sameness--but finally he heard the telltale pulse of music and saw it.

There was an alley across the street. Jongup ducked down it to get a better look at the garage. He'd half-hoped Himchan might just...be outside, conveniently, for him to get a look at and leave without needing to get any closer. But he'd never had that kind of luck.

The garage's metal grate *had* been thrown open again, though, and a car sat in the drive with its hood up. As Jongup watched, a man came out--the driver with the big lips. Jae or Dae. He had on a backwards snapback and navy coveralls. He leaned over the car, its hood half blocking him from Jongup's view. A few dull minutes later, a tall boy Jongup didn't recognize came outside. He strode over to the other man and the two seemed to be arguing for a minute, but Jongup couldn't make out what they were saying. Then Jae-or-Dae smiled and said something that made the tension leave the boy's shoulders as he laughed reluctantly, turning away. His gaze went across the street towards Jongup's hiding place. Jongup darted further back down the alley, cursing himself.

He debated for a beat how long to wait before leaving. This had been a stupid idea. Himchan was probably fine and the weird message to Kyung had been his way of saying goodbye or something.

He peered hesitantly around the corner at the garage. The car was still there, but the men had gone. Perfect. He stepped back onto the street--

--and directly into a body, much taller than him, and very solid.

"Hi," the boy from the garage said brightly. Before Jongup could answer, something crashed against the base of his skull and the world went dark.

*

He wasn't out for long.

He came to in a familiar olive-carpeted office. He'd been propped in a chair with his hands tied behind him, the position making his shoulders ache almost as much as his head. He couldn't quite swallow his groan as his vision swam.

Legs, then a face as someone crouched in front of him.

"Don't I know you?" Lips said.

"Kind of," Jongup rasped. The pounding in his head was already fading. Good; they probably hadn't given him a concussion. "You're...Dae?" he guessed. The other man squinted, then his expression cleared.

"Oh, *you*," he said, straightening.

"Who?"

They both looked around at the tall boy, who was leaning on the desk.

"This is the guy who helped Jae out last month," Dae explained. "What was your name again?"

"Jongup."

"Jongup, right." Dae nodded a few times. He was staring at Jongup through narrowed eyes. Jongup remembered his easy smile from the first time they'd met. It was nowhere in evidence now. His expression was darkly wary. "So why were you spying on us, Jongup?"

"I wasn't, I just--I'm on my way home from work," Jongup said. Dae looked unimpressed.

"You always take breaks to lurk in alleys on your way home?" the other boy--man--spoke up. His hair was a deep blue-black above a very pale face. He looked like a fifteen-year-old someone had taken and *stretched*; his height was even more impressive up close, but his face looked very young.

Jongup shrugged in response to the question and his shoulders burned. "If they look inviting, sure."

The other boy's lips thinned. He turned to Dae.

"What do you think?"

"I'm thinking maybe it was a little *convenient*, him being around to help Jae. Who interferes in a random street fight? I'm thinking he's been watching us. I'm *thinking* maybe he helped out with the attack last week."

Something in Jongup's head went white hot.

"What attack?" he blurted out. "Who--where's Himchan?" He'd been right, he'd been *right*, something had happened, something was wrong.

If Dae had been looking at him suspiciously before, he turned it up to eleven now.

"What do you know about Himchan?" the tall one demanded, baffled. Jongup had no idea how to answer and so just glared fixedly at the floor, willing his heart to slow its frantic beat.

"If he's been watching us, he could know plenty," Dae said grimly.

"I haven't been *watching* you," Jongup snapped. "I met him last time." He felt a small surge of hope that Himchan obviously hadn't mentioned him to his friends. If they knew he'd been hanging out with Jongup at the diner all this time, he doubted they'd be quite this suspicious now. Maybe he hadn't been looking to recruit him, after all.

Yeah, or maybe he was waiting til he had more to tell them.

Or maybe he's dead and none of this matters anyway.

"Yon--hyung's not back yet?" the tall boy muttered to Dae. He shook his head, his gaze steady on Jongup's face.

"Not til tonight. Go check if Jae needs anything, all right?"

The tall boy made his way to the door. He gave Jongup one final curious look, then was gone.

Dae continued to stare Jongup down. Jongup shifted, more because of the pain in his shoulders than anything else. It would take more than a little glaring to unsettle him.

"Why were you watching us?" Dae said.

"I was just passing by."

"Why did you attack us?"

"Attack *who*?" Jongup snapped. "I never--"

The door opened again. Tall boy was back.

Himchan was behind him.

Jongup's breath left him in a rush of relief at the sight of the older man, whole and well. He had on jeans, a black hoodie, his glasses. A snapback covered his hair. The effect made him look younger.

His eyes widened slightly when he saw Jongup.

"What's this?" he said. His voice was very even.

"Junhong-ah saw him lurking in the alley across the street, watching the garage," Dae explained. "We're guessing he had something to do with--you know. Last week."

Himchan's eyes roved over Jongup's face.

"He didn't," he said.

"How do you know?" Dae demanded. Himchan folded his arms calmly.

"Because he was with me."

Dae's mouth dropped open and he and the other kid--Junhong, he'd called him--exchanged a confused look.

"What are you--"

Himchan crossed the room to Jongup's chair and leaned over him, peering at his back. He let out a small *tch* of displeasure before going to the desk and rifling through the top drawer. Jongup couldn't stop watching him. He was okay.

"Go on downstairs," he told the others. "I'll take care of this."

"Himchan, what's going on?" Dae said. Himchan rose, a pair of scissors in hand.

"What's going on is you two overreacted," he said. "Everything's fine. Go downstairs."

"But--"

"Now." Himchan's voice held new steel. They went, Dae casting one final distrustful look at Jongup before closing the door behind him.

Himchan came up behind Jongup and cut through the ropes binding his hands. Jongup let out a gasp of relief as the pressure was off his shoulders. He brought his hands slowly in front of him, grimacing as the blood began to flow again, and Himchan came around to crouch before him.

"Those idiots," he murmured. He pulled the rope from Jongup's wrists and massaged the irritated skin beneath. Jongup slumped in his seat, taking him in. After a moment, Himchan's eyes rose to meet his.

"Are you okay?" he said. Jongup didn't trust his voice. He nodded, then winced as the movement sent fresh pain through his head. Himchan frowned and rose. He rested one hand on Jongup's shoulder and ran the other down the back of his head, searching. Jongup hissed in a breath as his hand found the goose egg at the base of his skull.

"Those *idiots*," Himchan repeated with more heat. He crouched in front of Jongup again, hands returning to his wrists. "Are you dizzy? Lightheaded?" Their faces were very close. Jongup shook his head. "That's good. Follow my finger?"

Jongup did, though it was a challenge to take his eyes off Himchan's face.

"Okay, good." Himchan sighed. "I'm sorry, Jongup. We're all on edge this week, they jumped to conclusions."

"They were talking about an attack. I thought something happened to you." It came out more accusing than Jongup had meant. Himchan tilted his head slightly.

"Is that why you're here?"

Jongup swallowed. "Kyung gave me your message. Then when I didn't see you...I got worried."

It felt a little like he was undressing in front of Himchan for the first time. He felt like--wait, the *first* time? Where did *that* thought come from?

He couldn't read Himchan's face.

"And here I thought you were mad at me," he said finally, pursing his lips. Pretty. Distracting.

"I was," Jongup said. He hesitated, then decided fuck it. "All this time, have you just been trying to figure out how to recruit me or something?"

"No." Himchan met his gaze squarely.

"Then why'd you keep coming back?"

The older man sighed and smiled a little. He looked tired, Jongup saw, faint lines showing around his eyes for the first time. Or maybe it was just that they'd never been this close before.

"Maybe for the same reason you stop and talk to me every time I do," he said. Jongup's face went hot. He hadn't meant to be so obvious, but of course he had been. But he didn't think Himchan could possibly mean what it sounded like.

Before he could formulate some kind of response, the medic stood.

"C'mon," he said, holding out a hand. "I'm taking you home."

*

The other men stared as they descended into the garage. Jongup felt the familiar itch of unfriendly eyes on him like an army of insects crawling over his skin. He made himself meet their eyes, lingering on Dae's. The other man scowled.

"He was friendlier last time," Jongup muttered. Himchan followed his gaze and snorted.

"He'll get over it, trust me," he said. "He has lots of practice being wrong." He waved the other men away. They only glowered in response.

Jongup gave him the address and Himchan drove, taking a long circuitous route, checking his rearview mirror frequently.

"How come you didn't tell them about me?" Jongup asked, emboldened by Himchan's focus on the drive. The other man hesitated.

"You have any siblings?" he asked, sidestepping the question. Jongup blinked as Jonghwan's face swam behind his eyes. In his mind, his brother was perpetually the kid he'd been the last time Jongup saw him--eyes blank and stunned, half his face darkened by an angry welt.

"No," he said.

"Well. I dunno if this would make sense to you, but--we live in an apartment above the garage. There's five of us in there, kind of all on top of each other all the time. And I mean, it's fine, it's *good*, they're--family, you know?"

Jongup didn't interrupt to correct him on this point, to say no, in fact he didn't remember what it felt like to have family.

Himchan didn't seem to expect a response anyway.

"But so sometimes it's nice having something that feels like it's just *mine*."

Jongup looked over sharply, something going pleasantly warm in his stomach at the thought that he might be part of something Himchan considered *his*.

He probably shouldn't dwell on this. He was probably imagining the slight pink tinge to Himchan's cheeks.

"Okay," he said simply. "Tell me what happened last week, then."

Himchan sighed. "It happened last time I saw you. One of our guys was attacked."

"Like what happened to Jae?"

"Yeah, but...knifief. The kid they hurt--I was with him right before it happened. That's partly why I didn't go back to the diner--I don't *think* anyone was tailing me, but just in case..."

Oh. The cryptic phone call suddenly made more sense.

"Is your friend okay?"

"He'll be fine. They didn't want to kill him, really, just--to send a message. Literally." Himchan peered behind him and took another unnecessary turn.

"The same people as before?"

"Mm, no. No, this was someone new."

They pulled, finally, onto Jongup's block and Himchan parked. He checked the mirrors again for a long minute. Jongup did too, wondering if it would be obvious if they were being followed. Wondering if Himchan had a lot of experience with this kind of thing.

"We're fine," Himchan murmured. He peered up at Jongup's building. "You don't have an elevator, do you."

Jongup snorted. Himchan nodded.

"I'll walk you up."

"I'm okay," Jongup said quickly. He wasn't sure how he felt about Himchan seeing where he lived. The other man shook his head.

"Dae clocked you pretty hard. Don't want you collapsing on your way up."

Arguing seemed like a lot of work.

They went in. With Himchan there, Jongup saw everything anew: the peeling wallpaper revealing crumbling plaster walls, the guttering lights, the old familiar condom, now crusted to the stair. Himchan didn't comment, just trudged up behind him.

His apartment was both better and worse--better because at least it was tidy, worse because it was all his. Jongup shifted uncomfortably as Himchan followed him in, sure his eyes would find the water stain creeping down the wall, the grime set in every corner. The other man looked around with unmistakable curiosity, but none of the disdain he'd expected.

"It's kind of a hole," Jongup told him. Himchan looked surprised.

"It's nice," he said. "Go sit down."

Jongup sat gingerly on his mattress and watched Himchan go to his freezer. He paused in front of it before returning with a soft ice pack, which he wrapped in a tea towel. He was quiet as he sat beside Jongup and pressed the ice to the lump on his head.

"Lot of ice packs for a restaurant worker," he said.

"I'm accident prone," Jongup said, and he smiled a little. They were quiet again. Jongup could have held the ice pack there himself, but he liked the solid pressure of Himchan's hand. His thumb brushed the short hairs on the back of his neck and Jongup shivered.

"You okay?" Himchan said in a low voice.

"It's just cold."

"Sorry." Himchan went quiet again for a minute. Jongup tried very hard not to stare at him. You wouldn't think someone could look as perfect up close as they did from a distance, but somehow Himchan did it. "What kind of trouble are you in, Jongup?"

He jumped a bit at the question. "What?"

"The old bruises on your chest." Himchan met his eyes. "And the way you constantly look like you're expecting someone to jump you."

Jongup gave him a pointed look. "Apparently that's justified."

Himchan laughed a little. His thumb brushed against him again and Jongup shuddered *again*. Himchan's gaze sharpened. His thumb moved a third time, sliding deliberately down his neck. Jongup jerked away, pushing himself to his feet.

"Do you--want a drink?" he said, going to the fridge. His heart was hammering wildly in his chest.

"Okay." Dammit, Himchan hadn't stayed on the mattress. His voice was too close. Jongup didn't turn around. He stood in front of the open fridge for a beat, trying to block it with his body so Himchan wouldn't see how bare it was.

"I have beer," Jongup offered. He'd bought some just because he *could*, just to see. It didn't taste very good, but there was something weirdly appealing about it anyway.

"Sure."

He pulled out two bottles, popped the caps off on the edge of the counter and turned back. Himchan stood a short distance away. He accepted the beer and took a sip, his eyes never leaving Jongup's face.

"So?" he prompted. Jongup shook his head and sipped his own beer, grimacing at the taste.

"I've got it under control."

"What's *it*?"

Jongup battled with himself. He couldn't tell Himchan about Park without telling him about everything else. And he couldn't possibly tell Himchan about everything else. He knew how *that* would go, and he kind of liked the way Himchan was looking at him now. Like he was a person.

Jongup knew how quickly that could change.

So he shook his head mutely. Himchan sighed and looked around the apartment again. The silence stretched between them, sticky and painful.

"Sorry about last week," Jongup said awkwardly. "When you started talking about money--I figured that was why you were really there."

"To *recruit* you," Himchan echoed his earlier words. Jongup nodded. "Yeah. Look, Jongup--I did think about it. The very first day." His eyes were steady on him. "Jae told us you were handy in the fight, and--well. That's always useful. But it was a coincidence, me running into you at the diner. We're not that big on recruitment anyway. It's better for our people to need us more than we need them."

Jongup considered this. "What about you?" Himchan raised a questioning eyebrow. "Do you--need the group more than it needs you?"

The other man studied him for a beat. "I'd be dead if it weren't for them," he said finally. Jongup didn't have to ask if he was being serious; he could see it clearly in his face.

"What do you mean?" he asked. Himchan took another sip of his beer. He was chewing on his lower lip and it occurred to Jongup for the first time that he might not be the only one who was nervous.

Then Himchan straightened and looked at him again. "Yongguk," he said. "Our leader. You met him--red hair, voice like a cartoon mountain?"

This description was so perfectly random and yet instantly summoned to mind the deep-voiced man Jongup had met in the garage that first day. He let out a surprised laugh before he could stop himself. Himchan smiled back hesitantly.

"He's--we grew up together," he said. He pushed himself up onto one of the counters to sit, a motion at once both familiar and proprietary. Jongup liked it. He did the same on one of the adjacent counters, swinging his legs a little. Himchan continued.

"Both our family situations weren't the best, so it was always the two of us." He went quiet for a moment, staring at his beer. Jongup tried to imagine him as a kid and couldn't do it. He barely remembered himself as a kid. "You asked why I stopped being a paramedic," Himchan said. "Truth is, I got fired when they found out I was stealing pills." His gaze held a slight challenge. Jongup tilted his head.

"To sell?" he guessed. Himchan's lips twisted in a smile, dark and unamused.

"To *take*," he corrected. "I'm an addict."

This idea fit even more awkwardly in Jongup's brain than the notion of Himchan as a child. He'd known addicts, and he simply couldn't imagine Himchan as one. He seemed more in control of himself than just about anyone Jongup had ever met.

Then again, maybe that was a coping strategy rather than something he'd been born with.

"You seem okay now," he said. It was half a question. He reminded himself he didn't really know Himchan, no matter how it felt sometimes. The other man shrugged.

"Been clean five years," he said.

"What happened?"

"Yongguk happened." Himchan smiled down at his beer. "We'd fallen out of touch--my fault. I thought--I don't know. I kind of saw the direction he was going, the kind of stuff he was getting into. It scared me. And probably I thought I was too *good* for it, somehow." He shook his head. "So I cut him out totally. Managed to get through school, get trained up, get a job. Only trouble was, I was alone."

Jongup knew something about alone. He thought he was only just starting to understand that *alone* might mean something darker than *safe*. He waited for Himchan to go on.

"By the time he found me, I was--in rough shape. Anyone else would've walked away and never looked back, and rightly so. But he stayed til I dried out. Saved my life."

"So you joined the gang," Jongup finished. Himchan shrugged again.

"Not the boldest way to start a life of crime, but--"

Jongup laughed again. Himchan looked relieved. What had he thought? Jongup wondered. As if *he* had any room to judge anyone. But then, Himchan didn't know that.

Something new occurred to him.

"The pills you gave me," he said. "The muscle relaxers. Those don't--you're not--?"

Himchan laughed, then turned it into a cough and gave him an apologetic look. "Those things really aren't strong enough to tempt me, Jonguppie," he said. Jongup gave a start at the nickname. It sounded so natural coming from Himchan. The other man didn't even seem to realize what he'd said.

"Anyway, the *point* is," he continued, waving a hand. "Once I started talking to you, I knew I wasn't about to try to recruit you. You've got your jobs, your school coming up--you don't need us. Unless you want to tell me about those bruises." He gave Jongup a pointed look but for once, Jongup wasn't bothered. He didn't think Himchan would push--although he felt a little guilty that the other man had been so honest with him and he couldn't do the same. He

reminded himself that Himchan didn't really want to know. No one would. And once it was out there, there'd be no taking it back.

"Okay," he said. He drank some more beer. It tasted better than he'd remembered.

"You should give me your phone number," Himchan said.

"Why?"

Himchan rolled his eyes, but he looked amused. "Just in case," he said. "Or I'll give you mine. If anything happens, you know..."

Jongup frowned. "How worried should I be?" he said. "About this new...whoever, following you guys."

"It's under control," Himchan said breezily.

"You're a crap liar."

"Look who's talking."

Jongup stuck his tongue out and Himchan laughed. A dimple appeared, like magic, under one eye when he gave a real belly laugh. Jongup wanted to *bottle* that laugh. He was fairly sure it could cure cancer.

In any case, he found he didn't much want to argue. He liked the idea of Himchan's number living in his phone, right before Kyung's--the only other number he had. He felt lighter than he had in a week. He never could have imagined feeling so comfortable with someone in his apartment. The beer must be hitting him already; that was the only explanation for his giddiness.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and flipped it open, pulling up a new contact screen.

"What is *that*?"

He glanced up. Himchan was staring with a mixture of fascination and horror.

"My phone?"

"That is *not* a phone. That is an *artifact*. I didn't think they even *made* those anymore."

"It works fine."

"Impossible. That thing is to phones what the horse-drawn carriage is to a space shuttle, Jongup-ah. That thing is tragic. What if I wanted to FaceTime you?"

"I don't know what that means." Jongup laughed at the look on his face. "Do you want my number or not?"

In the end, Himchan did.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

TW for brief mentions of homophobia, use of homophobic slur.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Himchan put off going home as long as he could. Part of it was dread over the inevitable barrage of questions--Daehyun wasn't one to let a thing go once he had it in his teeth, and his eyes had been full of dark promise when Himchan left the garage with Jongup--and partly because he was enjoying himself. Jongup was more relaxed than he'd ever seen him, and he'd proven Himchan's theory that some people were just worth more effort to get to know. He was funnier than Himchan would have guessed, and stranger. He liked it.

The younger man still refused to let loose with any details that might explain his life--how the hell did a nice kid like him wind up living in this pit in Seoul? Where was his family?--but by the time Himchan put his shoes on to leave, his questions felt distant and unimportant.

He made Jongup text him before he went. It took a long time for his phone to *ping* with the new message. He blinked at it a few times.

"Yes, Jongup, I know it's you, you're standing right in front of me," he told him. Jongup scowled.

"You were supposed to *type* it," he said. Himchan hid his answering grin and dutifully typed out his words. Jongup's face lightened as his phone gave a buzz. He smiled down at it.

"No one's ever texted me before," he said softly.

For some reason his smile stayed with Himchan his whole drive home.

It was dark when he pulled into the lot, the garage already locked up for the night. Himchan looked around warily before making his way to the side entrance. The street lights illuminating most of the area still left quite a few spots in shadow. He was willing to bet he was being watched right now.

It had been a week, and still no moves from the guy on the phone. On the whole, Himchan would have preferred a straightforward attack. Better that than this waiting...waiting, and that constant prickle at the back of his neck. He could hardly blame Junhong and Daehyun for what they'd done to Jongup. It must have been a relief to think they were finally *getting* somewhere.

All thought roads led back to Jongup. Huh.

Himchan locked the door behind him and made his way through the darkened garage to the stairs. It was quiet, but the others must be scattered through the apartment.

Their living space hadn't always been habitable. When he and Yongguk first bought the garage, the two upper floors had been old office space, home to rats, dust and garbage. They'd spent weeks cleaning and carting out junk, some of the most back-breaking work Himchan had ever done. But Yongguk had been adamant that they weren't paying rent to some shitty landlord.

They couldn't have managed it if they hadn't found Daehyun. He was the one who figured out the plumbing so they could install showers, not to mention all the kitchen appliances. He was loud and opinionated and not as charming as he liked to think, but Himchan had to admit they'd be lost without him.

He really wasn't in the mood to fight him right now.

As it turned out, though, it wasn't Daehyun waiting for him when he slipped into his room.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Yongguk demanded.

*

"Dae seems to think you've been hiding things from us," his best friend said. He was seated on the floor with his legs stretched out, back against the wall. He held out a beer for Himchan, who took it and kicked off his shoes before collapsing on his bed.

"Is not telling you every little thing I do the same as hiding things from you?" he asked, honestly curious.

"It doesn't sound like such a little thing to me," Yongguk said, sipping his beer. Judging from the collection of empties next to him, he'd been here awhile.

Himchan couldn't refute this. He didn't have a good reason for not telling them about Jongup. He almost had, that first day after he saw him at the diner. But he'd come home to a garage in chaos, Dae and Youngjae arguing, Junhong and Yongguk at the end of their respective ropes. He'd pushed the whole thing from his mind until he found himself back at the diner again.

Yongguk waited. Then, sensing Himchan wasn't going to respond, he pressed, "Dae's got a point about the timing, this guy showing up right before Snail got attacked. You know Phone Guy's been watching us--you don't think it's a little suspicious?"

Himchan lifted his head to glare at his friend. "Do I suspect him of getting a cracked rib to help Jae and then predicting which random diner I would stop at on my way back from a drop point I'd never used before? Jongup's a smart guy, Bbang, but I'm pretty sure he's not psychic."

Yongguk conceded the point with a nod. He fixed Himchan was the x-ray stare he knew so well.

"So what is this guy to you?" he asked.

Himchan's *nothing* caught in his throat as he squirmed beneath the question he'd been trying not to ask himself. Jongup was just some guy. Just some guy who made butterflies the size of pterodactyls flap around his chest. Just some guy whose smile lifted his feet right the fuck off the ground.

He shook his head wordlessly and let it drop back onto his pillow. It was much, much easier to look at the ceiling than at his friend.

"Are you...seeing each other?"

Himchan contemplated pulling his blankets over his head, or possibly throwing himself out the window. They weren't supposed to *talk* about this, to discuss the fact that his tastes ran a bit broader than most of the guys on their team.

Yongguk knew, of course. It was something the older kids had sniffed out when they were very young. Himchan remembered being shoved from boy to boy, *faggot* ringing in his ears.

Yongguk had found him after, hunched in the stairwell, tears drying in salty tracks down his cheeks. He sat beside him, made to put his arm around him, but Himchan had flinched away.

Better not let them see you with me or they'll think you're a faggot, too.

Yongguk had been furious. *They're full of shit. Who cares what they say?*

What if they're right?

He'd expected his friend to back away, or maybe give him a shove. Instead he'd looked at him thoughtfully. Even at age twelve, Yongguk had the ability to look ancient sometimes.

You don't like me like that, do you? he'd asked finally. Himchan snorted before he could stop himself.

Gross.

It had earned him his friend's full, rare grin. *Then who cares? C'mon, Channie, we'll get 'em back, you'll see.*

They had, and the matter had closed and stayed closed. Yongguk mentioned it so rarely Himchan had thought on more than one occasion that he'd simply forgotten. He should have known better; Bbang wasn't the forgetful type.

"No," Himchan said. "We're not seeing each other."

"Do you want to?"

They looked at each other across the room and for a moment Himchan could feel every day, every year they'd shared. Yongguk looked a little nervous, maybe because he sensed that if Himchan said yes now, he'd be going somewhere he couldn't follow.

Himchan tried to think. "I don't know," he said finally. "He's--I don't know. But he's no threat to us."

Us, he meant, the gang.

Us, he meant, Bbang and Chan. Some things just *were*.

Yongguk looked unconvinced. "You sure about that?"

"I'd never put you guys at risk."

"That wasn't my question."

Himchan blinked and pushed himself into a seated position. "Wasn't it? I lost track. What were we talking about?"

Yongguk threw one of his empties at him halfheartedly.

"Don't be--you know. Don't be...don't be..." he struggled a bit. Himchan waited, counting the empty beer bottles as he did. Yongguk had a strong constitution, but he *was* awfully skinny.

"Don't be...un-taking-this-seriously," he settled on. Himchan rolled out of bed and nudged the few remaining full bottles out of his friend's reach.

"No more beer for you."

"I mean it." Yongguk grasped his wrist and yanked him to the floor beside him. Himchan winced as his elbow hit the floor.

"Ow, Bbang, God."

"Sorry." Yongguk patted his shoulder a bit clumsily. "But I'm serious. You have to be careful where feelings are involved."

"I'm always careful." Himchan rearranged himself more comfortably so that fewer of Yongguk's bony limbs were digging into his side.

"But so...that's your type, then?" his friend asked after a moment. Himchan elbowed him hard and he started to laugh wheezily.

"Can we stop talking about this?"

Yongguk was still giggling. "Channie likes them short...and...bruised," he managed. Himchan rolled his eyes.

"Get out of my room," he said, kicking at him. "I wanna go to sleep and you're the worst."

Yongguk found his feet, still laughing. "Night night," he said, pinching Himchan's cheek before stumbling out the door. Himchan slammed his head against the wall a few times. Wasn't it just like Yongguk to leave him with the empties.

*

Yongguk's wavering gait steadied as he reached the other end of the hall. A door was ajar here. He slipped in sideways.

Youngjae was on the couch with Junhong. The maknae was stretched out with his head in the older man's lap, apparently unbothered by the laptop he had propped up on the side of his face. Yongguk could hear him snoring into Jae's stomach. As always, the sight of the younger men made affection so strong it was almost painful surge up in Yongguk's chest.

"Hey, hyung," Jae greeted him, noticing him in the doorway. "He back yet?"

"Yeah, he's going to bed." Yongguk glanced down the hall at Himchan's room again to be sure. The door was closed now; good.

Yongguk supposed it was bound to happen sooner or later, Himchan developing feelings for someone. Yongguk knew all about the brief trysts he'd engaged in over the years. He'd never needed to step in because none of them had meant anything.

He thought this one was different.

Youngjae was waiting. Knowing him, he'd expected this little visit.

"I need you to do something for me," Yongguk told him.

*

The kitchen smelled blessedly of coffee when Himchan walked in the next morning.

"*Good* morning, sunshine," Junhong greeted him from his customary spot on the counter. No matter how tall he grew or how often they reminded him that there was a perfectly good table with chairs *right there*, Junhong still seemed to think he was his tiny teenaged self, and preferred perching on counters like a ridiculously overgrown parrot. Or something. Coffee would improve Himchan's metaphor game.

"Morning." He tweaked the ends of Junhong's hair as he passed him. It was getting long, almost to his shoulders.

"Hyung?"

"Hm?" He poured himself a cup of coffee and turned back. Junhong was looking apologetic.

"Just--sorry about yesterday. With your friend. I didn't know."

"Oh." Himchan considered this. "It made sense, under the circumstances."

"It really seemed like he was watching us."

"He was just--worried about me." (And no, this did *not* make him happy, thank you very much. It was the deliciousness of the coffee that was making his heart do joyful leaps in his

chest.)

"Okay." Junhong was giving him a narrow look, but that was okay. He wasn't one to push. "What do you think Phone Guy's waiting for?"

For lack of a better name, and before Daehyun could come up with something annoyingly catchy and breathtakingly stupid, they'd taken to calling the mystery asshole "Phone Guy." Himchan shrugged.

"I really don't know," he admitted. "For us to get so freaked out we do something stupid, maybe."

The whole thing felt oddly distant to him. Jongup was more distracting than he'd realized. Himchan kept tucking thoughts of him away, only to have him pop up when he least expected it.

Technically, this was bad. Technically, they were in crisis mode. Phone Guy was plotting *something*, and that was where Himchan's attention should be--not thinking about the way Jongup's nose crinkled when he laughed, or the rapt expression on his face when Himchan caught him staring.

Focus. Right. Phone Guy.

"I wonder if we're the only ones who heard from him," Junhong mused. Himchan paused, coffee cup halfway to his mouth.

"That," he said thoughtfully, "is a very good question."

*

Park managed to wait all of two weeks before informing Jongup in no uncertain terms that it was *time to get back in the game*.

Jongup hated it when he called it a game. Games should be fun.

As always, Park was unforthcoming with most of the salient details. He gave Jongup the when--2am Thursday--the where--Warehouse District, dock 32--and the promise to furnish him with a sidearm when he got there.

Just a precaution, nothing to worry about, he said, but then, he always said that.

Jongup did as he was told. It helped that he didn't have much choice in the matter.

Park was there, along with a handful of guys Jongup vaguely recognized from past jobs.

"We're just moving some cargo tonight," the guy in charge--not Park--told them. "You know the drill."

They did. Cargo shifts were the best--or, rather, the least worst--of all the jobs Park pulled Jongup in for. They were just a matter of transferring crates from one truck or boat onto

another, unmarked vehicle. Then Jongup would make that manifest glitch out of existence on his next warehouse shift.

He worked. It was tiring, but he was used to it. As he shifted boxes from one truck to another, he let his thoughts wander.

As they always seemed to these days, they drifted to Himchan. He'd taken to texting Jongup every day--silly things, sometimes: *Suddenly there are ice cream trucks everywhere and the smell of the sugar makes me think of you--I WONDER WHY :p*

Sometimes he just asked about Jongup's day. Jongup had been knee-jerk suspicious the first time. But soon, he started to like it. It was nice having someone out there thinking about him, wanting to be sure he'd eaten.

A few times, they talked on the phone, late at night, Jongup lying flat on his back in bed. Wondering if Himchan was in bed, too.

Not that he was imagining that kind of thing.

They talked about nothing, about food and sleeping, their weird dreams. Himchan's subconscious was a far stranger country than Jongup would have imagined.

Sometimes Himchan talked about his friends. He was careful not to drop many details about their more criminal activities, but Jongup had learned by now that they were far more than associates to the other man, anyway. He almost felt he knew them himself. It made his guts clench with longing and jealousy at the clear affection in Himchan's voice when he talked about them, but Jongup would never ask him to stop. The more he learned about Himchan, the more he wanted to know.

And it was easier than talking about himself.

He tried, though. He avoided the past, but was careful to tell the truth as much as possible about his present. As long as he didn't mention Park or the warehouse, stuck to the diner and to his studies, it was okay. For the first time he could remember, he wanted to be known.

He'd had to lie tonight, though, when Himchan asked what he was up to.

Probably going to bed early, he told him, the untruth sticking in his throat a bit.

Good. Himchan had sounded pleased. *Sweet dreams, Jonguppie*.

He shook away the lie so that all that remained was the warm feeling of having someone to say goodnight to.

The work went smoothly. They'd done this so many times by now. Jongup didn't know precisely who they were working for--Park wasn't the man in charge, he just brought Jongup and other able bodies to do the jobs--but Jongup assumed he was better off not knowing. More than once he'd wound up in the middle of a fight when a second crew showed up. He'd normally take a few punches and deliver some of his own, and slip away at the earliest opportunity.

Tonight, he and the others shifted cargo under the watchful eyes of the man Jongup took to be Park's boss. At first, he barely registered the second man's arrival.

Then he heard him speak: "Everything quiet tonight?"

Jongup's spine went rigid. He recognized that voice, a *voice like a cartoon mountain*. He chanced a peek over his shoulder. There was no mistaking the man he'd seen in Himchan's garage over a month before. Yongguk.

He turned away hurriedly, heart thumping double-time. Would he recognize Jongup? He must have heard about his second visit to the garage; from everything Himchan had said, Jongup doubted any of the men he'd met would have kept such a thing from their leader.

Thankfully, his back was to the two men. He could just make out their words over the sounds of work around him.

"No trouble so far. I doubled the watch, like you said. They're twiddling their thumbs out there."

"You'd better hope it stays that way," Yongguk said grimly. Jongup chanced another glance, in time to see the two men move away, still talking in low voices. Jongup willed his heartbeat to calm the hell down.

What was Yongguk doing here? should have been the question, except it was obvious enough. He was the real man in charge. Which meant Jongup had been working for him--and, by extension, Himchan--all along. The urge to laugh tangled with an unwelcome burst of suspicion. Did Himchan know? Did Yongguk? Had they been playing Jongup this whole time?

Even as the idea occurred to him, he dismissed it. He'd never seen either man on a job before, nor any he'd met at the garage. This was probably too low-level for them to bother with under normal circumstances. Jongup thought of Himchan's veiled references to the man who'd attacked one of theirs a few weeks back, his belief he was being followed. Jongup could guess what had changed to get Yongguk out here now.

Even so, this posed a problem. If Yongguk recognized him, no doubt he'd tell Himchan, and Himchan would have questions that Jongup wasn't prepared to answer.

This was fine. He just needed to keep his head down and work. There was no reason anyone should notice him.

"Hey." Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see the boss. So much for *that* theory. "You're going with the truck tonight."

Yongguk stood behind him, gaze passing disinterestedly over Jongup as he watched the operation.

"Me?" Jongup asked, his voice just managing not to squeak. But the boss had already moved on down the line. Yongguk motioned to Jongup and he followed helplessly to the first truck

they'd finished loading. Yongguk climbed into the driver's seat and there seemed nothing for it but for Jongup to climb in beside him. He shut the door and turned to find a gun in the other man's hand.

He froze before realizing Yongguk's hand was slack around the weapon. He was checking his mirrors, not even looking at Jongup.

"Keep your eyes open. You see anyone following, tell me," he said. Jongup took the gun. They began to move.

*

A bottle of soju appeared in front of Himchan. He scowled up at Youngjae, who gave him a sunny smile.

"Break time?" his dongsaeng guessed. Himchan looked pointedly at the papers and open laptop in front of him.

"Oh yeah, I'm basically done," he said. "I'm just sitting up at 3 am for fun."

Youngjae produced a bottle of wine from behind his back and made it do a little waltz with the soju.

"Can I tempt you with this fine vintage?"

Himchan peered at the wine. "Did you steal that from my room?"

"Noooooooyes," Youngjae said. He left the bottles on top of some pages Himchan needed and dragged a chair over to the desk.

"Not really looking for company right now, Jae."

Youngjae ignored this and sat. "Yongguk hyung asked me to look into your friend," he said quietly. "Jongup."

This cracked through Himchan's haze of work. "He *what*?"

*

The truck was silent. Jongup kept his eyes on the mirror, looking for any cars that might be behind them for longer than a block or so. It was still dark out and the roads were nearly empty. He thought it would be easy to spot a tail, but he was happy for the distraction anyway. Kept him from fidgeting too obviously. Yongguk was so still beside him, and he didn't want to draw his attention.

He tried not to think that his being chosen for this job meant he'd been recognized. Coincidence. Someone had to do it. The longer they went without Yongguk speaking to him, the better the odds he didn't know who he was. Right?

It felt like hours, though in reality it was probably no longer than thirty minutes. Yongguk pulled the truck into a garage whose door lifted on their approach. Jongup had a moment's panic as the truck trundled into the dark interior and he saw a flash of bodies in the headlights. Then Yongguk was parking, and lifting a hand in greeting to the men outside, who he clearly recognized. Jongup followed his lead and got out of the truck, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot as Yongguk spoke briefly with the other men. Then he motioned to Jongup again and led him to a black SUV tucked away in the garage.

There was more silent driving time. The sun was beginning to light the sky. Normally, Jongup would have been home by now. He kept looking for signs they were being followed, but the streets were beginning to fill with people heading to work, and it was harder now. He was *so* tired. It took a moment to register when Yongguk parked, and another to realize they were outside Jongup's building.

He gave a start, and turned from his mirror to find Yongguk looking at him squarely.

"So, Jongup," he said. "I thought it was time we talked."

*

Himchan's mind was reeling and he felt like shouting himself hoarse, but it technically wasn't Youngjae he wanted to yell at. He pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed.

"What do you *mean* he works for us."

The accounts and schedules were forgotten in front of him, his glass of wine ignored. Youngjae gave him a look that was only mildly contrite.

"I guess he's part of one of the smuggling crews in the warehouse district," he said. "Makes sense when you think about it."

Himchan disagreed. This did not make sense. Jongup wasn't supposed to have anything to do with their operation.

"There's always a chance he doesn't even know," Youngjae said. He was looking at Himchan with fucking *sympathy*, which was the worst. "Most of those guys are just told where to go and when; they're not really *ours*, you know?"

Himchan laughed hollowly. "Right."

"At least he works for *us*," Youngjae pointed out fairly. "Does a good job, too, apparently."

Himchan just nodded. He wasn't sure why the news was bothering him so much. Youngjae was right; Jongup could be shifting cargo for Kang, and then things would really be messy.

But it felt like more proof that Jongup still didn't trust him. He was on a job right now, not safe in bed as Himchan had been imagining.

Not that Himchan had been imagining...that.

Fuck.

"Well. I hope this puts the issue to rest, then," he said briskly. He wasn't about to share all this stupid inner turmoil with Youngjae. He was a good listener, sure, and one of Himchan's best friends. But Jongup was something separate. Just *his*. Or so he'd thought.

"I was kind of surprised when Dae said you and Jongup were friends or whatever," Youngjae said, declining to pick up on Himchan's subtle hint that it was time to stop talking. "Cause of how, you know. You don't like most people?"

"I still don't," Himchan said pointedly.

"So what is it about him, then? I mean, don't get me wrong, *I* like him," Youngjae said. "He did save my face getting smeared on the concrete that time. I'm on your side, here." He gave Himchan an encouraging smile that, annoyingly, made Himchan's shoulders relax.

"I don't know," he admitted grudgingly. "He's--he makes me laugh. And." He sighed. "He's maybe the most *alone* person I've ever met," he admitted. "I keep thinking, like...he's what I'd be without Yongguk."

Youngjae huffed out a breath and squinted at him, looking suddenly irritated. "You mean he's what Yongguk would be without *you*," he corrected. "Or what any of us would be without the rest. Why do you always do that?"

Himchan stared. "Do what?"

"Act like Yongguk hyung's your damn savior. You know he feels the same about you. So do I. No wonder you like Jongup; *alone* is pretty much your ideal *type*."

This rankled. Himchan scowled at his friend. "You're full of shit."

"Drink your wine," Youngjae said.

*

It was one thing to have Himchan in his apartment.

(It was so much a thing, in fact, that Jongup had found himself buying a small table, and taking a pair of mismatched chairs from his neighbor when he was moving out.)

(It was a little embarrassing; Himchan had been over once and Jongup was practically picking out China patterns.)

But if Himchan was one big confusing thing, having Yongguk in his space was something very much *else*.

Jongup made coffee while Yongguk stood in the middle of the room, hands in his pockets, gazing around with undisguised curiosity. Jongup couldn't shake the idea he was about to be chewed out, privileges revoked. The only privilege Yongguk could possibly have any impact

on were Jongup's Himchan visitation rights--which were, incidentally, also the only privileges he cared about.

You haven't done anything wrong, he reminded himself. *Lately*.

"Thanks." Yongguk accepted the cup of coffee, and the chair Jongup motioned to. Jongup sat across from him, his own mug of coffee cradled in his hands.

"You and Himchan have been talking a lot," Yongguk said.

"I guess."

"You didn't know Park's been having you do work for us?"

Jongup tried not to shift, tried not to show how disquieting he found the idea that Himchan might actually know Park. The two men shouldn't exist on the same planet, let alone the same social sphere.

"No," he said. Yongguk nodded, which maybe meant he believed him, or maybe meant he wasn't surprised, or maybe meant nothing at all. Jongup found himself suddenly angry. Whatever he and Himchan did or didn't have going on, he was sure it was none of Yongguk's business. "Me talking to Himchan doesn't have anything to do with you."

Yongguk arched an eyebrow. "Good," he said. He looked around again. "Channie likes to be needed, you know," he said. "He likes helping people."

"I'm not his charity case."

"That's not what I said."

"What *are* you trying to say? What's the point of this?" Jongup said. He paused. "Are you jealous?"

Because there was something proprietary about this whole thing, wasn't there? Yongguk narrowed his eyes.

"You don't know anything about me and Himchan."

"I know you helped him get clean and he feels like he owes you."

The older man gave a start at that, his eyes widening slightly. When he spoke again, he sounded considerably less certain than before.

"He told you about that?"

Jongup nodded. "I know you grew up together and he thinks of you like a brother." He almost didn't say it. "Maybe you think of him as something else."

Yongguk's glare probably would have scared some people, but Jongup had seen worse. He sipped his coffee calmly. There was something almost nostalgic about having someone try to

intimidate him.

"Does he know about *you*?" Yongguk asked. Jongup's calm slipped and he went cold. Yongguk's face was knowing, dispassionate. Well, he could afford to be dispassionate; his existence wasn't as easily-shattered as Jongup's.

"What are you talking about."

"You know."

Jongup swallowed. The only warmth in the room was coming from his coffee cup. He noticed vaguely that his arms had broken out in goosebumps.

"Does Himchan?" he managed finally. Yongguk regarded him coolly.

"Not yet."

*

"I don't know why you're so interested, anyway," Himchan said. "Are we seriously so codependent it's actually newsworthy whenever any of us have one friend who's not part of the group?"

"Hyung. Phone Guy's *kind* of got everyone on edge. And fair enough, you know? You can't really expect Yongguk hyung not to be interested when you start hanging out with someone new out of nowhere."

"Jongup doesn't have anything to do with that."

"Well, yeah, we know that *now*. And don't you feel reassured?"

"I feel *annoyed*. With you."

"Hold that thought, hyung." Youngjae turned serious. "There *is* something."

Himchan sighed. "*What*."

Instead of answering, Youngjae pulled Himchan's laptop to himself. He typed away for a moment. Himchan drummed his fingers on the desk. Youngjae slid the laptop back. There was an article pulled up. Himchan read the headline and his stomach dropped.

"Yeah, so there's that," Youngjae said.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, everyone; seeing the boys in DC threw off my schedule for a bit! Should be back to weekly postings now. :) Next chapter we finally learn about Jongup's

past, stay tuned.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

TW for mentions of abuse.

It was 6:09. Jongup was alone. He should have been sleeping. He sat at the table, mug of cold coffee in his hand, staring into space, statue-still.

There came a knock at the door. Jongup blinked. Then, as though he'd been waiting for this--well, he kind of had--he rose briskly and went to answer it.

"Hey," he said. His voice almost sounded normal.

Himchan smiled in greeting, but all of his dimples stayed hidden, so Jongup knew it was false.

"I wasn't sure you'd still be awake," he said. "You were up all night."

Jongup swallowed painfully. He knew, then. They stared at each other across the threshold as Jongup tried to gauge how *much* Himchan knew--about the job, obviously, but the rest?

"Ask me inside, Jongup," Himchan said. Jongup took a step back and the older man came in, shutting the door behind him.

"I didn't know," Jongup blurted out. Himchan's eyes narrowed in confusion. "That the jobs were for you guys. How could I know that?"

"You couldn't," Himchan conceded absently. He was staring at the table, and the two coffee cups on top of it. He reached into his pocket and Jongup tensed, but he only pulled out his phone. "I was more interested in this, anyway."

He tapped something into the phone then held the screen out for Jongup to see. "Is this you?"

Even on such a small screen, the headline jumped out to punch Jongup in the gut: *Area Boy Convicted in Father's Murder*.

Everything stopped.

Once upon a time, two or three lifetimes ago, Jongup had seen the ocean. He'd had a family back then, brothers who laughed too loud and played too rough. A mother with the kind of smile that could stop people in their tracks. A father who--

Once upon a time, Jongup had seen the ocean. He cried when they left, but his brother took a creamy white shell from his backpack and lifted it to his ear. *Listen*, he said. *What do you hear?*

Jongup heard the ocean.

He heard it again now, a pounding rushing obliterating sound that covered the world. His vision narrowed so all he could see was the headline: *Boy. Murder. Boy. Murder. boymurderboymurderboymurder--*

The headline vanished. He blinked. The rushing sound stopped, left his ears ringing. Or was that all in his head? Did it matter?

Himchan had lowered his phone and was frowning at him.

"Jongup?"

He took a few steps back, sure somehow that if Himchan got too close, whatever was rotten in Jongup would crawl under his skin and infect him. Jongup's fault, again.

"You should go," he said. Himchan shook his head.

"Talk to me."

"What's there to say? You already know everything," Jongup said, relieved when his voice didn't shake.

"Then this is true?" Himchan said. "You did this?"

Jongup could still see his father's look of surprise, almost comical, as he realized he was falling. He could still hear the sound of him landing at the bottom of the stairs in an inelegant pile. It was a clumsy sound, loud enough to cover the snap his neck must have made when it broke.

"Yes," Jongup said. Himchan stared at him, then down at the phone in his hands, then back up at him again.

"On purpose?"

He almost laughed bitterly. Himchan wanted so badly to give him a way out. Jongup could have lied, but Himchan always saw right through him.

"Yes."

"Why?"

He shook his head. How could he make excuses? There *was* no excuse. Himchan glared at him.

"So, what? You're just a cold-blooded killer? I don't believe that."

"You should," Jongup said. He'd been called worse in court. And probably in the article Himchan was holding.

"Jongup."

He let out his breath in a frustrated huff. "Why are you still here? You know what I did; you can just disappear now."

Himchan stared at him.

"I can go," he said finally. "But if I do, it's only because you asked me to." He looked at Jongup squarely. "Or I can stay and you can tell me what really happened."

Jongup hesitated. He couldn't possibly explain. But he couldn't quite bring himself to let Himchan walk out the door, either.

The older man saw him wavering. He nodded and sat at the table, eyeing the second coffee cup. Jongup wondered if he knew it had been Yongguk's.

"You know," Himchan said. "I've done some things I'm not proud of. Some things that would make you look at me differently if you knew about them." He touched the handle of Yongguk's mug with the tip of his finger, then looked up at Jongup. "If you did this, I think you had a reason. You can tell me."

Jongup's knees felt weak. He sat down. This still felt like a trick. Himchan was looking at him...kindly. Jongup didn't know quite what to do with that.

He spoke.

"I loved my dad. He was--he could be really funny. He was always dancing with my mom when I was little, I remember the music--" He had to stop and clear his throat, which had gone thick. This part always felt more like dream than memory. For all he knew, his mind had fabricated all of it in some trick of his subconscious.

"Sometimes, though. He drank a lot, and sometimes he...wasn't so funny." He could still see the dent where the pot of ramyun had hit the wall, the way the soup turned the paint almost red as it dripped down.

"My mom left," he went on finally. "I don't even know how old I was. Young. My oldest brother started fighting with our dad a lot more then."

Himchan shifted slightly and Jongup suddenly remembered he'd told him he didn't have siblings. Ah, well. What was one more lie among friends?

"He tried, but--it kept getting worse. Then, one day he was gone, too." That night, Jongup and Jonghwan each snuck out of their own beds to wait in Jongin's, sure he'd be back soon. That night, then the next, the next, the next, until one day they watched as their father grunted and shuffled the mattress out of the house as he cursed his eldest son.

We don't need that asshole, he told them. *He's dead, you understand?*

"Christ," Himchan remarked tightly. Jongup barely heard him.

"Then it fell on Jonghwan, but he never fought back like Jongin. He just curled in on himself." He wasn't sure how to voice this part, the certainty he'd felt that his middle brother would soon disappear like everyone else. Except with Jonghwan, it could happen while his body was still in the house.

He couldn't go on. He took a sip of cold coffee.

"Did he hit you?" Himchan said quietly.

"No. I was his favorite." This was the detail no one could ever get over in court. His father never lay a hand on him in anger. Even towards the end, he'd come home some nights--few and far between, maybe, but they happened--and pull out his records, tug Jongup into his lap, even though by then he was too old.

C'mon, Uppie, this one'll melt your face off, he'd say, tickling his ribs.

How Jongup had loved him. How he'd hated him.

His father turned his anger, never far beneath the surface, on Jonghwan. Jonghwan, who'd always preferred books to music. Who made Jongup's lunch every morning after their mother left. Who corrected his homework and slept squeezed in beside him on Jongin's mattress until they were forced back onto their own.

"I thought Appa was gonna kill him that night," Jongup said. The excuse tasted like ash. He sipped more coffee, trying to wash it away. "It got so bad but he...he wouldn't stop."

Jongup had loved his father, and he'd loved his brother even more. But his deepest shame was that it hadn't been some protective instinct for Jonghwan that had finally gotten his feet moving, but rather the sudden clear understanding that, if Jonghwan left like the others, his father would turn his ire on Jongup. That he might be the favorite, but that wouldn't protect him forever.

"We were upstairs. Appa was...kicking Jonghwan. He wouldn't stop, and I just." He had to stop again. "I pushed him," he managed finally. "Down the stairs. His neck broke."

"Jesus." Himchan's voice was hoarse. Jongup couldn't look at him. His hands clenched around his mug, hard enough his knuckles went white.

The room was so quiet he could hear the mice in the walls, the familiar skittering sounds he fell asleep to each night. Then a hand was wrapping around his, tugging it off the mug. Himchan squeezed it insistently and Jongup looked at him in surprise.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Himchan said. Jongup flinched, tried to pull his hand away, but Himchan held on. "Jongup. The article said you were ten. *Ten*, and everyone who should've--should've protected you was either gone or abusive. You were just a kid. You were protecting your brother."

"That wasn't why I did it," Jongup burst out. Himchan held onto his hand doggedly.

"It's okay if you were protecting *yourself*, too," he said softly.

The court had disagreed. Everyone had disagreed. Who could blame them? What kind of son was capable of such a thing?

Himchan was still holding on. Jongup let his own grip go slack, staring at their hands. Himchan wove their fingers together. Jongup couldn't look at his face.

"They still tried you in court?"

He swallowed, nodded. "I went to jail. Kid jail, but still."

"Still," Himchan agreed. "How long?"

"Five years with weekly psych evals. Everyone thought I must've been crazy, I guess. Then they moved me to a group home with other violent teenage offenders. Stayed there til I was of age."

Himchan let out a breath. "Some of our guys have done time in that kind of place. Sounds like they can get pretty rough."

Jongup gave a half shrug. "You get used to it."

He'd trained himself to be a light sleeper. He could fashion a weapon out of just about anything. The group home had been designed to keep the boys in, except for their pre-approved outings, complete with anklets and chaperones to be sure the public would be safe from them.

No one had been overly concerned about protecting them from each other.

"What happened when you got out?" Himchan asked after a pause. Jongup was relieved he let the group home go. He didn't much care to think about it.

Of course, he didn't much care to think about what had come after, either.

"Nothing," he said. "I mean. I didn't have anywhere to go, so..."

"They didn't help you? Your--I don't know--a case worker or someone?" Himchan sounded mildly indignant. Jongup couldn't remember the last time someone else had been indignant on his behalf. He felt warmer suddenly, and his fingers twitched so he was holding Himchan's hand back. He still couldn't look at him.

Instead, he studied their hands, the way they fit together. Himchan's fingers were flat at the tips, his nails uniformly blunt, but there was something elegant to them, too. They fit neatly around Jongup's, which were all knobby knuckles, hard calluses from years of physical labor. He had the hands of a man twice his age.

"No," Jongup said. "Once I was out, I didn't have a case worker anymore."

He'd spent months on the streets, finding what work he could get--restaurants, mostly. They paid cash under the table and didn't ask questions. But the work was back-breaking and the pay minimal. He never stayed anywhere for long.

"Then I met Park," he said. His eyes darted up to meet Himchan's for the first time. Himchan's narrowed, but he didn't say anything.

"He got me off the streets," Jongup said. "Got me my warehouse job, best pay I ever got. There was...like, a group of us, living in this house."

It hadn't been as bad as the group home, but it had never felt safe, either. The faces were always changing as men came and went. Jongup never knew if he'd have a room to himself or if there'd be someone else stuffed in the other corner when he came in.

"We didn't have to pay rent or anything, but sometimes Park would have certain jobs for us. I guess you know about that part now. Probably more than I do."

It was Himchan's turn to look uncomfortable.

"We have a few guys like him around Seoul," he said. "It's their job to find people for when we just need more bodies--like the manual labor stuff."

"Thought you guys weren't big on recruitment."

Himchan arched an eyebrow in challenge. "He ever try to recruit you?" he said. "Our guys like him find us some stable crews to do regular work. Reliable people, like you. It's just another job; you get in, you get out, you get paid."

Jongup blinked.

"You get...paid?"

"Yeah, y--" Himchan read his face and his own darkened. "Park did give you your cut after every job, right?"

"He said the jobs made up for not paying rent."

"Rent--we *own* that house," Himchan snapped. "That piece of shit. That was never supposed to be the deal." He let go of Jongup's hand to grab his phone.

"What are you doing?" Jongup's hand curled into a fist, suddenly cold.

"Just letting Bbang know we need to deal with this," Himchan muttered, thumbs moving furiously across the screen. Jongup went rigid at the sound of Yongguk's name and Himchan's eyes lifted to meet his. He put the phone down.

"Those bruises," he said. "Your old ones. You got those on the jobs Park set up, didn't you."

He gave a half shrug. "Sometimes another crew shows up."

Himchan sighed and massaged his temple, and Jongup saw the deep circles under his eyes for the first time. He realized he wasn't the only one who'd been up all night.

"That wasn't right," Himchan said quietly. "You should have been paid for your work every time, you should have gotten--fucking--medical attention if you got hurt working for us. Why'd you keep doing the jobs? You don't even live in that house anymore."

His hand was just sitting on the table now, curled up next to his phone. Jongup wanted to hold it again. He couldn't quite believe Himchan was still *here*. He knew Jongup was a killer, but he'd moved onto the Park thing as though that was what really mattered.

Jongup shifted. "He said he'd tell the bosses at the warehouse about me. I can't afford to lose that job."

If he'd thought Himchan's expression was dark before, now it turned almost frightening. When he looked like this it was impossible to believe him capable of the deep belly laugh that made Jongup's toes curl every time he heard it.

"That's done now," Himchan said firmly. "You're getting back-pay for all the work you did. You won't lose your warehouse job." He looked at Jongup. It was possible Jongup was staring. "What?"

"Just--you're still here." He let some of the wonder creep into his voice. It felt like a tiny miracle.

Scratch that. It felt like an infinitely *huge* miracle.

Himchan's expression relaxed. "I'm still here," he agreed. "Not what you expected, huh?"

Jongup shook his head. Nothing about Himchan was what he expected.

The older man's eyes widened suddenly. "Jongup," he said slowly. "What about your brothers? And your mother? You have family out there somewhere, right?"

The thought didn't sting the way it used to. Jongup could even smile a little.

"When I was in jail, I used to daydream all the time about Jongin showing up and--busting me out, I guess. One of the guards telling me *you have a visitor*, and it's *him*. Never happened."

He'd had similar fantasies in the group home; on the rare occasions he was let out into the world, he saw Jonghwan's face everywhere. Impossible, really--when he'd last seen his brother, he'd been a boy. He'd be an adult now. Jongup might not even recognize him.

"You never looked them up?" Himchan asked.

"They knew where to find me," Jongup said, sharp. "It was all over the papers. Jonghwan was *there*." He saw that Himchan was concerned by this little outburst and he tried to smile. "I mean, I can't blame them. I killed our father. It must've been easier to just forget I ever existed."

Himchan frowned. "Easy's overrated," he murmured. He reached out and ran a finger along Jongup's wrist, tracing the bone. Jongup went still, not wanting him to stop.

"Yongguk was here," he said. Suddenly he needed to tell Himchan everything. The older man's eyes darted to the second coffee mug.

"He went to the job site," he said, almost to himself. "What'd he say?" This to Jongup. He shifted a bit uncomfortably.

"I think he was trying to...get me to stay away."

Himchan frowned. "From the jobs?"

"From *you*."

He couldn't read Himchan's expression now, but he was still touching his wrist lightly. Jongup turned his hand over carefully, and Himchan's index finger pressed lightly against his pulse.

"You must have misunderstood," he said, but not very convincingly. Jongup watched his finger trace the faint lines of his veins and then his palm. Jongup's thumb twitched, wanting to press against Himchan's hand and hold it there.

"I think he's jealous," he said. It was easier to say not looking at Himchan's face.

"Why would he be jealous?"

He had to look. There was something in Himchan's expression that could almost be called hope. Jongup's hand closed around Himchan's fingers. He didn't pull away.

"I don't know."

Himchan smiled--not his full-on smile, but still a real one.

"You must be exhausted. You were up all night."

The subject change was both a relief and disappointment.

"Look who's talking," Jongup said.

Himchan snorted and brushed his free hand through his hair. "Yeah, yeah. C'mon." He stood, tugging Jongup's hand, and pulled him over to the mattress. "You got pajamas?"

"Fuck it," Jongup said, collapsing on the bed. He kept his grip on Himchan's hand somehow by accident. "I'm not *that* tired. Maybe a nap or something..."

Himchan shrugged. "Call it what you want. I'm not leaving til you go to sleep."

This didn't sit right with Jongup. Maybe it *was* exhaustion making him bold, or maybe the simple fact that Himchan knew the truth--the whole truth, now--and was still looking at him

like he was a person. Had touched him of his own volition. This was all so improbable it was making Jongup lightheaded.

"Stay," he said. Himchan blinked down at him. "Just--you're exhausted too." Reluctantly, he let go of his hand so he could scoot back on the mattress, making room. "Just sleep here for awhile."

Maybe this had been a mistake. Himchan wasn't moving. Hell, he'd probably just been being *nice*, and here Jongup was, making insane assump--

Himchan kicked off his shoes and set them neatly next to the wall. Then he sat on the mattress, his eyes never leaving Jongup's face.

They lay down facing each other, not touching. Jongup *had* been tired, once, all the way down to his bones. Now he couldn't remember ever being quite this awake.

"Go to sleep," Himchan whispered. Jongup laughed; he couldn't help it. Himchan just grinned like he was in on the joke. Maybe he was. He reached out and touched Jongup's eyebrow, cutting off his laugh as cleanly as if he'd used a knife. Then, slowly, gently, he pushed his eyelids closed. "Sleep," he insisted. Jongup could hear the smile in his voice. Then his hand was gone from his face. Jongup made a disgruntled noise and reached out blindly until he found his wrist, his hand. He held it loosely. Himchan didn't pull away. His fingers tightened slightly around Jongup's.

Well, fuck. Jongup kept his eyes shut. There was no way he was sleeping now. He could hear Himchan breathing softly, steadily.

His hand was warm in his.

No way he could sleep like this.

He could feel Himchan's damn heartbeat, the blood pulsing under the thin skin of his wrist.

He could never sleep again.

He could nev

*

Jongup was asleep. Himchan watched the tension drain from his face, could swear he saw the moment he drifted off. They were still holding hands. The angle was slightly awkward for Himchan, but he'd live with it. He didn't want to wake him.

He needed sleep himself, but he knew it wouldn't come. His mind a was roiling mess. Jongup's history was nothing like he'd expected.

Himchan had known violence. He had seen it in his friends. The first time Youngjae killed someone on a job, he'd been younger than Jongup was now. He hadn't cried or raged or tried to drink it away that night. He'd just...sat. They all took turns sitting up with him. It wasn't

until Junhong, still practically a baby, had draped himself over his side, that Youngjae had blinked back to life, smiling a little and rolling his eyes affectionately at the maknae.

Yongguk disappeared every time he had to do it. He'd be gone for two days, whenever the current crisis had passed. He grieved in private. No matter who it had been, no matter the circumstance, he never liked to take a life.

Himchan had known men who relished violence. The ones who liked to go a bit too far, who were almost disappointed after the kill, because it meant their fun was over.

It was clear to Himchan that Jongup wasn't one of these, and just as clear that Jongup didn't know it. He obviously classified himself as one of the monsters. And who could blame him? Everyone who should have taught him the difference had left him a long time ago.

He was sure Jongup was not a violent man. He seemed more alone than ever, now that Himchan knew he didn't have to be. He itched to track down his brothers, his mother. How could they have left him alone for so long?

His thoughts turned to Park. Himchan didn't know him well, and that had been his mistake. They'd been stupid to trust someone they didn't know better. He wondered how many people he'd been scamming out of their pay over the years.

Park's time was up. He'd tell Bbang, get him to--

But Himchan's plans for Park skidded to a halt as his thoughts landed on his best friend, of Jongup's claim that he was jealous. Nonsense, of course, at least in the way Jongup was thinking. But if he'd come here trying to stake his *claim* or something--well, they'd have to talk about that, too.

He didn't want to think about any of this right now. The sun was streaming through the window, too warm on the side of his face. He moved closer to Jongup to get back in the shade. The younger man made a small sound and his grip tightened on Himchan's hand. He was frowning in his sleep now and Himchan couldn't help reaching out a finger to smooth out the lines on his face. Jongup sighed, and Himchan held his breath until he settled.

Hell. He was, he realized, completely fucking done for.

*

When Jongup blinked awake, he was alone.

The empty space beside him made his heart plummet through three stories of apartment building to splatter against the foundation before he even remembered what was missing. Himchan had gone.

Jongup squeezed his eyes shut again, cursing himself for fifty kinds of stupid. Of course he was gone. Who would stay after hearing the truth? Jongup punched the pillow beside him. His fist hit something...not-pillow. He opened his eyes.

A sheet of paper. He blinked at the unfamiliar scrawl across it: *Back soon, H*

Before he could even start to tell himself not to get his hopes up, the front door opened and Himchan came in, arms full of grocery bags.

"You're up!" he said. "Or did I wake you?"

Jongup couldn't help staring as Himchan set the bags on the table and put his shoes next to the door.

"No, I just woke up," he said.

"I thought you'd be hungry. You've got nothing in, Jonguppie, seriously, what do you eat?" Himchan said. He began setting food out on the counters and pulling things out of the cabinets. Like he'd been here a hundred times. Jongup bit the inside of his cheek hard to make sure he really *was* awake. Then he rolled out of bed and joined Himchan in the kitchen.

"You didn't have to do that." He had the absurd urge to put his chin on the taller man's shoulder to see what he was doing at the stove.

Yongguk's voice came to him, unbidden and unwelcome: *Channie likes being needed. He likes helping people.*

Jongup banished the voice. Maybe it was true, but that didn't mean anything, did it? Himchan could have left for good any time. If he was still here it was because he wanted to be. Jongup had to believe that.

Maybe it was more to spite Yongguk than anything, but Jongup stepped up behind Himchan, rose on his tiptoes and peered over his shoulder, letting his chin rest there for the barest moment.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Himchan went still when Jongup touched him--a moment both brief and endless in which neither moved--and then continued fiddling with the stove as if nothing had happened. He didn't shove Jongup away.

"I told you I'm a good cook," he said. "I'm gonna feed you."

Jongup tried to remember the last time someone made him food, and simply couldn't.

"What are you making?" He rested his chin on Himchan's shoulder for another fraction of a second. The world kept spinning.

"You'll see." Himchan turned to look at him and their faces were so close Jongup almost reared back in surprise. Then he almost did something else--came so close, in fact, that he *did* take a step back to stop himself.

"Okay," he said hastily, trying to cover his own awkwardness. "Um. Do I have time to take a shower?" He had, after all, been working all night. Himchan's eyebrow twitched and, as one, he and Jongup looked at the sheer shower curtain that served to block off Jongup's tiny bathroom from the kitchen. He felt himself flush. He maybe hadn't thought this one through.

"Sure," Himchan said, returning to the grocery bags and sorting through them in a businesslike kind of way. "If you trust me alone in your kitchen."

"I think you'll be okay," Jongup said, edging to the bathroom, then backtracking to find some clean clothes to take with him. It was a tight fit--usually he undressed in the middle of the studio--but he made it work. Every clang from the kitchen made him flinch. He felt like every hair on his body was standing on end, hyperaware of Himchan's proximity.

He turned the water on as cold as it would go and closed his eyes against the spray.

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The sound of Jongup's shower was distracting, but Himchan made do. He kept his face turned studiously away from the gently-billowing shower curtain.

He hadn't been able to sleep, not face-to-face with the younger man, not once he actually admitted to himself that, just maybe, he wanted more from him than simple friendship.

Not that anything with Jongup could be simple.

The way Jongup stood behind him just now...Himchan had wanted to turn around, just to see what he would do. He was starting to think that, just maybe, he wasn't alone in this particular morass of feelings.

He just *had* to go for the complicated ones.

He was glad to be cooking. He read the recipe off his phone a few times to be sure he was doing it right. He'd missed--well, ignored--three calls from Yongguk. He only relented at the text from Junhong: *u dead hyung?* He shot back a quick response and tucked the phone away. For the moment, he wanted his head here. His friends could wait.

"Smells good."

Jongup stepped out of his bathroom--well, Himchan used the term "room" loosely--and---oh, fuck. He had on jeans and a grey t-shirt so worn and faded it was practically transparent. His feet were bare, his hair damp and messy.

Himchan was *so* fucking done for.

He held out a hand to ward Jongup off as he tried to peer around him at the stove.

"Sit down, it's almost finished," he said. Jongup smiled a little and did as he was told.

"You're bossy in the kitchen," he said.

"I'm bossy everywhere," Himchan corrected. Jongup's cheeks went pink and he smiled down at his hands.

"I'll remember that," he murmured. Himchan turned back to the stove as he felt himself flush.

So done, so done, so done.

He plated Jongup's food and put it in front of him on the table. And promptly liquified as the younger man's face lit up ten times brighter than he'd ever seen it.

"Pancakes!"

He sat across from him, knees still a little shaky from that smile.

"I don't know if they're any better than Kyung's," he warned, producing a bottle of syrup. "I've never made them before."

"They're better. I can tell," Jongup assured him. He poured what could be called an excessive amount of syrup on top, then gave Himchan an uncertain look. "You're not having any?"

"You first," Himchan snorted. "You're the guinea pig."

"Lucky me." Jongup took a bite and his eyes lit up again, and fuck, Himchan hadn't gotten this much of a rush since he stopped using. The pharmaceutical companies should market Moon Jongup's smile if they *really* wanted to get people high.

"Oh my god," Jongup said, except the muffled, mouthful-of-food version. "H'mch'n." He swallowed and stared down at his plate for a beat. "*Himchan*."

He couldn't help laughing. "Is that a good thing?"

"It's." Jongup clutched his heart rapturously and collapsed in his seat, miming a fainting spell. Himchan laughed again.

"You look like I poisoned you."

"Poisoned me with goodness." Jongup's smile made him look about a decade younger. "No wonder Jay couldn't shut up about pancakes." He hesitated, then added shyly, "That story was true, about the guy who told me about pancakes. Just--it wasn't a roommate at school, it was one of the guys in the group home."

He looked his own age again. Himchan just nodded. It was a relief not to need to ask. He thought if Jongup knew he could tell him the truth about everything, they might actually stand a chance.

At what, he wasn't quite ready to say.

Jongup took another bite and pretended to pass out again. Himchan snorted.

"If you do that every time it's gonna take you forever to eat," he teased.

"Can't help it. You have to try this, seriously, here--" Jongup held out a bite of pancake and it was between Himchan's lips before he could protest.

Sweetness flooded his mouth. Jongup was right; it *was* good. The younger man pulled the chopsticks back. A drop of syrup dripped on Himchan's chin. He rolled his eyes at Jongup, who grinned.

"Oops." He reached out and swiped at the syrup with his thumb, then froze, apparently stunned at his own daring. Himchan swallowed the pancake and waited to see what he'd do next.

Jongup paused, then brought his thumb to his mouth and licked off the syrup. It was a perfectly natural thing to do, except his eyes never left Himchan's, and his expression held a strange mix of hope and challenge.

Himchan swallowed again.

His phone rang, making them both jump. Then they laughed, at themselves, at each other, at the tension that had cropped up unexpectedly. Ha. Ha. Who gets tense over pancakes and syrup and licking and staring--

"Aren't you gonna get that?" Jongup said.

Himchan sighed and took out the phone. He still couldn't pull his eyes away from Jongup's face. His lips, to be specific, but no one asked and it wasn't important.

"Hello," he said irritably, ready to tell Yongguk off for interrupting breakfast, a.k.a the most important meal of the day.

"So, who's this Moon Jongup I keep hearing about?" Phone Guy asked.

Chapter 7

Youngjae had a keen nose for trouble. He was always the first to know when Junhong was about to boil over, when Himchan and Dae's bickering was about to shift from playful to the real thing. He might be a beat behind Himchan when it came to reading Yongguk, but he fancied he got closer with each passing year.

Today was trouble.

First Himchan stormed out--or left, anyway; his face had been too weirdly blank for Youngjae to really think it a storm-out--without a word. Then Yongguk returned not long after, saying nothing but a single barked *fine* when Daehyun asked how the job went. Then he was gone up to his room, ignoring the hurt look on the younger man's face.

Then Himchan didn't come home.

Then he didn't come home some more.

Then they received evidence he didn't *plan* to come home in the form of him texting Junhong and telling him so.

Then, hours later, another text: *Heard from PG. Omw back with company. Everyone on best behavior.*

"What does *that* mean?" Junhong said, reading over Youngjae's shoulder.

"PG means Phone Guy," Daehyun explained from over his other shoulder.

"I know *that*, hyung," Junhong said. He had a way of saying *hyung* that made it sound like he meant to say *stupid*, which Youngjae enjoyed very much. "I mean the best behavior part. What is that?"

Youngjae twirled his chair around and kicked out both legs to ensure he had the proper personal space. He adopted a scholarly tone.

"I'm glad you asked, Junhongie. *Best behavior* probably refers to showing proper manners, deference to your elders, or, I don't know, just off the top of my head, not knocking people unconscious just for passing by..."

He received twin punches to his shoulders for this. He should have seen that coming.

"I already apologized for that," Junhong protested.

"Wait, you think he's bringing Jongup back here?" Daehyun said. "Why would he do that?"

"Let me just activate my psychic powers to see," Youngjae said, pressing a finger to his temple. Dae swatted his hand away.

"Seriously. What's he even *doing* with that guy? He's a murderer!"

"Show of hands, who here's ever killed someone?" Youngjae said, raising his hand. He snuck a foot out to rest comfortably against Junhong's as the maknae dropped his chin and lifted his hand. Dae scowled.

"That's different."

"*Someone* didn't raise their haaaaand," Youngjae sing-songed. His friend rolled his eyes and raised his hand and put it down again immediately.

"Whatever, those were *different*. Those were...self-defense. This guy kills his own father when he's still a kid? Obviously his galbi's a little undercooked, you know?"

Youngjae shrugged. He could see Dae's point, but at the same time, nothing he'd seen of Jongup led him to think he was unhinged. Himchan was one of the best judges of character he knew, and had spent far more time with the guy. He had to trust that if Jongup was dangerous, Himchan would have seen it.

"Should we tell--?" Junhong jerked a thumb towards the stairs.

"I'm sure he texted hyung already," Youngjae said. "No need to bug him before they get here."

He smelled something off with the hyungs, but he couldn't guess at it just yet. Yongguk and Himchan had such a long history that Youngjae thought even he didn't know the half of it. It was rare for them to be at odds with each other, and he had no real reason to think they even *were*. Except Himchan hadn't liked Yongguk asking Youngjae to look into Jongup. It made him uncomfortable to think he might be a contributing factor to a rare argument between his friends.

It wasn't long before Himchan's car pulled into the garage. Sure enough, Jongup was with him. He wasn't as blood-covered as he'd been the last time Youngjae saw him. He just looked like a normal guy, jeans and t-shirt and backpack slung over one shoulder. He wasn't someone Youngjae would look at twice on the street.

Himchan, he saw, was pissed.

He led Jongup over to the cluster of his friends.

"You guys hear anything?" he asked by way of greeting.

"From Phone Guy? Nah," Youngjae said. Himchan nodded, looking unsurprised.

"You remember Jongup," he said, putting a hand on the shorter man's shoulder. "I guess Junhong's the only one you didn't meet officially." The maknae stepped forward.

"Sorry about last time," he said, offering his hand. "Was your head okay?"

Jongup shook his hand. "Just sore for a couple days. I've had worse."

"Cool." Junhong gave him a bashful smile that probably went further towards putting Jongup at ease than his apology had done. Youngjae could see Dae itching to say something--of course, *itching to say something* was pretty much Daehyun's position any time he wasn't already speaking--but holding himself in check. His eyes kept darting between Himchan and Jongup. Youngjae admired his restraint.

"Good to see you again," he told Jongup, who smiled back hesitantly. Himchan's hand still rested between his shoulder blades. Interesting.

"Where's Bbang?" he asked.

"Here."

They all turned to see their leader standing halfway down the stairs.

"Who's watching the shop?" he said, eyes scanning the garage.

"Snail and Hoonie," Dae said. Yongguk nodded.

"Let's go up."

The group followed him to the largest office upstairs. They all had their customary places--Yongguk in the black chair, Himchan on the end of the couch at his elbow, Junhong perched on the desk next to Dae, Youngjae at the door. But today they had a sixth. He and Himchan leaned on the desk, leaving Junhong to take a tentative seat on the couch. Dae joined Youngjae at the door. He could feel his friend's tension and pressed his arm against his side in lieu of telling him to calm the fuck down.

"So, what'd he say?" Yongguk asked Himchan.

"He asked about Jongup," Himchan said, and everyone looked at Jongup. To his credit, he didn't squirm under the scrutiny, though he did glance at Himchan, and shift his weight so he was a bit closer to him. Also interesting. "He knew him by name," Himchan went on. And glared at Youngjae.

Youngjae blinked. "What'd *I* do?"

"Did you talk to anyone? About--" He glanced at Jongup. Youngjae's mouth dropped open in indignation.

"No," he snapped. "Obviously."

"He knew his *name*," Himchan repeated, and Youngjae's irritation left him abruptly. Himchan was *scared*. He didn't think he'd ever seen him afraid before. He hadn't been nearly this shaken by Phone Guy knowing *his* name. A few puzzle pieces slipped into place.

"What about the rest of you?" Himchan turned his glare on the others.

"Channie. No one's talked to anyone. We already knew he was watching us," Yongguk said. Himchan didn't look particularly mollified by this. Jongup edged a bit closer to him, and

Youngjae wondered if he knew he was staring. Interesting, yet again.

"What else did he say?" Junhong asked.

Himchan folded his arms. "He wants to meet."

"He wants to *meet*?" Dae burst out. "Hyung, why didn't you lead with *that*?"

Youngjae gave him a sideways glance. Had he not been watching the same Himchan-and-Jongup show Youngjae had? It seemed fairly fucking obvious why Himchan was more hung up on some details than others.

Their hyungs ignored this.

"When?" Yongguk said.

"Tonight."

"Where?"

"At the Den, 10:00." The Lion's Den was a popular club in the middle of the city, known to be neutral territory. Youngjae wasn't much of a club guy, but he'd been to the Den a few times when Yongguk and Himchan needed to meet with Kang or one of the other bosses. It was always a good time to get dressed up in whatever trashy ensemble Dae forced him into and then go stare down a few other crews across the dance floor.

It was a more conventional choice than Youngjae would have expected from Phone Guy. He found himself oddly disappointed.

"I bet Kang got an invite, too," Junhong spoke up. Yongguk frowned.

"What are you talking about?"

"You talked to Lee?" Himchan said before Junhong could reply. He nodded.

"Lee?" Dae said. "Kang's Lee? What are you two talking about?"

"Junhongie thought to wonder whether we were the only crew Phone Guy contacted," Himchan said. "I had him check with Lee." Lee, Kang's second-in-command, was a reasonable enough guy. He'd also happened to grow up best friends with Junhong's older brother, and as such, the two could speak without violence breaking out.

"You didn't tell me," Yongguk said, the reproach mild but clear in his voice. Himchan's stare was insolent. It fit oddly on his features.

"Weird. So you *don't* like your people going behind your back?" he said. Yongguk's expression darkened. He stood, and Youngjae tensed. There was almost no way the leader would take a swing at his best friend, but--

He jerked his head at the door and Himchan straightened. He touched Jongup's arm lightly, then followed Yongguk out of the room. Youngjae and Daehyun parted to let them pass. Himchan closed the door behind him, leaving thick silence behind.

"So, hey," Youngjae said brightly, smiling at Jongup. "This is cool and not awkward at all."

"Himchan made me come with him," Jongup said immediately. "He was just--that phone call kind of--I didn't ask to come or anything." He looked so guilty that *Youngjae* felt guilty, although of all the people in the room, he thought he had the least reason to be.

"No, this is good!" he assured him. "He just wants to know you're safe."

"I guess." Jongup glanced longingly at the door. He had it bad, Youngjae saw. It made him like him more.

"The whole thing's so weird," Dae said moodily. "No offense, but I don't see what you have to do with anything."

Junhong rolled his eyes but Jongup didn't look offended. "I don't either," he admitted. So maybe he wasn't that bright, after all.

"It was the quickest way Phone Guy could think of to get under Himchan's skin," Youngjae said patiently. Jongup went very still. This idea clearly hadn't occurred to him yet, and he didn't seem to like it. "Junhongie, why don't you show Jongup to Himchan's room? He can stash his stuff. And show him around a bit."

The maknae nodded. "C'mon." He motioned to Jongup, who followed him out, still frowning. Youngjae rounded on Daehyun.

"What's with you?"

"What?"

"What what? You didn't even try to charm the new guy. Are you feeling all right?"

Daehyun swatted his hand away as he tried to feel his forehead.

"He's not *the new guy*, he's just...some guy," he objected. "It's not like I try to charm everyone I meet."

Youngjae smiled politely.

"Well, you might want to charm this one," he said. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing a lot of him, if Himchannie gets his way."

Dae frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Youngjae stared at him. "Himchan's new boyfriend. What are *you* talking about?" Daehyun began to sputter.

"New--Himchan's not gay," he said. This was so blatantly incorrect that Youngjae could only stare. Harder. "He's *not*," Daehyun insisted. His brows knitted. "Is he?"

"That's an affirmative, genius," Youngjae said.

"Since *when*?"

Youngjae just rolled his eyes and waited.

"But--I talk to him about girls all the *time*."

Youngjae didn't doubt it. "Yeah. You know that thing you do where you talk and talk and talk and--"

"Shut up, I do not."

"--talk some more without ever letting anyone get a word in edgewise? All these times you talked to Himchan about girls, did he ever talk about them *back*?"

He watched his friend digest this.

"Well, that's not--I don't--oh, shit."

Normally, Youngjae enjoyed watching Dae learn something new, particularly things Youngjae himself had already known. But at the moment, this didn't strike him as the most important thing happening, and he wished his friend could fast-forward a little.

No such luck.

"Wait, so is *this* why he always turns me down for double dates?" Daehyun said, brightening. "I thought it was *me*!"

"I'm sure it was," Youngjae said. "Just, also, y'know. A lack of interest in the random girls you were trying to hook him up with."

"Hmph. So you think he and Jongup--? Hmph." Daehyun gazed meditatively at the door.

"Yeah. Obviously. Because I have eyes. So you'd better work on your attitude. And maybe don't knock him unconscious again."

"Well how was I supposed to know?" Daehyun wailed. "We have to break them up and find someone new for hyung. Jongup probably hates me now."

"Probably," Youngjae agreed. "And that's a pretty big problem for me and I definitely care, but I also tend to think we have something more important to worry about right now."

"Yeah." Daehyun scuffed a toe against the worn carpet, scowling. "Do you think Himchan and Yongguk hyung are really fighting?"

Oh. Youngjae had been thinking about Phone Guy. But, come to think of it, the thought of his hyungs seriously having it out did make his stomach flop anxiously.

"Okay," he said. "Two somethings."

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"You disappear without a word right now? Seriously?" Yongguk demanded. Himchan slammed the door behind him and faced his friend.

"Youngjae knew where I was going. Everyone knew where I was going. Fucking *Phone Guy* knew where I was going; you telling me you couldn't guess?"

He could see Yongguk struggling to keep his cool. He always hated to lose control.

"You let me call you three times," he said finally. "Knowing this guy's out there, knowing how dangerous it is right now. Be pissed at me if you want, Channie, but don't be an asshole."

There was some fairness to this.

"I texted Junhong," Himchan muttered. Yongguk shook his head. "Well, what about you?" Himchan snapped. "You go to Youngjae to dig up dirt on Jongup behind my back? All you had to say was, *hey, I'm worried about your new friend, why don't we have Jae look into it and make sure everything's copacetic?* And then you go talk to him without talking to me first? What the hell, Bbang."

"I just wanted to make sure he's--safe," Yongguk said, seeming to choose his words with care. "I don't know you're in the right headspace right now to be objective."

Himchan blinked. "I don't even know what you're talking about," he said coolly.

(His mind tried nudging him with the memory of Jongup in bed a few hours before, his face smooth and relaxed and mere centimeters from Himchan's. Of his hand wrapped around Himchan's. Of the sound of his voice when he asked him to stay. Oh, shut up, brain.)

Yongguk was giving him a knowing look. When they were younger, Himchan had believed briefly that his friend could read his mind, so completely did he always seem to understand what he was thinking before he even spoke. He was getting that feeling again now.

"Why did Jongup get the impression you were trying to get rid of him?" he demanded. Let Yongguk sit in the hot seat for a minute. "If you were just *worried about me*, why'd you go to his place like that once you knew he worked for us? He thought you were *jealous*."

"I am."

Himchan blinked uncertainly. Yongguk was looking at him solemnly.

"I'm in love with you, Himchannie. I've been trying to tell you for years, but--" He broke off, overcome with emotion. Himchan gave him a disdainful look.

"Now who's the asshole?" he said. Yongguk broke character to grin at him, and some of the tension broke at the same time.

"I just wanted to make sure he wasn't going to be scared off too easily," he said, joining Himchan in leaning against the desk, pressing his arm lightly against his side. "You seem to really like him, and I know it's been a while since you felt like that about someone. Plus, you know--his history? The thing with his dad and all, it--wasn't exactly reassuring."

"The thing with his dad was awful and not his fault," Himchan said firmly. He glanced at his friend, his familiar profile. "And I can take care of myself, you know."

"Yeah. It's just you're usually too busy taking care of everyone else to bother." Yongguk quirked an eyebrow at him, eyeing him sideways. "You still mad at me?"

"I will *try*," Himchan sighed huffily, "to get over it."

"Good." Yongguk turned serious. "So, the Den? You smell a trap?"

"Well, I don't smell anything good. But I don't see any way out of it, do you?"

"No. I want this done."

Done? Himchan would settle for getting it *started*. Hearing Jongup's name on the asshole's lips had set something crawling under his skin. As far as Himchan was concerned, he and his friends were fair game. They'd chosen this life. Jongup hadn't, and Himchan would be damned if any harm came to him because of their...association.

"So, what's our play?" he asked.

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The third-floor apartment above the garage wasn't exactly what Jongup would call *homey*, but it did have a comfortable lived-in feel to it. And in any case, it *was* Himchan's home, so he couldn't help his curiosity as Junhong showed him around.

"Bathroom," he said, kicking at a door. "Obviously." Jongup took in a shower rod strung liberally with jeans and boxers. "The shower's busted so we mostly use this one to dry laundry. There's another one at the end of the hall."

Onwards, he rapped a fist on one door without stopping, then the next. "Dae's room, my room. Common room." He paused as they came to an open space with a wall covered in windows that could have used a good wash. A trio of battered couches made a U around a large coffee table, strewn with laptops, take-out containers, and--two guns. Just in case Jongup forgot where he really was.

Junhong kept moving. "Jae's room, other bathroom, that's Yongguk hyung's room at the very end, but here's Himchan's, and yours now, I guess." He sounded a little bemused but he opened this door with a flourish and the smile he gave Jongup was friendly enough. He went in, a bit nervously.

Almost immediately, his shoulders relaxed. The room *smelled* like Himchan. He hadn't even realized the older man *had* any particular smell, but here it was, a mix of coffee and gasoline and the faint underlying scent of spicy cologne.

A familiar pair of blue coveralls--the source of the faint gasoline smell, Jongup knew--had been tossed over a chair, but otherwise the room was neat as a pin, bed made, shoes in an orderly line against the far wall. There was a half bookshelf beside the bed and Jongup crouched in front of it, curious. A cursory glance revealed the books to be medical texts, and Jongup's heart ached. The books were well-worn, some studied to the point of breaking apart. Himchan had worked so hard only to lose everything.

"Yeah, Himchan hyung's real smart," Junhong said from behind him. Jongup had forgotten him for a moment. He rose quickly. The younger boy settled himself on the end of Himchan's bed, crossing his long legs. "He still knows all that stuff, he's had to, like, give us stitches a bunch of times. And that time Dae got shot, that was bad. Hyung keeps those around to study when he has time, so he won't forget everything."

"Oh," Jongup said softly. He wasn't sure what to make of the boy's casual reference to his friend being shot, but he knew he didn't care for the knowledge that Himchan's lifestyle made this a possibility.

"So, he wants you staying here for a while, huh?" Junhong said. Jongup realized he was just as curious about him as he was about all of this. Being here, in Himchan's room, Jongup felt on the cusp of knowing *everything*. He was tempted to shake out the older man's pockets in case they were hiding any secrets. He didn't think there was anything he didn't want to know about Himchan at this point.

"He's afraid this phone guy's gonna come after me," Jongup said. He didn't feel the need to mention how Himchan's worry--worry for *Jongup*; he didn't think he'd ever get over the novelty of it--had eclipsed any concern Jongup might have felt over the cause of it.

"No offense, but it'd be great if he did," Junhong said. Jongup blinked a few times, nonplussed. "So far we've just been *waiting* for him to make another move. It's why we, y'know, clubbed you over the head that time. Did I mention I'm sorry about that?"

"You did," Jongup said, smiling a little. "I get it. Himchan's been on edge, too."

"Yeah." Junhong stretched out his legs and kicked them moodily, face in a pout. Jongup couldn't guess at his age; one minute he looked in his mid-twenties, and now he looked about fourteen. "It's good he has you, though," he said, brightening. "*I* think it's good, anyway. Having someone, you know, else..." He trailed off. Jongup wasn't fully sure what he meant by his *else*, nor when he said Himchan *had him*.

He did, though. Jongup was fairly sure that if it hadn't been for that damn phone call, *something* decisive would have happened over that plate of pancakes.

Junhong was right. Waiting sucked.

They both jumped at the sound of Himchan's voice calling Junhong's name. The boy relaxed again.

"Your room!" he called back. A beat, and then Himchan appeared in the doorway. Jongup felt oddly guilty at being found in his bedroom, though technically he'd been invited.

Hell, Himchan had *insisted*.

He looked more relaxed now than when he'd left with Yongguk. He smiled at Jongup.

"Sorry about that," he said. "Did Junhong give you the tour?"

"All except the kitchen," Junhong said. "We still have to show you where Dae hides all the good snacks."

"Essential information," Himchan agreed. "Yah, off my bed, you worked this morning."

"I'm clean," Junhong protested, but he let Himchan tug him to his feet. "Whatever. Am I going with you to the Den later?"

Jongup had the same question. Himchan sighed. "Yeah, probably," he said. "Go talk to Bbang, he'll sort you out. You're just *backup*, though, understand? Den's neutral for everyone, that means us, too."

"Yeah, hyung, sure," Junhong said eagerly. Himchan narrowed his eyes at him and Jongup could feel his worry.

"Go on," he said tiredly, giving the boy's shoulder a push. "Get out of here."

"Yeah, yeah." Junhong grinned at Jongup sunnily on his way out, shutting the door behind him. Himchan let out a sigh and collapsed on his bed.

"You can put your stuff down," he told Jongup. He hadn't even realized he was still holding his backpack. He set it down gently beside the bookcase.

"Is everything okay?" he asked. Himchan sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face. Jongup remembered that he still hadn't slept.

"Yeah, fine, fine," he muttered. "Are *you* okay? Sorry I left you alone with those guys."

Jongup perched on the edge of his mattress. "It was fine. What's happening later? Are you really meeting this guy at the club?"

Himchan scooted over to make room for him. "Looks that way, yeah."

"I'm coming with you."

"You're really not." He said it so calmly Jongup's brain did a weird short circuit thing: *Does Not Compute*.

"Pretty sure you don't get to tell me what to do," he said tightly. "You're all freaked he knows my name and then you're gonna go meet him without me? Like hell."

"I don't want you anywhere near this one," Himchan said. "The garage is the safest place I know. Bad enough he knows your name; that's the closest to you he's ever going to get. It's my fault you're in this far in the first place. I already put you in danger just being around you."

Jongup almost laughed. Twelve hours earlier, he'd been certain Himchan would never want to speak to him again once he knew the truth. Now he knew, and here he was, worrying over Jongup's safety.

"Are you out of your mind?" he asked. "You already basically saved my life."

Himchan tilted his head at him. "The pancakes weren't *that* good," he said. Jongup pushed his shoulder hard.

"It's not funny."

"It was a little funny," Himchan muttered. He rubbed his shoulder exaggeratedly and Jongup relented, patting the spot gently. Himchan grabbed his hand and held it, and Jongup had to bite back a smile. He curled his fingers around Himchan's and held on tightly until the older man looked at him.

"I want to come with you," he told him. "I feel like I should."

Himchan nodded. "I know," he said. "But you're not going to."

Jongup huffed but Himchan wouldn't release his hand. "It'll be fine," he told him gently. "We've done this kind of thing before."

Jongup glared at him. "So it's okay for you, but too dangerous for me?" he said. Himchan blinked a few times, apparently at a loss. "You don't want me there, but I'm supposed to be fine with you going?"

"I--yes," Himchan said with a shrug. "Yes, I'm sorry but yes, I don't care if I'm a hypocrite. Yes."

Jongup shook his head even as his insides went mushy again. "I can always just go home," he warned. Himchan scowled.

"You're seriously gonna fight me on this?" he demanded. At Jongup's answering nod, he sighed. "Why?"

Why indeed. Jongup shifted nervously but he forced himself not to look away.

"You get that you're literally the only person I give a shit about, right?" he said. "Well, and Kyung. But mostly--I don't have anyone else. And you're the only person who seems like they might actually give a shit about me *back*, so--"

"I do," Himchan said. His chin had lost its stubborn tilt. "Give a shit about you back. Of course I do."

It wasn't exactly a declaration of love, but Jongup would take it.

"Then let me come tonight," he said. "I'm good in a fight. And if nothing happens, what does it matter?"

He could see Himchan wavering. "You'll stay out back with Dae," he said finally.

"Fine. Whatever. He's not gonna club me over the head again, right?"

Himchan smiled at this. "Truth is, Dae loves people. He's probably being weird with you because he made a mistake and thinks you don't like him. If he knows you aren't holding a grudge, he'll be your best friend in a heartbeat, trust me."

This was a comfort. Jongup wasn't overly given to worrying what people thought of him--he didn't imagine many people thought of him, period--but he had a hunch that his life would be a lot easier if Himchan's friends liked him. Because after the events of that morning, he'd decided: he wasn't going anywhere. It had been years since he let himself want something. Now, looking at Himchan, he couldn't *stop* wanting.

"What about Yongguk?" he asked. He knew just from listening to Himchan that there was no one in his life who exerted greater influence. Jongup wanted Daehyun to be okay with him. He *needed* Yongguk to be.

"Oh." Himchan rolled his eyes. Strange how the single syllable should hold so much affection. Jealousy gnawed at Jongup's chest. "He was just...worried about me."

This made no sense. "He already knew I was working for you guys, though," Jongup objected. "What was he worried about?"

Himchan wouldn't look at him, instead frowning down at their hands, still linked. It felt natural already. Jongup tightened his grip because he could.

"You know he's known me a long time," Himchan said finally. "Basically my whole life."

"Yeah..."

"He hasn't--I haven't--" He sighed in frustration. Jongup ran his thumb across his knuckles, turning their hands over, noticing the scar on the back of Himchan's for the first time. "He hasn't seen me have feelings for many people, so he was just...trying to look out for me." Himchan's voice was very quiet but Jongup heard him clearly enough. His eyes darted back up to his face. It had gone pink and Himchan was still staring everywhere but at him.

Jongup realized he was smiling. He didn't know when that happened.

"Yeah?" he said. Himchan gave half a shrug without looking up.

"It's not a big deal," he said. His tone was airy but his face was dark, introspective.

"It is to me," Jongup said. This made Himchan look up, his expression wary until he saw Jongup's smile. He pursed his lips, unsuccessfully hiding his own grin.

"Well," he said. "What do we do now?"

They moved at the same time.

It wasn't like Jongup had never done this before, but nor had he ever touched anyone who really mattered. One of the survival skills in the group home had been finding someone to mutually release tension with who wouldn't then turn around and beat the shit out of you at the first sign of trouble. Jongup had had a few of these.

Himchan was something new.

Jongup could no longer recall how he'd ever been satisfied with so little, because Himchan's lips were barely touching his, moving so softly against his, and already it was the most--*most*--Jongup had ever felt.

He drew back, shaking. Himchan looked at him soberly, one hand light on the nape of his neck.

"Is this okay?" he asked quietly.

This was not okay. This was so much more than okay, so much more than anything. Jongup was on sensory overload. He touched Himchan's cheek, let his thumb slide across his lower lip. Himchan didn't pull away. His free hand was warm on Jongup's thigh. Jongup wanted to crawl into his lap; hell, he wanted to crawl *inside* him. He needed more.

He kissed him again, only distantly aware of his nerves wondering if he was even doing this right, if he was good enough. But Himchan wasn't pulling away. His lips were soft against Jongup's, and then his tongue, hot and insistent, was in his mouth, and Jongup lost his footing and he was falling, falling.

He straddled Himchan's lap and this contact, the feel of this body against his own for the first time, jolted him back to himself. He pulled away a second time. Himchan looked up at him, his eyes glassy, lips swollen. Jongup couldn't remember ever wanting anything quite this much. He pressed his forehead against the other man's as they breathed each other in unsteadily. Himchan's hands were tight on his hips.

"Now I *really* don't want you coming tonight," he said after a beat. Jongup smiled.

"And now there's no way I'm not," he said. "Somebody's gotta watch your back." Himchan made a small unhappy sound. Jongup kissed it away.

"This has been a very weird day."

"It's not over yet," Himchan said.

Chapter 8

He could have had a normal life.

Normally he wasn't one for regrets--wasn't one to admit to them, anyway--but at the moment, Himchan was regretting every decision he'd made that meant he couldn't dedicate the whole of his night to the man in his lap right now. How was it possible he had to deal with the *business* at a time like this? All he wanted to do was systematically divest Jongup of each piece of clothing currently separating them and run his hands and mouth over every inch of his body.

Or, hell, plan a few nice dates to show him he was worth the effort.

Or *whatever* it was normal people did when they stopped pretending their feelings hadn't expanded enough to slip through every crack in their foundation.

Jongup still tasted faintly sweet from the pancakes and his hair was smooth between Himchan's fingers and he had Himchan's face between his hands and--

And that was Daehyun pushing the door open behind them, already talking.

"Hey, hyung, you have an oh God no," he said, catching sight of them. Himchan growled a bit and pulled back from Jongup. If there had been anything within reach, he'd have thrown it at his friend. Jongup bit his lip; Himchan couldn't tell if he was amused or mortified.

"What's up, Dae?" Himchan said tersely. He kept his hands tight around Jongup's hips. He could feel him wanting to bolt. Daehyun's cheeks had gone crimson and his eyes were frantically scanning the room for something, anything, else to look at.

"You have an, um. Appointment?" he said. Himchan frowned, his mind a blank except for the neon flashing *Jongup Jongup Jongup* that still had a hold on all his senses.

"Snail and Hoonie are on shift, they can handle any customers," he said, mentally telegraphing the message *GO DOWNSTAIRS GO AWAY I'LL DO YOUR LAUNDRY FOR A MONTH OR PROBABLY KILL YOU IF YOU STAY* on all frequencies, in case his dongsaeng had finally mastered that telepathy thing.

"It's not a customer, hyung, he's asking for you specifically. You, um. Asked him to come in?" Daehyun graced him with a quick, pointed glare. Oh. *Oh*. Right. He'd sent the message out that morning, before Phone Guy's call, before having it out with Bbang, before this *thing* with Jongup got truly underway. It felt like a year ago.

"Oh, that," Himchan said, avoiding Jongup's eyes now. He settled for looking at his lips, which was--well, equally distracting. "I'll be right there."

"Cool. Cool. That's cool." Daehyun kept his eyes wide and fixed determinedly on the ceiling as he backed out of the room.

"Appointment?" Jongup said as soon as they were alone again. "Sounds official."

"I'm very official," Himchan agreed seriously. He kissed him again before he could ask any questions. Himchan wasn't sure he could bring himself to lie to him now. That could be a problem.

"Will you be okay if I go deal with some stuff?" he asked, pulling back reluctantly. "You can hang out in here if you want--sleep some more?--or hang out with the guys or whatever."

For a moment, Jongup's eyes were heavy and still focused on Himchan's lips. He blinked a few times, visibly struggling to come back to himself.

"I want...a better idea of what to expect tonight," he said finally.

Himchan couldn't help but pull a face. He supposed there was no avoiding it; if he wanted to truly be with Jongup, he couldn't hide this part of his life from him forever. It had been nice, was all, just being Himchan the Diner Customer--even if that had never really fooled anyone. It had been nice to pretend. He felt a stab of nerves at the thought of Jongup seeing this side of him. Himchan wouldn't blame him if he decided he wasn't so interested after all.

"Yeah," he said with a sigh. "Let me hook you up with Dae; he'll fill you in on how we operate."

"Okay." Jongup lifted himself off Himchan's lap and pulled him to his feet. Their height difference struck Himchan anew as the smaller man looked up at him through absurdly long eyelashes. Fuck. He really, really didn't want him to change his mind about this. It had been years since he'd really considered how his life might look from the outside, and now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't imagine why Jongup would want to be involved.

Better to find out now, before you get any deeper, he told himself. He'd never apologized for his life before, and he didn't intend to start now, even for Jongup.

"Dae?" He barely raised his voice. His friend appeared in the doorway; of course he'd been lurking in the hallway just outside the room. Himchan released Jongup's hips. If tonight went smoothly, they could be back safely in this room in six hours or so, at which time Himchan had every intention of holding Jongup all damn night.

He pushed the thought away. It was time to work.

"Jongup's coming with us to the Den," he said. Daehyun arched an eyebrow but didn't protest. "Fit him with a piece, will you? And give him the rundown on how it'll work."

"Sure," his dongsaeng said promptly. "Your appointment's in the smaller office downstairs."

"Thanks." Himchan did his best to convey silently to Dae that he should keep Jongup away. Daehyun gave him a small nod, then turned the full wattage of his smile on the other man. He was clearly trying to make amends, and Himchan was grateful to see it.

"Jongup, you hungry?" Dae asked.

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Daehyun had snacks hidden *everywhere*.

"Don't let Junnie fool you, kid can *eat*," he warned, pulling three varieties of chips out of an unused heating vent and passing one to Jongup. "So can Himchan. They're the ones to watch out for."

He said this so seriously Jongup wasn't sure he was allowed to laugh.

"Okay," he said.

"And if you like sweet stuff better, there's a bunch next to the alternator in the '75 Pony downstairs."

"...Why?" Jongup had to ask. Dae grinned.

"Jae's been saying for two years he's gonna fix it up. Won't admit he doesn't know how. He's got the biggest sweet tooth in the group; I figure if he ever mans up and asks me for help or just starts working on his own? He deserves a nice surprise. Otherwise, it's allll mine." He laughed maniacally. Jongup snorted. That *was* kind of funny. Dae's smile faded until it was basically sane.

"Hey, man, sorry about last time," he apologized abruptly. "Blame Himchan hyung; it never would've happened if he'd told us you guys were seeing each other."

"Oh, we weren't," Jongup corrected. Dae frowned.

"Uh? But--just now, I mean--"

"Yeah, like--that was technically the first time," Jongup said. He meant to be reassuring, but a look of unmistakable horror crossed the other man's face.

"So you mean I just--I just--" he gaped, then abruptly smiled a wide, false smile. "Can you wait here a minute?"

Jongup shrugged, nonplussed. Dae darted out of the common room. Jongup took a few steps after him, curious. He watched the other man push into one of the rooms--either Youngjae's or Junhong's.

"*What?*" someone--Youngjae--asked irritably. Daehyun's answering whisper was theatrically loud and Jongup could hear it clearly from the hallway.

"I just interrupted their first kiss, oh my *God*, Jae--"

There was a pause, and then a howl of laughter.

"Shut up shut up shut up--"

"Jongup's *definitely* gonna hate you forever now." Youngjae said.

Jongup leaned against the wall, smiling.

"This isn't funny you asshole--"

"This is what you get for barging in all the time without knocking." Youngjae replied unrepentantly. "You know, like you did to me ten seconds ago."

Dae made a rude noise. "Like I'd ever have to worry about seeing *you* kissing anyone."

Quiet, then sounds of a hushed scuffle broke out.

"What are you doing?"

Jongup turned to find Junhong mounting the stairs behind him.

"Dae was gonna talk me through the plan for later, but--" Jongup aimed a thumb at Youngjae's room, where one of the men let out a pained yelp. Junhong snorted.

"He's easily distracted. C'mon." They returned to the common room and Junhong picked up one of the guns off the coffee table, studying it thoughtfully. "You're coming with, then?" he said. "Tonight?"

"Himchan wants me to wait out back with Dae," Jongup said, scowling to convey what he thought of the idea.

"Makes sense," Junhong said. "We keep you outta sight of the other crews so they don't get to know your face. That way they won't pick you out as one of ours later, so if you decide this stuff isn't for you, no harm no foul."

"How long have you been doing this?" Jongup asked. "I mean, what are you, nineteen?"

"Twenty-one." Junhong didn't seem to know whether to be proud or offended at Jongup's mistake. He puffed out his chest a little, anyway. "Been with Yongguk hyung since I was fifteen--even before he finally tracked Himchan hyung down. There *was* no "this" yet, really; just Yongguk and a bunch of us kids who didn't have anywhere else to go."

"So what happened?"

The taller boy shrugged. "He found Himchannie. One day Yongguk was just *gone*, and he stayed gone for weeks. Most of the other kids split, figured he wasn't coming back. But, I don't know--maybe I was stupid but I just had a sense about it. I knew he'd come back. And he did, with Himchan."

He shook his head, his eyes faraway. "Hyung was thirty kilos lighter than now, he looked like--like if you breathed hard near him you'd knock him over. Yongguk hyung, though--he was happy for the first time since I met him. I didn't even know he *could* smile back then. It was like he wasn't *right* without Himchan, and once he was here? Everything started to fall into place. Himchan found Jae and Jae brought in Dae and--well, he's been regretting it ever since."

Jongup smiled at this. For all their bickering, it was obvious the men were no more or less than brothers. The thought made him ache, and for the first time, he considered he might want something almost as much as he wanted Himchan.

"So, you know anything about cars?"

Jongup blinked at this abrupt subject change. "I--no," he admitted. "I don't even have my license."

"Aw, really?" Junhong ditched the first gun and took up the second. "Driving's the best, you gotta get Channie hyung to teach you. Anyway I was just asking 'cause it's usually Dae's job to check out the cars while the hyungs are doing their whole *grrrrr* negotiating thing inside."

"What do you mean?"

"He'll disable a few of the other crew's cars. We'll have a guy stationed outside the Den and a few in the surrounding neighborhoods to see when Kang or whoever drives up. Then Dae takes out--not all of 'em, too obvious, but a few. Just messes with the tires or alternator or whatever. Trips 'em up when everything breaks up later, so if the meeting doesn't go so good, you know--"

"They can't follow you guys back here," Jongup finished. Junhong nodded.

"Zactly."

Jongup perched on the arm of one of the couches, considering. "How'll that work tonight, though? You guys don't know who Phone Guy is, right?"

"It's a problem," Junhong agreed darkly. "He could do it to Kang's cars, I guess, or see if anyone else is staying outside. Everyone usually keeps a guard or two outside whenever there's one of these little parlays."

"If there's a guard outside, how does he disable the cars?"

"He's really stealthy."

There came another shout from down the hall.

"...sometimes," Junhong muttered. He held out the gun. "Try this one."

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Dae found them before long. He was bleeding from a tiny cut on his lip but looked very smug.

"That's just the gun I was gonna suggest for you," he told Jongup. "C'mon, let's see about transport for tonight."

Jongup and Junhong followed him down to the second floor, then almost ran into his back as he stopped dead. The office door had opened and a man almost fell into the hall.

It was Park.

It took Jongup a beat to recognize him. He had a hand up to try to stem the flow of blood from his nose. Bruises bloomed darkly along his cheek, and he couldn't seem to stand up straight, his left arm tucked protectively against his side.

He made for the stairs but stopped at the sight of the trio--at the sight of *Jongup*. They stared at each other, then Junhong stepped down alongside Dae.

"Take the back stairs, asshole," he said coolly. Park gritted his teeth but did as he was told, stumbling back the way he'd come, towards the shadowy second staircase at the other end of the hall. Jongup didn't watch him go, his attention arrested by Yongguk stepping out of the office, closely followed by Himchan.

Himchan was wiping blood off his hands with a rag and didn't realize he had an audience, but Yongguk met Jongup's eyes. His face was a mask. He held his gaze for a moment before following Himchan to the larger office down the hall. They closed the door behind them.

A pause, then Dae clapped Jongup on the shoulder. "C'mon," he said. Jongup followed him down.

He wasn't sure what to feel. Even though he'd already known it intellectually, it was strange to think Himchan capable of violence.

I've done some things that would make you look at me differently if you knew, he'd told him. Jongup had dismissed the idea, certain that *he* held the monopoly on opinion-changing admissions of violence. Now he wondered. It wasn't like Park didn't deserve it, wasn't like Jongup hadn't daydreamed about knocking him on his ass more times than he could count. It was just...unsettling to think of Himchan doing it *for* him.

Park's voice whispered in his memory: *I've got your back, man*. Then: *You know none of this shit comes for free, right?*

He shook it off, but the dread crept in nonetheless.

It was noisy downstairs, the garage clanging with metallic echoes as a few mechanics Jongup didn't recognize did their work. One boy was talking earnestly to well-dressed couple while taking notes on a clipboard, somehow managing while balancing on a pair of crutches.

"When's Snail going back to his corner?" Junhong asked Dae once they'd passed.

"Technically he's cleared to be back by now," Dae said. "But all of a sudden he's all gung ho to work the garage shifts. Kid's still spooked." His tone was mocking but when Jongup looked at his face, he saw he looked sympathetic.

"What happened to him?" he asked. The name Snail rang a bell.

"Phone Guy used him to get in touch with us the first time," Dae said. He motioned to Junhong and the two of them lifted a canvas cover off a car. "By literally carving his phone number right in his gut. It was sick."

Jongup looked back at the boy in question, his own guts twisting. The guy who did *that* knew who Jongup was? And had Himchan's phone number. He wasn't sure which was more disturbing. No wonder Himchan had been so bothered by his phone call.

"What do you think?" Dae was asking Junhong. "Two? Three?"

"We'll be an even six if we all go." He saw Jongup's questioning look. "We don't all show up to these meetings together; that way if shit goes south, we can split up. More options for getting out safely."

"I say we take three cars," Dae said decisively. "Pair up. I'm guessing Himchannie'll want to go with you, Jongup--"

"You guess right for once."

They all turned to see Himchan approaching. Jongup couldn't help but glance at his hands. They were clean.

"Everything okay, hyung?" Junhong asked. Himchan didn't bat an eye.

"Course." He raised both eyebrows at Jongup in silent question: *Okay?* Jongup nodded, though the dread was still there.

You know none of this comes for free...

"We'll stagger it," Himchan was saying. "Jongup and I'll do the first couple drive-by's to check things out, then you and Jae, then Junnie, you're with Bbang, right at 10."

Junhong looked pleased, but Daehyun frowned. "I don't like you going without backup, hyung."

"*I'm* his backup," Jongup said automatically, pushing away Park's voice again and this old anxiety. Whatever his current *thing* status with Himchan, he had no intention of letting him out of his sight unless he absolutely had to.

The look Himchan shot him suggested this hadn't been his intention, but no matter. Junhong gave an approving nod and Daehyun relaxed, apparently mollified.

"Works for me," he said, grinning at Himchan. "You should eat something before you go."

"We'll grab a bite on the way," Himchan said absently, studying the car they'd uncovered. "And hell with this scrapbucket, we're taking mine."

"Don't blame me if someone shoots out your tires again," Dae said.

"Yeah, yeah." Himchan touched Jongup's elbow lightly--too lightly to account for the spark of electricity Jongup would swear shot straight through his chest at the contact. "Come back upstairs, let's get changed." He gave Daehyun a pointed look. "That means *knock* first if you want to come in."

Dae colored as Junhong laughed, and Himchan smirked and tugged Jongup behind him and back up to his bedroom.

"They gave you a gun?" he asked, kicking the door shut behind them. Jongup took it out of his waistband and held it out. Himchan took it and studied it for a beat. "Should be a good weight for you. It feel all right in your hand?" he asked.

"Sure," Jongup said with a shrug. In truth, he thought guns were overrated. You could do real violence with just about anything: a pot of boiling water. A fist with a roll of brass won tucked in the palm.

A well-placed staircase.

"What's wrong?" Himchan's eyes scanned his face worriedly. "Dae's not still being weird, is he?"

"No," Jongup said quickly. "It's just. I saw Park."

"Did he say something to you?" Himchan's face was forbidding. It held a warning Jongup knew wasn't meant for him.

"No. I think he was too busy trying not to bleed out in the middle of the hallway."

Himchan studied him. "If you're worried about him, don't be. He got off easy."

"I'm not worried about him, I just--" Jongup shook his head, frustrated by the words stuck in his throat. Himchan took a few steps toward him and stopped. The air felt sticky between them. Jongup tried again haltingly. "I don't want you to feel like you have to...do things like that for me. Or anything. Just. You don't have to do anything."

Himchan's brow furrowed.

"Jongup. He cheated you out of pay you earned. He threatened a job you needed. He let you get hurt and made you deal with it yourself. I know we haven't really defined *this*--" He motioned between them. "--yet--but whatever we decide? Of *course* I had to do something."

Jongup's stomach churned. He felt suddenly nauseous.

"I can't be with you like that," he blurted. Himchan looked alarmed.

"Like *what*?"

"Like--fuck." Jongup turned away, running his hands angrily through his hair.

"Fucking *what*? Talk to me." Himchan made as if to approach him but Jongup held out a hand and he froze.

He breathed. He wished he could scrape his mind clear of these memories. He couldn't look at Himchan. Looking at him was distracting and he needed to find some way to get this out.

"I feel like I *owe* you now," he said. "That was how it worked--in jail, then the group home." And with Park. "You couldn't trust anyone but sometimes someone'd be in a good mood and--share a cigarette or whatever contraband they had, or have your back in a fight. But you always had to pay it back. Usually with interest."

He'd learned early not to accept small kindnesses. He didn't have anyone on the outside to send him the coveted candy or dirty magazines, so everyone knew the only methods he had of returning any favor had to involve either fighting or sex. He had yet to taste a chocolate bar good enough to offset a week in the infirmary--or a hastily-delivered hand-job in the bathroom.

"You don't owe me, Jongup," Himchan said. His scowl had faded and now he just looked sad. "None of this is supposed to cost you anything. So if *that's* why you're really here--"

"It's not," Jongup interrupted, cursing himself. Great, now he had Himchan doubting everything. The older man seemed to be trying to see straight through him.

"So your whole *I don't take charity* line's more than just a pride thing, huh?" he said quietly. Jongup gave a lopsided shrug. His gaze settled on Himchan's knees.

"Come here?"

It was a request. Jongup hesitated for half a beat, then went to him. Himchan drew him in, hands going to the small of his back. He glared fiercely down at him.

"I'll say this once," he said. "You don't owe me for the painkillers. Or for the bandages that first day. Or for the pancakes. Or--"

Jongup kissed him quickly. It cleared some of the cobwebs from his mind.

"--right, or the kissing," Himchan said, nodding briskly as though Jongup had made a good point. He barely broke his stride, though Jongup noticed that his gaze lingered on his lips for a moment before lifting back to his eyes. "And *as* for Park--you weren't the only one he was cheating out of their pay. He was stealing from a lot of you, and, by extension, he was stealing from *us*. No one gets to do that. You brought the issue to our attention, that's all. Okay?"

Jongup nodded. Himchan's hands were firm on his back. With anyone else, it would feel like a cage. But with Himchan...Jongup relaxed as he realized he felt *safe*.

"Everything feels a lot simpler when it's just us, alone in a room," he muttered. He wished desperately that they didn't have the gang's business hanging over them--though of course, without the gang, they'd never have met.

Himchan sighed. "You're right. That's partly why I don't want you there tonight. Once you're involved in this shit everything gets a whole lot more complicated, believe me."

This made sense, and for the first time, Jongup's resolve wavered. But then he thought of what Dae had said Phone Guy did to Snail. What, was Jongup going to stay behind and watch

fucking TV while his--Himchan--was out meeting that guy face-to-face? Impossible.

"If you're going, so am I," he said stoutly. Himchan wrinkled his nose at him and Jongup wrinkled his right back.

"Stubborn," Himchan muttered.

"Believe it."

They were quiet for a moment. Jongup wracked his brain for a way out of this thicket of awkward he'd planted.

"Um. I kind of told Dae he interrupted our first kiss and now he's extra freaked," he said. Himchan let out a startled bark of laughter and just like that, the tension dissolved.

"That's *brilliant*," Himchan said delightedly. His smile had even more force up close. Jongup tucked his hands in Himchan's back pockets and the taller man's smile faded and went almost painfully tender at once.

"This part can be simple," he said softly. "Just us, alone in a room."

Jongup meant to nod but kissed him again instead. He had a hunch Himchan understood what he meant, anyway.

*

They had to change, Himchan said, because The Den was "kind of swanky." He picked out Jongup's outfit and they changed clothes in opposite corners of the room, facing away from each other. Jongup knew if he saw the other man in any state of undress at the moment, he'd just wind up distracted, and he would need to distract Himchan back as long as possible.

Later, he told himself firmly.

It was very hard not to peek.

Now they were in the car and Jongup was trying not to tug at the black button-down shirt Himchan had loaned him. He was trying not to fiddle with the gun tucked in his jacket. He was trying not to stare too obviously at Himchan's profile, which was perfect--the straight line of his nose, the way he pursed his lips irritably when he hit a red light.

Okay so two out of three wasn't bad.

Jongup was distracted enough by these details that it took him a few minutes to realize Himchan was looking in the rearview mirror more than at the road.

"We've got a tail," he announced conversationally. Jongup jumped, turned in his seat. "The black SUV two cars back. They've been on us for three blocks now."

"What do we do?"

Himchan drove on, then pulled into an alley, making a few turns so they were out of sight of the street. Jongup kept looking behind them, watched as the SUV pulled up behind them. Himchan parked.

"What are you doing?" Jongup demanded. Himchan looked very calm.

"We're gonna get out of the car. Stash your gun under the seat and keep both hands visible, okay? I'll take care of this."

Jongup wanted to protest--if this was Phone Guy, they'd be fucked, out in the open with no weapons--but Himchan was already climbing out of the car. Jongup followed suit.

The SUV's doors opened and a man and woman stepped out. The man was very tall and lanky, the woman shorter and heavysset. They both held guns loosely at their sides. Jongup tensed at the sight.

"Well, well, as I live and breathe," Himchan said. "I thought you were in Incheon--when'd you get home?"

The other man smiled.

"It's only been a few weeks. Thought I'd've run into you before now. You must be keeping your head down for once."

"You know me, Detective. Law-abiding almost to a fault."

The man--the *detective*, fuck--laughed. His gun was still out but he made no move to raise it. Jongup relaxed slightly. This wasn't Phone Guy, clearly.

"What brings you back?" Himchan said.

"This case I've been running out of Incheon for the better part of a year. The main player's moving up in the world. Maybe you've heard of him--Kim Taesong?"

"Can't say as I have."

The detective hummed. There was a stillness to him Jongup found unnerving. He looked at the woman instead. She was looking back at him through narrowed eyes.

"Well, it's the damndest thing," the male detective went on. "He comes out of nowhere and cuts the hell through all the established gangs in town. Racks up a double-digit body count in a matter of months. Real sadistic fuck."

Jongup's stomach dropped and he and Himchan exchanged a glance.

"Word in town now is he controls everyone who's left. The whole damn city's his, and now he's looking to run the same game in Seoul. So I thought I'd check in with my old friends, see if anyone new's been in touch."

Himchan was silent. The other man waited, then sighed, looked at his partner, cocked his head back toward the car. She was still glaring at Jongup, though she looked thoughtful rather than angry. At the man's nod, she shrugged and returned to the SUV, climbing back into the driver's seat but leaving her door open.

The man took a few steps closer to Himchan. So did Jongup, giving the detective a warning look. He thought he saw understanding spark in the man's eyes as he looked between them.

"Look," he said, more quietly. "You and me, we go way back, Himchan-ah. And, at the risk of sounding all bleeding-heart whatever, I don't actually want you guys getting sliced and diced by this guy."

"Stop. Please. You're embarrassing yourself with this overflow of emotions," Himchan said flatly. The detective snorted.

"Asshole," he said. He backed away slowly. "You've got my number. You feel like talking things over, give me a call. You can tell the idiot the same."

Himchan gave an ironic salute. "Roger that and fuck you very much, sir."

The detective just raised a hand in farewell and climbed back into the car. Jongup stayed still beside Himchan as they watched the SUV back out of the alley and disappear. He had about a dozen questions crowding around each other in his throat. The first to burst out was "Why didn't you tell him?"

Himchan gave him a surprised look. "We don't talk to cops," he said simply.

"But--you know him," Jongup said. Then, "*How* do you know him?" The exchange had felt more familiar than he'd have expected, even assuming Himchan had had a few run-ins with the law over the years.

"He's Bbang's cousin," Himchan said dismissively, motioning for Jongup to return to the car. He did, his questions choking him again until he'd shut the door, then he rounded on him again.

"Call it off. The meeting tonight. If what he said was true, this guy's worse than you thought."

"Sounds that way." Himchan scowled. "Fuck. We can't back out now without losing face."

"So what? If his plan is to take over every gang in the city and kill anyone who gets in the way, you'd be crazy to make it easier for him."

"Good point." Himchan tapped his index finger to his lips. "Kang got an invite tonight, too. Could be Phone Guy's hoping to take us all out in one go."

"It doesn't really sound like he's the type to care about the rules of your neutral territory," Jongup agreed. He was starting to come around on the merits of guns.

Himchan took out his phone and dialed.

"It's me," he said after a pause. "I just ran into Sleepy hyung....yeah, that's what *I* said, but I guess he's been back a minute. Chasing some new asshole out of Incheon. Have Youngjae run a search on Kim Taesong. Yeah. That might be our guy." Jongup watched him. His face was as darkly intense as the first time they'd met. "Is Junhong with you? Good." Himchan met Jongup's eyes. "We're gonna need a new plan."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry this took forever! This chapter kicked my ass a dozen ways. Thanks for your patience. <3

New plans were devised with a speed Jongup found a bit dizzying.

He and Himchan returned to the garage, where Junhong was dispatched almost immediately, looking older and more serious than Jongup had yet seen him. Jae and Daehyun were next, pausing only for Daehyun to change into a crisp white button-down and black pants. Himchan gave him the once-over when he came down, fussing with his collar while Yongguk talked in low tones to Youngjae.

Jongup hung back awkwardly, feeling useless and in the way. He could see Himchan's worry in the set of his shoulders as he watched the two men leave. Jongup would have liked to try to rub the tension away, but he wasn't sure Himchan would want him to in front of Yongguk. The two seemed to have talked out their issues, but Jongup could feel Yongguk watching him with Himchan, and he had the sense he was still making up his mind what he thought about it.

So Jongup just bumped Himchan's shoulder lightly with his own.

"They'll be okay?" he said. He meant it to sound reassuring but it came out a question. Oddly, though, this seemed to help. Himchan nodded, some of the lines in his forehead fading.

"They know what they're doing." he said.

There followed a period of work for him and Yongguk wherein Jongup could only watch and feel so superfluous he wanted to claw his own face off. The older men were making phone calls, each simultaneously tapping away at their laptops, then talking to each other in a kind of shorthand Jongup could only understand bits of.

It was a relief when they exchanged a look across the office and closed their laptops with finality.

"It'll either work or it won't," Himchan told Yongguk with a shrug.

They had to leave soon, but Himchan pulled Jongup back into his room and asked him to wait while he disappeared down the hall for a minute.

He returned with a fat envelope. Jongup stared blankly at the money inside. He'd never seen so much.

"This is what we owe you," Himchan told him uncomfortably. "For all the jobs you did."

"There's no way they were worth this much."

"There's interest added in because it's so late."

"Himchan..." He tried to give the envelope back but Himchan stepped back out of reach.

"It's yours," he insisted. "You could use it to--" He swallowed hard. "get out of Seoul, start over somewhere. Go back to school, whatever."

Jongup scowled even as something seemed to *reach* from within him at the idea of getting away from the city. He'd dreamed of it before, of starting fresh someplace new, away from Park and the diner and the rumbling exhaustion of his warehouse shifts. But he knew he'd never be satisfied now going alone.

"You want me to leave?" he asked Himchan. The other man hesitated.

"I want you to be safe. I want you to get to do everything you want to do," he said quietly. "Kim might know your name, but if you got out of town..."

Jongup put the money on the bed on his way to Himchan, who just watched him apprehensively. He'd changed into a dark grey button-down before they'd left hours ago, and now Jongup smoothed down his collar before grasping it in both hands.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily," he said. He hesitated, then said it: "The only way I'm leaving is if you're coming with me."

Himchan closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against Jongup's. Jongup's finger brushed his throat, feeling the flutter of his pulse.

"I guess that's that, then," Himchan said.

"I guess so." Jongup smushed his nose against Himchan's until he laughed. There came a knock from behind them. Yongguk.

"Time to go," he said.

*

The Lion's Den wasn't much different from any other club in Seoul, except it involved a thorough pat-down along with the ID check at the door. Min Yejun had been the bouncer as long as anyone could remember, and he was legendary for his ability to sniff out even the most carefully-concealed contraband, be it drugs or weapons. As such the Den was safe, neutral territory, the perfect place for enemies to meet without things ending in a bloodbath.

At least, usually.

Himchan really hoped that streak wasn't going to end tonight.

Min checked them at the door, his glare darkening when he recognized Yongguk.

"Not planning to make trouble tonight, are you?" he rumbled. Yongguk gave his best dead-eyed stare in response, not reacting as Min patted him down with extra force.

"How would we do that?" Himchan asked when it was his turn. "*Swallow* our weapons?"

"Like no one's ever tried it," Min sniffed. "Anyhow, you're all trouble. I've heard the language you boys use."

Min didn't look much older than Yongguk, but then, he'd been working here for twenty years. Daehyun and Junhong were at least two-thirds convinced he was a vampire.

Himchan pushed the thoughts of his friends aside. They'd all be *fine*. They were probably being overly cautious anyway.

He forced an easy grin for the bouncer as he came up empty of anything objectionable in his jacket. "You may be in the wrong line of work, Min."

The bouncer just glared and turned his attention to Jongup. Yongguk had already gone inside, but Himchan waited for the shorter man. If he was nervous, he didn't show it. He gave Min an unimpressed look that had Himchan biting back a grin.

Then they were in.

The club was full of people dancing and drinking, because of course it was. Himchan still had a sinking feeling in his stomach at the sight of the crowd. He didn't like to do the work they did around civilians. It was one thing to risk himself. It was something well within the realm of shitty to endanger others.

Yongguk had stopped on the edge of the dance floor to wait for them. For a moment, watching him in the strobing purple and blue lights washing over the club, he looked like a stranger, cool and untouchable.

Then his eyes met Himchan's and he was just Bbang again.

The cross around his neck glinted against his shirt. He'd never been the religious type-- Himchan knew the idea of God didn't sit so well with him, not after everything they'd seen. But still, before any night like this, they shared the same prayer: *Please, don't let any innocent people get hurt because of us.*

Himchan gave him what he hoped was a steady nod, then turned back to Jongup. He, too, was new and strange in the foreign setting of the club. The clothes Himchan had found for him were all black, his pants and shirt and leather jacket. He looked like he belonged here, not bussing tables and washing dishes in the diner. Himchan wished once again that they were here on a *date*, that he could try to coax him onto the dance floor, tipsy and laughing from one soju too many.

Please don't let him get hurt because of me.

They made their way past the dance floor and up the stairs to the second level. The new vantage point let Himchan survey the entire club. He found Daehyun behind the bar, his crisp white shirt practically glowing, same as the other bartenders. So that was one puzzle piece in place, at least. Himchan hastened his step so he could whisper in Bbang's ear.

"Dae's in."

Yongguk's lips quirked in the briefest of smiles.

It was less crowded upstairs. Somehow, the acoustics of the Den made it so Himchan could feel the music pulsing in his feet more than he could hear it. Up here, they could talk.

Kang had already arrived. He was a large man, given to wearing sunglasses indoors, even at night. Himchan had thought this an affectation, but later learned the older man suffered from severe photophobia and needed the lenses to keep his migraines at bay.

His second-in-command Lee sat beside him, drumming his fingers on the table. He was constantly moving with the restless energy of a junkie, though word was he'd been clean even longer than Himchan.

Next to Lee sat Junhong. Himchan sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of the fresh bruise marring the maknae's face. He saw Bbang's hands clench into fists at his side, but he too must have seen Junhong's smug expression. He knew what he was doing.

Kang rose to greet them.

"Bang. Kim."

Yongguk held out a hand to Junhong as he came around to their side of the table.

"Touch our maknae again and this truce is done," Yongguk told Kang. The other man looked unruffled.

"You sent him into my territory, what did you expect? My boys deserved more retribution than this for--" He jerked his head back to one of the men clustered behind him. The gangster formerly known as Neck Tattoo glared at Himchan. His ink was now broken up by a series of fresh scars. Himchan didn't know what he was scowling for; he'd taken care to leave him alive, after all.

"They attacked Jae on *our* territory," Yongguk reminded Kang. "What'd *you* expect?"

Kang smiled and popped a thumb at Junhong. "That's what he said. Your boy's got a smart mouth."

Junhong crossed his arms over his chest, lips twisting in a smirk. He caught Himchan's eye and winked, and Himchan rolled his eyes,, torn between fussing over his injury and strangling him.

They sat.

"No sign yet?" Himchan said.

"I assume he wants to make an entrance," Kang said. "His actions all have a certain theatrical flair."

Himchan had enjoyed the theatrics more before he knew the body count behind them.

Wait, scratch that. He'd never enjoyed them.

"Can I get you gentlemen something to drink?"

They looked up as a waiter appeared next to the table. He smiled graciously at them all, but when he held up his notepad, Himchan saw his hand was shaking slightly. He knew who they were, then.

"A few bottles of soju for the table," Yongguk said. The server bowed and departed with clear relief.

"How sure are you about this intel?" Kang asked. As always, he spoke with a lazy drawl, elongating his words so his speech sounded almost slurred. Himchan had never been able to quite pinpoint his accent.

"Jae confirmed what our source told Himchan," Yongguk said calmly. Youngjae's skills with a computer were well known even outside of their own group. Lee arched an eyebrow.

"Your source being....?" he prompted.

"None of your business," Himchan spoke up. Lee scowled, but he hadn't expected anything else. His eyes went to Jongup.

"And who's this?"

"Also none of your business."

The waiter returned with the drinks and Junhong poured a round for the table, passing shot glasses to Yongguk, then Kang, then Himchan, then Lee. Himchan took advantage of the general distraction to feel under the table. The guns were there, strapped underneath where Dae had stashed them. Apparently they'd been right to assume Min wouldn't monitor the employee entrance with the same care as the front door--all too easy for a new bartender to sneak a few pieces in at the start of his shift.

Jongup hadn't missed the move. He arched a eyebrow at Himchan and Himchan gave the merest of nods. Whatever Kim had planned for them, they wouldn't be as defenseless as he was expecting.

He felt a vibration from his jacket and he pulled out his phone, glancing at the caller ID. He half-expected it to be the asshole himself, but Youngjae's name popped up.

"Jae?"

"..chan? I...ot the...ackers, I'm..."

Himchan sighed. "Hang on, Jae, I can't hear you, gimme a sec." He nodded at Yongguk and pressed his hand to Jongup's thigh briefly as he left the table. He didn't bother going downstairs; there was a fire escape on the second floor frequently used by smokers. It was almost empty now.

"Okay, that's better," he said as cool air washed over him. "Say again?"

*

Gangs were weird, Jongup decided. Kang and his people had clearly been at war with Yongguk and Himchan for years, and he had a feeling he knew exactly whose handiwork the angry scars on Tattoo's neck were.

This thought was incongruous with everything else he knew of Himchan--how exactly could the man who'd taught himself to make pancakes just to make Jongup smile be capable of cutting another man's throat? It seemed insane--yet Jongup also recognized the skill it must have taken not to kill him in the process. Himchan's medical training at work, he supposed.

But now, the two groups were drinking together, Kang and Yongguk talking like two heads of State, perfectly reasonable and respectful, despite the underlying thread of hostility. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, indeed.

He glanced down the hall where Himchan had retreated with his phone. He could barely see it through the crowd; the second floor had filled up almost as much as the dance floor.

Junhong nudged his shoulder and gave him a reassuring look. Jongup was beginning to suspect he was a mind-reader. The maknae frowned suddenly and took his phone out of his jacket.

"Jae," he said, answering it, plugging his other ear with his finger. "What? He just---what?"

Yongguk looked over as his voice went sharp.

"Call you right back," Junhong said, and pocketed the device. He looked at them. "He was talking to Himchan and heard *something weird*, then the phone disconnected. Now Himchan's not answering."

Jongup didn't wait to hear any more. He was already on his feet, making for that hallway, Yongguk and Junhong on his heels. He shouldered his way through the crowd impatiently, barely seeing the people he was pushing aside. Surely any second, Himchan would appear, shaking his phone in irritation because he'd--dropped it or something--

Yongguk's hand clapped on his shoulder.

"Fire escape," he said, his lips close to Jongup's ear so he could hear. He nodded and made a beeline for the window at the end of the hall. He stopped short when he reached it.

Himchan wasn't there, but his phone was, buzzing harshly against the metal stair where it had dropped. Jongup could see Jae's name on the screen as he tried again to get through to his hyung.

For a moment, none of them moved, then Yongguk leaned through the open window. Jongup thought he would pick up the phone, but his fingers brushed the metal beside it. They came away red.

Bile rose in Jongup's throat at the sight of the blood. Junhong swore.

Yongguk looked at them, something frantic in his eyes. When he spoke, he didn't sound like a cartoon mountain. He sounded like a scared kid.

"He's got Himchan."

*

Jongup didn't stop to think. He vaulted through the window and clattered down the stairs, scaring the hell out of a couple sharing a cigarette at the bottom.

"Did you see--" he gasped, stopping. The man frowned and stepped slightly in front of his companion. "Did you see anyone?" Jongup asked desperately. "From--?" He motioned to the fire escape, then looked down the twin, empty lanes of the alley where Himchan could have been taken. There was no sign of anyone. He barely registered Yongguk running past to see his way to the street.

"Sorry, man, we just got here." The other man's eyes narrowed in concern. "Is everything okay? Do you need us to call the police?"

"No." Yongguk had returned. His usual mask was back in place, though now Jongup could see the seams where his fear seeped through. The older man glared at him. "No cops. We'll take care of this ourselves."

The smokers clearly found them a bit of a buzzkill, and moved away toward the front of the club. Yongguk had his phone out.

"What are you doing? We need to go after him!" Jongup said. Yongguk waved him away vaguely as he dialed.

"Hey," he said into the phone. "They took Himchan. Any movement?" He listened, and sighed. The mask cracked further as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, that's what I figured. High alert, I want extra eyes on the garage. You know what to do."

He hung up and pocketed his phone.

"We had people watching the whole time from across the club," he told Jongup. "They didn't see anything, which means..." He and Jongup both looked down the dark end of the alley, away from the street. Jongup felt sick.

"They could be anywhere."

"They would've taken him in a car," Yongguk agreed.

"We have to do something," Jongup said. "They could be--we have to *do* something."

Yongguk continued to stare blankly down the alley. Fury gripped Jongup out of nowhere. He pushed Yongguk against the wall.

"How were you not prepared for this?" he demanded. "Do you *get* that he has Himchan now? He's already hurt, what the fuck are you gonna do about it?"

Yongguk just stared at him. Jongup pushed him again. Yongguk sagged against the brick wall, then stepped away again. Jongup pushed him once more for good measure.

"Do you even care?" he said weakly.

In a heartbeat, Yongguk had his hands at Jongup's throat and had pushed *him* against the wall. His vision went spotty as his head hit the bricks.

"You don't fucking ask me that," Yongguk practically spat. "He's been with me my whole fucking life; who even *are* you? You got here fifteen minutes ago, so don't fucking lecture me on giving a shit--he means a hell of a lot more to me than he does to you."

Jongup would have argued this point, but he was too relieved to see the life back in the older man's eyes.

"We have to get him back," he said again. Yongguk's glare eased somewhat, as did his grip on Jongup. Before he could respond, though, there came a shout from above.

"Hyung!" Daehyun crashed down the steps. "Junhong told me--Is Himchan really--?"

"They took him." Yongguk stepped away from Jongup. Daehyun looked between them curiously for a second before cursing.

"Kang has his people checking the perimeter," he added. "I've never seen him so pissed."

Jongup frowned. "Why would he care?"

"The Den's neutral," Dae said. "Always has been. Anyone who breaks that, especially anyone not from Seoul--well, *everyone's* gonna be pissed about that." He looked back at Yongguk. "What do we do?"

"Have our guys widen the perimeter in case they see anything."

"Will that work?" Jongup watched him closely. Yongguk met his gaze.

"Probably not."

"So...?" Daehyun prompted.

"The rest of us fall back to the garage," Yongguk said. "And get our fucking guns back. We're gonna need them."

*

They returned to the garage.

All the lights were on, the place fuller than Jongup had ever seen it, boys and men and women rushing around and standing guard. Everything felt unreal. He missed the usual underlying pulse of Junhong's music. It had only been a day, but the garage had already come to feel almost familiar--an illusion that was shattered now.

Yongguk and Daehyun both stopped to talk to their people and Junhong took Jongup by the elbow and steered him, gently but insistently, to the office upstairs.

"Are you okay?" he asked when they were alone. Jongup stared at the top of the desk--Himchan's spot.

"No."

"Me neither."

He looked at the taller boy for the first time, saw again how young he was. Junhong collapsed on the couch and covered his face with his hands. He swore colorfully. Jongup leaned against the desk. He felt he'd come unmoored from his own body.

"He never meant to show up and talk, did he," he said. Junhong brought his hands to his lap and looked at him. "Kim Taesong. The whole thing was always a trap."

"We knew there was a good chance of that going in," Junhong pointed out. "That's why I warned Kang first." He paused. "Usually *knowing* it's a trap makes more of a difference." He shook his head. "I should have gone with him."

Jongup had been thinking the same thing about himself. "You didn't know," he said. Junhong shook his head.

"I should have."

"He'd probably have stopped you anyway. He's stubborn like that."

Junhong snorted, but his eyes had gone bright and he was blinking rapidly. Jongup looked away, down at his hands.

"Do you think it's wrong that I'm here?" he asked finally.

"What?"

He couldn't look at him. Yongguk's words were ringing in his head. "Since I've only been around these past few months."

"Did Yongguk hyung say something to you?"

Jongup did look up at that. Junhong's eyes were red, but dry. The maknae nodded as though Jongup's expression told him all he needed to know.

"Don't take it personally; hyung always takes a while to warm up to new people. D'you know what happened the last time Himchan brought someone home to meet us?"

Jongup winced. He wasn't sure he was ready to hear about Himchan's exes right now. But he just shook his head.

"Well I'll tell you: nothing. Because it's never happened before."

He could breathe again. "He was just trying to keep me safe," he said.

"We have safehouses he could've taken you to," Junhong said. "He'd never have brought you here unless you were really important to him. If he's important to you too, I'm glad you're here."

He didn't actually ask the question, but Jongup answered it anyway.

"He's important to me."

Junhong smiled sadly. "Us too," he said.

They were quiet for a moment until Yongguk and Dae came in, kicking the door shut behind them. Jongup could see at a glance that something--else--was wrong.

"He just called," Yongguk said. Junhong sat up sharply.

"Kim?" Jongup said. Yongguk nodded.

"He has him," he confirmed. "Said he'd make a trade. All we have to do is give up all our territory and we'll get him back safe and sound."

Junhong collapsed back in his seat, his expression going flat.

"Do it," Jongup said immediately. Yongguk looked at him calmly.

"It's not an option."

"Fuck your territory," Jongup snapped. "This is *Himchan*."

Yongguk breathed slowly, deliberately. Beside him, Daehyun looked like he was afraid to move--except for his eyes, which darted between them.

"Listen to me, all of you," Yongguk said finally. "We're getting Himchan back. Period. And we're not giving anything up to do it."

"How?" Junhong asked.

Before Yongguk could answer, there came a clattering from the hall, then a brisk rapping at the door. This broke Daehyun out of his trance and he opened the door a crack to peek through before admitting Youngjae.

"What the *fuck*," the younger man said to the room at large, looking around between them. "This isn't a joke?"

"No joke," Yongguk said shortly. "They have him."

This deflated Youngjae completely. He collapsed onto the couch next to Junhong.

"Fuck," he said bleakly.

"Did you get them?" Yongguk asked. He seemed determined not to let the situation get to him again. Gone was the frightened boy from the alley. Jongup got the impression if he were to push him now, he'd get a gun to the head for his trouble.

Jae nodded. "For all the good they do at this point," he said. "Fuck, if we'd just had more *time--*"

"What's this?" Junhong asked, looking between him and Yongguk.

"Our last job we took a shipment of GPS trackers meant for the SPD," Jae explained. This was enough to break through even Jongup's panicky haze.

"You stole from the police department?" he asked. Jae smirked slightly, though his heart clearly wasn't in it.

"Nothing they'll miss. We thought we'd stick 'em on Kim's guys' cars once they showed up."

Jongup could understand his earlier comment now. If the car Himchan had been taken in had been fitted with a tracker, they could find him. They could at least begin to narrow it down. Now, they didn't even know where to start.

"We were just about to talk plans," Daehyun told Jae. "Seeing as how immediate surrender isn't really in the cards."

"Is *that* what Kim wants?" Jae asked dismissively. It seemed Jongup was the only one who thought it a viable option to even consider just doing what the asshole who had Himchan wanted. Daehyun nodded.

"Yongguk hyung already told him where he could stick *that* idea, so--"

"*So*," Jae interrupted. "Alternatives."

As one, they all turned to look expectantly at Yongguk. It was so abrupt, the attention on him so complete, that even despite his anger, Jongup felt a bit sorry for him.

But Yongguk didn't flinch.

"I've been wrong," he said, "handling this thing the way I have. We're done hiding and waiting for him to make a move. This is *our* city. Time to let this asshole know there's not a place in it that can hide him." He turned to Daehyun. "Get the word out. Not just us and Kang, but everyone--Mina's people on the east side, too."

Daehyun nodded, but he looked troubled. "Not a lot of love lost between us and Mina's girls," he warned. Yongguk nodded.

"Just tell them the Den was violated," he said. "Mina's reasonable so long as she knows we're not making a power-grab."

"Plus she's always had a soft spot for Himchan," Jae snorted. He caught Jongup's eye. "She owns most of the territory in East Seoul," he explained. Jongup had already gathered as much and barely heard this. He looked at Yongguk.

The leader spoke to Daehyun. "I need you to go in person, Dae."

"Of course."

Jae stood and pulled Junhong to his feet behind him. "We'll get the word out to our friendly neighborhood mercenaries," he said. "Kim Taesong's days of mystery are about to end. I found an old picture of him when I was digging up dirt; we'll get a copy of it out to everyone we know. How much of our stock can I set for the bounty?"

Yongguk looked at Jongup.

"All of it," he said.

So at least they agreed on *something*.

*

The others dispersed, leaving Jongup and Yongguk alone in the office.

"Give me something to do," Jongup said.

"Get some sleep. You couldn't have gotten more than a few hours. You worked last night," Yongguk said. Jongup blinked. The warehouse job felt like it had happened a year ago.

"I'm fine," he insisted. "I couldn't sleep if I wanted to."

"Then take a sleeping pill." Yongguk rummaged through the top desk drawer and pulled out a bottle. Jongup stared at him.

"Are you crazy?" he asked. "You think I want to sleep right now?"

Yongguk sighed. "You want to be involved? Fine. Good. Honestly, we'll need you. We can use the extra muscle. But not tonight. I need you rested if you're gonna be of any use."

This made a fair amount of sense, but everything in Jongup cried out against it.

Yongguk took his hand. Jongup flinched, but the older man merely closed his fingers around the pill bottle.

"They're not too strong," he said quietly. "We don't keep much hardcore stuff in the garage."

"Because of Himchan?" Jongup asked. Yongguk nodded once. Up close, Jongup could see his worry again, his exhaustion. It occurred to him that Yongguk hadn't slept any more than he had.

"What about you?" he asked awkwardly. "Will you sleep?"

Yongguk gave a short, humorless laugh. "Ah--here's the part where my hypocrisy is revealed," he said. Jongup smiled despite himself.

"That's what I thought," he said.

Yongguk gave him a lopsided smile. "Go on," he said. "Sleep for a few hours. I'll wake you if there's any news."

Jongup nodded reluctantly. He could feel his imminent collapse--adrenaline had kept him going this far, but it wouldn't last much longer.

He made his way down the hall to Himchan's room. He hesitated a beat before going in.

It was even worse than he'd anticipated. That faint, lingering Himchan smell was bad enough. Worse, though, was the specter of what *should* have been--this should have been their first real night together. Himchan should be here now. The enormity of the loss crashed over Jongup again and he barely made it to the bed before his legs gave out.

He sat with his head between his knees and tried to breathe, tried not to think what Himchan might be going through right now. Tried to ignore the crushing weight of his own uselessness.

His phone rang. For a minute he didn't even recognize the sound, so rarely did he get calls. He sighed and answered.

"*Are you alone?*" an unfamiliar voice asked. Jongup sat up straight.

"Who is this?"

But he thought he knew, even before he heard the sly laugh that basically telegraphed *HELLO I'M EVIL*.

"*I believe you all refer to me as Phone Guy.*"

Jongup would have run to get Yongguk but his legs didn't seem to be working.

"Actually, we just call you Kim Taesong," he corrected. "Or *That Asshole*, depending on our mood."

Kim was silent for a beat. Jongup felt a thrill at the thought he'd caught him off-guard, even as he winced at his own cavalier tone. But from everything Himchan had told him about the man, he suspected he'd do best to keep his emotions under wraps.

"That's not very neighborly," Kim said.

"Yeah, well I hear you're not from around here anyway." Jongup dug his fingers into the bedspread, trying to ground himself. "So, what are you calling me for?"

He desperately wanted to order Kim to put Himchan on the phone, but he held himself back.

"I have your medic."

Jongup felt the comforter rip under his fingers. "So I've heard."

"Bang didn't want to play." Kim sounded petulant. It was a bizarre tone coming from a grown man. It made Jongup's skin crawl. *"I'm hoping you'll be more fun."*

His self control broke.

"Fine. You want to play? Then I want to talk to him."

"I was wondering when you'd ask." He sounded pleased, but Jongup didn't give a shit. If he could just know Himchan was still *alive*--

"Put him on."

There was a shuffling over the phone, then the sound of breathing, then, muffled, Kim telling someone to say hello.

"Himchan?" Jongup couldn't hold back. "Himchannie?"

The breathing turned ragged. Jongup heard Kim's voice again in the background: *"Don't be stubborn."*

When Himchan spoke, his words were fast enough they bled into each other.

"It was a forty minute drive to get--" He broke off and Jongup heard the unmistakable sound of multiple fists hitting flesh. Himchan let out a pained groan that was cut off with frightening abruptness.

"Himchan," Jongup said again, helplessly. He got to his feet and began to pace the room, unable to be still.

"I'm sorry, he's being uncooperative right now."

"If you touch him again I'll--"

"You'll what?" Kim sounded genuinely curious. *"You'll kill me? Push me down a flight of stairs, perhaps?"* Jongup was silent, save for the blood pounding in his ears. He couldn't

believe Kim couldn't hear it through the phone. *"Yes, I know all about that, Moon Jongup. Ask me how."* Jongup didn't, but Kim answered anyway. *"Maybe Himchan told me. Maybe he'd tell me anything to make the pain stop."*

When Jongup got his hands on Kim Taesong, he would never, ever, let the pain stop.

"Or maybe I looked it up online; who remembers?" Kim went on airily. *"My point is, I know what you are. I know what you're capable of. It's up to you whether Himchan is returned to you in one piece, or several."*

"What do you want?" Jongup asked tonelessly. He ached for and dreaded the thought of hearing Himchan's voice again. If he was honest with himself, he didn't think there was anything he wouldn't do to get him back safely.

"Bang Yongguk's head," Kim said. He waited a beat. *"Or, if that's too gruesome, I'll settle for his body. Headless. Ha, I kid--But seriously, if you wanted to go that extra mile--"*

Jongup's brain had shuddered to a stop at the word *head*, but now it whirled back to life.

"You're out of your mind."

"So I've heard."

"What d'you need Bang dead for?" All Jongup could think was *stall*. If Kim talked enough, surely he'd figure out what the hell to do.

"He's got some of the best territory in Seoul. I asked him nicely to share, but he didn't budge. If he won't give anything up to save his friend, he's worthless to me. Whereas you've only been with these guys for fifteen minutes or so, and I know you care about Himchan a lot more than you care about them. I'm counting on you to be reasonable here, Moon."

The world was clearly taking a vacation from *reasonable*, but Jongup let it go. He thought fast.

"I need some time. Everyone's on high alert right now."

"You can have a little time. Himchan here won't last forever."

"Put him back on the phone. Let me talk to him. Don't hurt him." Jongup held his breath. He heard Kim telling Himchan not to do anything foolish. He pressed a hand to the wall to steady himself as his legs went watery. "Himchan?" he whispered.

A long pause, then a sighed *"Jongup."*

He closed his eyes. If he could just live in that moment of hearing Himchan's voice--

He opened them again. "Himchan, we're coming for you, you hear me? Just hang on."

"Be careful," Himchan said. His voice was hoarse and Jongup could barely hear him. He closed his eyes again.

"I will," he promised. "Just hang on."

A muffled scuffle, then Kim was back.

"You know, I almost don't want to kill him," he said thoughtfully. "To be honest with you, Jongup-ah, he's holding up impressively well. He'll be fun to break."

Jongup's fingernails drew blood as his hand formed a fist of its own volition.

"If you break him, you won't get what you really want," he said. "There's no deal without Himchan. *Safe*. So you need to call me once a day so I can hear he's all right until this is done."

"So sensible," Kim exclaimed. "I like you. Tell you what. I'm going to have my fun. I'll have more fun with every day it takes you to get this done. Just as an incentive for you to hurry the fuck up. The faster you move, the more intact he'll be."

So much for stalling.

"Have some self control," Jongup snapped. "You want this territory so bad, you can wait for it. Bang won't be easy to get by himself right now. He doesn't trust me."

"I have faith you'll find the motivation to persevere somehow," Kim said. "For now, I'm afraid I have to go! Because I'm getting bored."

"Wait," Jongup said desperately. "What am I supposed to do once he's dead?"

"I'll give you a drop point once you've killed him, not before."

"The hell with that--what's to stop you killing Himchan once I've done what you want?"

"Oh. That is a conundrum."

"If you like playing so much, why don't I bring Bang to you alive? We'll do a trade."

"I can't say it's not tempting," Kim sounded so fucking pleased it made Jongup queasy. He stayed quiet, let him think it over.

"All right, fine. We'll say dead or alive, though I think you'll find he'll be easier to manage if he's dead. Oh, and Jongup?"

"What."

"I really wouldn't take longer than a week if I were you. The human body can only endure so much."

Blood was dripping steadily from Jongup's palm now. He couldn't find his voice, but it didn't matter. Kim disconnected.

Chapter 10

Metal raps against metal, the sound of a night stick thwapping against bars.

"Yoo," the guard rasps. "You've got a visitor."

This seems unlikely, but not worth arguing over and earning himself a fresh beating. Jae shrugs and stands and waits for his cell door to open.

He's led down the hall, past other prisoners in turn jeering and indifferent. He keeps his expression blank, though his heart's been clanging a riot in his chest since he was brought in.

There's no chance his visitor is his father, but he can't help hoping--and can't help his disappointment when he's led in and finds a stranger seated on the other side of the glass.

The boy doesn't look much older than Youngjae himself, but he can't say for sure. He's sharply handsome, despite his slightly undernourished look.

Jae sits on the cracked plastic chair and studies him for a beat before picking up the phone. The other boy follows suit.

"You lost?" Jae asks. Now that he's closer, he can see the boy's clothes are expensive, although the kind of expensive that passes itself off as street, casual. For a moment he feels a stab of envy. No wonder he's in jail; he can never stop himself wanting what other people have.

The boy smirks at him. He's free and Jae isn't, he can get up and leave any time, but up close Jae can also see dark circles under his eyes and just how pronounced the hollows in his cheeks really are. There's only one reason a boy with clothes this nice would look so underfed. Jae's willing to bet if he took off that nice hoodie, his arms would show the track marks.

The boy's eyes are clearer than any junkie's, though, and Jae can see him matching his own appraising look, eyes raking over him.

"You're here because you broke into Bak Doyun's penthouse," he says. Jae blinks.

"I'm surprised Bak let word get out about that," he says. All it would take was the knowledge that one person had gotten through the security system; now every thief in Seoul would think they could do it too.

The other boy snorts. "You think I read about it in the paper?" he says. "We've been watching his place for weeks. We saw you get arrested."

Jae cocks an eyebrow. "Wannabe burglars?" he guesses. His visitor doesn't look offended.

"He's the biggest coke dealer in Seoul. We might want in on some of his business, but we need leverage first. But none of our people could crack his security system."

Jae doesn't mean to puff out his chest in pride or anything, but the boy's words do give him a rush of the warm fuzzies.

"Well, it's a tough system," he says generously.

"And you cracked it." The other boy smiles at him a little, different than his smirk. Jae tenses. He doesn't know what that smile means.

"I'm not telling you how," he says immediately.

"How about you show us?"

Jae stares at him blankly. "We'll pay your bail," the other boy explains. "We get you out of here, get your charges dropped, and you show us what you know. We might have some jobs for you going forward."

"You're, what? Part of some gang?" Jae asks.

"We're kind of new."

"Oh, a startup gang," Jae says scathingly. "I definitely want in on that action." He waits, then adds, "By which I mean--I mean I don't. That was sarcasm. I work alone."

"Cool story, Batman," the other boy says, rolling his eyes. "You done? You want to spend a few years in here if they convict you? Cause I hear solitude's not so fun in prison."

Jae slouches, annoyed. "Good point."

"Then what do you say?"

"I sayyy...." He draws it out, stalling, trying to think of the perfect option three. "You never even told me your name."

The boy nods. "It's Himchan."

The sound of typing filled the car. Youngjae didn't look up from his laptop as Junhong slid back into the driver's seat.

"How'd it go?" he asked absently.

"Fine. That's the last of them; every bounty hunter in Seoul's gonna be looking for them now."

"Good."

"What are you doing?" Junhong craned his neck to see the screen.

"Trying to learn more about Kim's business in Incheon," he said. "I've been thinking about what Yongguk's cousin told Himchan hyung--Kim takes over basically the whole city and then, what? Leaves? I doubt a guy like that's gonna just give up his new territory, so--"

"Someone must be watching it for him," Junhong finished. "Smart."

"Thanks; I come by it naturally."

Junhong snorted, put the key in the ignition. It took Youngjae a beat to realize he hadn't turned it, and he finally lifted his eyes from his screen to look at his friend. Junhong had his hands loose on the wheel and was staring blankly out the window.

It was morning, the kind of drizzly gray morning that always made Youngjae want to stay curled up in bed. The sun was rising, but the light had a dim gray cast to it. On the whole, he'd preferred the dark.

"Junhong?"

The maknae blinked and looked at him.

"Sorry, just--just thinking."

Youngjae shifted uncomfortably and looked back at his screen, but now nothing on it made sense, the words swimming away from his gaze before he could focus. He'd been thinking all night, but also actively not. He'd slammed the door against all thoughts of what might be happening to Himchan right now, in favor of possible solutions, possible avenues to get to Kim.

"About what?" he asked gruffly, though of course he knew.

"The first time I met Himchan hyung."

He gave a start at this--he hadn't known, after all--but the maknae didn't notice.

"That was when we were still in that shitty house on Jegiro, remember? Before the garage." His voice took on a dreamy, faraway quality. Youngjae nodded.

"The windows leaked when it rained."

"The fridge leaked all the time."

"*And* the toilet." They laughed a little.

Junhong went on, "I'd been living there with Yongguk hyung for awhile, plus some other guys, then Yongguk took off--he'd found Himchan, but we didn't know it at the time. He was just gone. And then *everyone* was gone. I was by myself for ages and then--one night they just walked in the door."

Youngjae must have heard this story before. It all had the haze of a memory. He didn't interrupt.

"Himchannie still looked half-dead; he'd only been clean a few weeks and he hadn't gained much weight back yet. But they had groceries with them, and--he just set to work in the kitchen, just started barking orders at me to help him." Junhong laughed a little. "Yongguk hyung like rolled his eyes at me but he was *smiling* and I'd never seen him do that before, so I just did whatever Himchan said."

"And, let me guess, the food was amazing."

"No, the food was *amaaaaazing*," Junhong corrected. "I remember thinking Himchan was really annoying but if he kept making food like that he could stay forever."

Youngjae snorted. They were quiet for a minute.

"D'you think he's still alive?" Junhong asked.

"Yes," Youngjae said firmly. He wasn't willing to consider the alternative. "Kim wants to use him to negotiate with Yongguk, so--"

"But hyung already told him no," Junhong said. "What if he decides Himchan's no use to him?"

"That was just an opening salvo," Youngjae said. "He didn't *actually* expect Yongguk to agree to that. He'll be back with another offer, believe me."

Please.

"And if it doesn't work? If we can't find them?" Junhong didn't look at him as he gave voice to the question none of them wanted to think about.

Youngjae pictured their leader's face, his expression when they'd left the garage hours before. Youngjae had lived with him for almost five years, had seen him serious--he was almost always serious--but he'd also seen him hurt, seen him exhausted, seen him giggly and giddy and stupid-drunk. He'd never seen him quite like this, like some kind of vengeful god. He doubted anything short of what was happening now could have brought it out in him, save maybe something happening to the kid sitting beside him.

He told the truth.

"Then Yongguk hyung'll burn this city to the ground trying."

*

The human body could lose two liters of blood before death was a foregone conclusion. As Himchan watched the trickle from his leg, he thought irritably that he still had a ways to go.

Sigh. Well. Since he wasn't going to bleed to death for a few days, he supposed he'd better get himself out of this mess.

There was a man seated beside the door. He was just an underling, not the big beefy guy who shadowed Kim at all times. Those two had left after Kim got off the phone with Jongup.

Himchan had been trying not to think about that phone call, trying not to replay the sound of Jongup's voice, small and frightened, saying his name.

Of Kim telling him all he had to do to get Himchan back was deliver Yongguk, dead or alive.

Himchan had been failing. All he could *do* was think about it. He tried telling himself that Jongup wouldn't do as Taesong asked. He wouldn't even think about it.

You get that you're literally the only person I give a shit about, right?

That didn't matter. Jongup wouldn't. He *wouldn't*.

We're coming for you, you hear me? He'd said *we*. It would have been touching had Himchan not seen the kind of firepower Kim and his men were wielding. He didn't want Jongup or his friends getting anywhere near it.

Which led back to his original conclusion, that he get *himself* out of this before they could.

He wished he knew where the hell he was. He knew his neighborhood down to the narrowest back alley, and it was utterly disconcerting not to be able to pinpoint his own location. If he knew that, he could figure out his closest ally, the nearest safe place to lie low.

The drug they'd given him was some kind of paralytic--even now his limbs felt artificially heavy and unnaturally slow--but he'd been awake the whole time in the car. They'd stuffed him in the trunk so he hadn't been able to see which way they drove, but he'd been able to feel the car moving *fast*, none of the starts and stops he'd expect from Seoul traffic patterns. They must have taken the highway, so they'd be well out of the city by now, which meant he had fewer avenues of escape.

They'd blindfolded him and brought him to a beige room with a cream-colored carpet and a single covered window. It could have been a hotel room, a room in a house, an unused office. The only furniture was Underling's chair beside the door. Himchan had been daydreaming about beating him to death with it.

All in good time. For now, he gave a theatrically loud sigh. Underling glared at him. Himchan looked pointedly at the maroon splotch spreading from under his leg. His pants and flesh had been badly torn as he was dragged off the fire escape.

"This *was* a nice carpet," he said. "Why do I feel like Kim's gonna bill me for it?"

Underling sneered. "I wouldn't worry about living that long."

"Aw, the silver lining. Thank you," Himchan said with sincerity. Underling didn't seem to know what to do with *that*, so he settled for glaring in a confused kind of way that lifted Himchan's spirits a little. Oh sure, Kim had him at a *bit* of a disadvantage, but apparently he hadn't gotten enough of a foothold in Seoul yet to hire quality help. Himchan was looking forward to wiping the floor with this idiot.

"I don't want to tell you how to do your job or anything," he said. "But is Kim really going to be happy with you if you let me bleed to death so soon?" He was willing to gamble this guy

wouldn't know a life-threatening wound from a just-damned-fucking-painful one.

"No talking."

Himchan nodded as though chastened and waited a beat.

"So sorry," he said apologetically after a moment. "It's just my vision's starting to gray out around the edges, and it really sounded like Kim had more plans for me, so--"

"You in a hurry to get tortured?" Underling said. He gave a long-suffering sigh and stood up. He graced Himchan with a derisive look. "Idiot. Wait here."

Himchan nodded humbly and waited for Underling to leave the room before rolling his eyes.

He didn't have time for a proper gloat, though. He shifted a bit, the pins and needles in his ass strong enough to offset the pain in his leg, almost. His chest ached and it pinched sharply when he breathed--cracked rib, he suspected. They hadn't been gentle, getting him off that fire escape.

Fuck it. He'd had worse, and he believed his captors when they said they had still worse in store for him. Underling may have been an idiot, but it was clear to Himchan that Kim Taesong was not. Insane, possibly. Sadistic, definitely. Himchan still couldn't begin to guess at his motives for all of this, but judging from the gleeful expression on his face when he thrust his phone to Himchan's ear so he could hear Jongup's voice, he was having *fun*.

He'd had fun calling Yongguk first, putting him on speakerphone so Himchan could hear his flat refusal of the deal Kim offered. He'd had fun musing aloud over which of Himchan's friends to try next, all the while squeezing his leg just under the wound. It took all of Himchan's control not to scream, and he could see Kim enjoyed the hell out of that, too. He'd have no problem drawing this out, and he'd get a kick out of each torturous moment.

Himchan didn't intend to give him the pleasure. He could guess what his friends were doing--they'd be getting the word out to everyone they knew on the streets, maybe even put a price on Kim's head. There would be people looking for them. It was just a matter of figuring out whether they were looking in the right places.

With Underling temporarily gone, Himchan pushed himself ponderously to his--well, foot. His injured leg wouldn't take his weight without a good helping of agony on the side. He made his hobbling way to the window and pulled back the corner of the heavy drape.

Light flooded in and seared his retinas. He grimaced and blinked away the haze threatening to blind him. He could see a sea of rooftops, clotheslines flapping with laundry, and there, distantly, Seoul's skyline. He experienced a sudden nauseating rush of homesickness.

"The *fuck* do you think you're doing?" Underling was back. He dropped his handful of bandages on his way over to Himchan.

"Uhh. Just letting some sun in?" Himchan said, though now that his eyes had adjusted, he could see the day outside was gray, the sky a uniform blanket of clouds. Underling grasped

the back of his shirt collar and hauled him backwards. He lost his footing and for a long, frightening moment, Himchan couldn't breathe. Then he was dropped unceremoniously against the far wall and the pressure on his windpipe let up. He canted to the side, gasping.

Underling glared down at him, then aimed a swift kick at his midsection. The pain was immediate and immense. If Himchan's rib wasn't broken before, it surely was now.

Still, the plus side of having the breath kicked out of you was you couldn't give your assailant the satisfaction of screaming.

Underling watched him another beat, apparently warring with himself over whether to continue his assault. Blessedly, he backed off to retrieve the medical supplies, which he tossed in Himchan's general direction.

"Clean yourself up," he said, settling back into his seat beside the door. "He'll be back soon."

Himchan fumbled for the bandages. It seemed absurd to worry about his leg at this point, so sharp was the pain in his chest.

"So sorry...to be a...bother," he wheezed. Underling just scowled.

"Shut up."

*

This is the place.

Yongguk paid well for the information and his intentions are good, so he's not sure why he's hesitating.

The apartment building looks no different from any other on the block, a giant rectangle inlaid with windows set at regular intervals. The only things differentiating it from the building they grew up in is that none of the windows are smashed and the sidewalk outside isn't lined with quite so much garbage.

Young professionals live here, women in pencil skirts and heels, men in blazers. Is that what Himchan looks like now? Yongguk watches a man exit the building and for a second, he thinks it is Himchan, suit perfectly fitted, hair cleanly parted. But no; it's a stranger.

Yongguk's nervous.

His own nerves, so unfamiliar, almost stop him, almost turn him away without even trying. Himchan had wanted a clean break, to get away from him. It's unfair of Yongguk to be here, to insert himself in his oldest friend's new life.

But he has to see. Himchan may not like Yongguk's choices, may not want a part of the new group he's accidentally formed. Yongguk's promised himself he won't argue over any of it. But Himchan is family, and Yongguk misses him.

He knows better than to ring the buzzer. He times his approach perfectly to catch the door as someone else is leaving, then lingers in the mailroom until he finds Himchan's name. He's in 14G.

Yongguk's antsy in the elevator. Finds himself at Himchan's door. Stares at it for a long beat, sure that somehow it should look different than the other identical doors lining the hall, simply because it's Himchan's home.

He knocks.

If life were a film, Himchan would answer after a short pause. He would stare at Yongguk, dumbfounded, over the threshold. Then his face would break into that familiar grin, both lovely and goofy, and he'd pull Yongguk inside.

Life isn't a film, and this isn't what happens. What happens is nothing. He's not home.

Except Yongguk got his work schedule and knows he's off today after an eighteen hour shift. Paramedics' schedules are brutal. Most likely Himchan's sleeping, dead to the world.

Yongguk breaks in.

Well, he gets in, no breaking required. He's known how to pick a lock since he was eight. Himchan taught him.

The apartment is--wrong. He senses it immediately. Himchan never had much growing up, but what he did have, he took care of. The apartment has an unmistakable air of neglect, of uncaring. Every surface is covered in garbage, ancient take-out containers, piles of crumpled receipts, dishes crusted over.

And everywhere, everywhere, are empty yellow prescription bottles.

Yongguk takes this in with a dull sense of dread. It's not what he'd expected.

He doesn't even see Himchan at first, so completely does he blend in with his wrecked surroundings, and by the time he sees him, there's an ashtray coming for his head. He barely manages to duck. It smashes against the wall behind him.

"Get th'fuck out," Himchan says.

Yongguk can only stare, and now there's nothing dull about his horror. Himchan looks like a corpse, skin and bone and deep bruise-colored circles under his eyes, the rest of his skin gray and waxy. He's in a pair of boxers and nothing else. He's watching Yongguk like he's a stranger. He has to clear his throat twice before he can speak.

"Himchan, it's me," he says. "Bbang."

Himchan's eyes narrow and Yongguk takes a few cautious steps closer. It's a sunny day outside but Himchan has the shades drawn and the apartment is dim with gloom.

"Bbang?" he repeats. Yongguk nods and stops a few meters away from the ruin of his best friend. "What are you doing here? You in some kind of trouble?"

This is so patently absurd, given their surroundings, that Yongguk laughs. Himchan smiles a little, but uncertainly, as though he's not quite sure he's doing it right. It fades quickly and Yongguk's laugh cuts out like a radio that's been unplugged.

"Himchannie," he says weakly, his chest tight and hot. "Himchannie what did you do?"

*

After Kim Taesong's phone call, Jongup could not sleep.

If he'd been at home, he'd have ripped the place apart. He wanted to *break* things--specifically, Kim Taesong's face, but barring that he'd settle for anything solid he could get his hands on.

But he wasn't at home, he was in Himchan's room, and he'd sooner break his own fingers than damage the other man's belongings.

He paced instead, clocking the shift from night to day. Every so often, he heard the others in the garage, sometimes distinct, sometimes just the faraway other-people sounds that he remembered so well from jail, from the group home, from Park's house.

This, plus habit, made him slip into it. He'd learned young to size up the people around him, to assess potential enemies and allies, determine quickly who posed the biggest threat. It was a series of calculations that generally left no room for true friendship. Himchan had set off his alarms, of course, but somehow he'd slipped past them.

His friends had not.

So Jongup went down the line of them, sorting and judging.

Himchan had said Daehyun was the best mechanic. He was clearly useful, and trusted. He'd knocked Jongup out with precision, so clearly he could fight, but still, Jongup had trouble labeling him a threat. He so clearly wanted to be *liked*, and that was a simple weakness to get around.

Harder to categorize was Youngjae. He'd been nothing but friendly, yet Jongup could sense sharp edges. He wasn't entirely sure what he *did* for the group, though he gathered it was something to do with computers.

Then there was Junhong, unmistakably the sweetest of the lot, yet he held a gun like it was a natural extension of his arm.

And here Jongup's categories broke down, crippled by the simple fact that he *liked* these men. Cold assessments were easy when you didn't give a shit, impossible once feelings got involved. And Himchan trusted them all; that had to count for something, right?

Except Kim Taesong had been watching them, and knew things he shouldn't have known. Jongup supposed it was technically possible for him to have learned it all on his own--wire taps or hidden cameras or whatever-the-fuck. But it was a hell of a lot more likely that he had someone inside the garage, giving him the dirt. Himchan might be too close to the situation to see it clearly, but Jongup wasn't. Quite.

His thoughts churned exhaustedly, but sleep felt impossible, not to mention *wrong* at a time like this. He found himself wanting to rifle through Himchan's things, looking for--what? Clues?

He collapsed on the edge of the bed, massaging his temples. His eyes went to the bedside table. With a sigh, he slid the top drawer open.

It held the usual suspects: a tangle of obsolete phone chargers. Some loose batteries. A half-full box of condoms and a bottle of lube. (His brain stuttered a bit at this but he managed to stuff away the images these objects raised for later.)

The second drawer wasn't much more illuminating. He poked desultorily through the detritus, feeling tired and guilty.

Then, stuffed behind a rusted-out bike lock, a photograph.

It showed a group of kids vamping for the camera. Jongup found Himchan in a second, no matter he couldn't have been older than nine when the picture was taken. His cheeks were round, his hair long, but each of his dimples was on display, and Jongup found himself grinning back.

Young Himchan's arm was around another boy with stick-thin limbs and a badly suppressed smile. Yongguk.

He stared for a long moment, guilt and worry battling again.

He knew what he had to do.

He smoothed out the edges of the picture and lay it on top of the table. He wouldn't hide from Himchan that he'd gone snooping.

He shrugged on his jacket from the club on his way out the door, shivering a bit. He could smell fresh coffee and meat grilling when he stepped into the hallway, but he ignored the kitchen in favor of the stairs, slipping silently down to the second floor.

Yongguk was right where he'd expected, frowning into his laptop in the office. He looked drawn and pale, save for the deep circles under his eyes. Jongup hadn't thought to check a mirror on his way out but he suspected he didn't look much better.

He still had the gun in his jacket. He took it out now and closed the office door behind him. Yongguk's eyes flickered up at the sound, went sharp and still at the sight of the weapon.

"Kim Taesong called me," Jongup told him. "Offered a new trade. You for Himchan."

Yongguk was still for a long moment, then he sat back in his chair. "Well. I guess that was smart. What's your plan here?"

He was taking this very well. Jongup stood on the other side of the desk, keeping an eye on Yongguk's hands. No doubt he had a gun of his own nearby and Jongup didn't want to get shot this morning.

"He'll give me the meeting place once I...have you."

Yongguk nodded once. Jongup couldn't read his expression. He tried to see the boy from the photograph in the man before him, and couldn't quite believe they were the same person.

"Kim let me talk to Himchan," he said. Yongguk's eyes widened. "Kind of."

"He's still alive." Yongguk said it so quietly Jongup almost didn't hear him. He sucked in a shaky breath.

"They're torturing him. Or they will." Yongguk's head jerked slightly and part of Jongup felt only cold relief at the rage he saw in his eyes. "I told them they have to call and let me talk to him every day until...until I deliver you."

Yongguk's face was blank, then settled into something more approving.

"You should do it today," he said, and Jongup went weak with relief.

He took a seat and slid the gun across the desk to Yongguk, who only stared at it blankly.

"We need a plan," Jongup told him. "He won't believe I got to you so fast, and if he doesn't believe it--"

"Himchannie'll pay the price," Yongguk finished. He made no move to go for the gun. He cocked his head at Jongup. "Why tell me? Why not try to make the trade?"

"Himchan wouldn't want me to." Jongup knew this to be true. No matter what was done to Himchan, no matter what he was being made to endure, if Jongup hurt Yongguk, he'd never forgive him. Family was family. Even Jongup could understand that. He could see from Yongguk's bland acceptance of this new information that he'd be willing to give himself up for Himchan anyway, and this alone was enough to make Jongup trust him. "So we find another way."

Yongguk studied him, and for once he didn't look suspicious, merely appraising.

"We need to find it fast," he said finally. "Himchan will be--he gets *punchy* when he's backed into a corner."

"What do you mean?"

"He'll try to get out of this on his own. I don't know how--" Yongguk sighed and tented his fingers, frustrated. Jongup waited. "He told you about his addiction?" he said. Jongup nodded. "He told you how I found him?"

"Yeah..."

"He was. Fuck. He was a wreck. He looked practically dead, and you know he's really proud, too--he wasn't happy I saw him like that. So we're face-to-face for the first time in years and he asks me if *I'm* in trouble." Yongguk laughed a little, but there was no humor to it. "He was like that for weeks, vomiting one second, taking shots at me the next. God forbid I think he's vulnerable."

Jongup nodded, though he wasn't sure where Yongguk was going with this. "I don't--"

"It's great when we need to talk to Kang or whoever," he said. "I don't--I'm not so much with the words, at least not spur-of-the-moment. Himchan's so good at it, he's never rattled by anyone, he knows how to find someone's buttons and *push*, you know?"

Jongup thought of Himchan when they'd first met. The medic's cool indifference had gotten under his skin, and for the first time he wondered if it had been intentional.

"Yeah," he said. "I get that."

"So with someone like Kim--"

"You're worried he'll provoke him on purpose."

Yongguk shook his head. "I *know* he will."

Jongup banged his head constructively on the desk a few times. He heard the door open behind him.

"Oh, *this* bodes well," Youngjae said. Jongup lifted his head and turned back to him.

"Is that coffee?"

The other man brought the pot to the table along with a cluster of mismatched mugs.

"There's food, too, but you have to come to the kitchen."

Jongup's stomach rumbled audibly but he shook it away irritably in favor of the caffeine. Youngjae sighed and returned to the door, calling for Junhong.

"Any word from Dae?" Yongguk asked.

"Yeah, Mina's people are giving him the runaround, of course. She still hasn't forgiven him for hitting on her the first time they met. But he'll get through, he always does." Youngjae collapsed into the chair beside Jongup and poured himself some coffee. "Jongup, do you want cream and sugar?"

"Sure."

"Well we don't actually have any, so--"

"Hey, it's everybody. What's going on? Do we have a plan? Are we fighting?" Junhong joined the group. Youngjae swatted his hand away when he reached for coffee.

"You're hyper enough already."

"Jongup has news," Yongguk said. The other two fell quiet. Jongup told them about the call, adding at the end, "Himchan managed to tell me they'd driven about forty minutes to wherever they're holding him."

Youngjae and Junhong exchanged a glance. "Doesn't do us much good without knowing what direction they took," Youngjae said.

"Himchan'll find a way to give us more information next time they call," Yongguk said. "Jongup, you need to play this out."

"How?"

"Why not tell him what we're really doing?" Junhong spoke up. "He could probably guess it anyway. Let him know we've got every gang member and mercenary in Seoul looking for them. Maybe that'll convince him to stay in one place for a while."

Yongguk nodded. "I'm guessing they got out of the city already," he said. "Kim *has* to know we have more resources here than he does. He'd try to keep Himchan out of our reach."

Jongup's heart sank.

Kim doesn't know we're working together, he reminded himself. *We're one step ahead of him this time.*

Unless they weren't. Unless Kim did have an informant in the garage, or this very office was bugged and he was listening to them right now and laughing.

He looked at Youngjae and Junhong. The former was chewing his fingernails with an anxious absent-mindedness, the latter playing with a spent shell casing. Both looked exhausted, worried, young.

Jongup turned his attention to the room at large, although he knew realistically there was no way he'd spot a bug if one even existed.

Still.

"So what do we do then?" he asked, pulling a sheaf of papers across the desk and motioning to Yongguk for something to write with. The older man passed him a pen.

"We have some contacts outside Seoul," he said, but his eyes were on Jongup's hand.

HE COULD BE LISTENING, he wrote, showing it to the others. He saw Junhong's eyes flicker up around the corners of the room, just as his had done a moment earlier. Youngjae looked skeptical, Yongguk grim.

"I have a few people I can get in touch with," Youngjae said. Jongup couldn't tell if this was true or if he was just covering the silence in case they really were being overheard. It didn't matter.

WE SHOULDN'T TALK HERE, Jongup wrote.

Then: *I HAVE AN IDEA*.

*

Kim Taesong crouched in front of Himchan. He was older, in his forties at least. His clothes were nice without being ostentatious. He'd look like a normal businessman if not for the crazed glint in his eye.

"I hear you've been having some fun with Mr. Woo here," he said. Himchan's breaths had taken on a whistling quality, but he met his captor's gaze with steady insolence.

"I get bored easily," he said. Kim's smile widened.

"I knew I'd like you," he said. "You're a man after my own heart; knew it the first time we talked." He settled into a cross-legged position across from Himchan. It was an odd posture for a man his age. "I want you to tell me more about this Moon Jongup. I know *you* trust him, but can I? Will he deliver Bang to me as promised or try to double-cross? Could he possibly be that stupid?"

Himchan was tired. He'd been up for two days already and he had who knew what drugs still lingering in his system. Any attempts at subterfuge were unlikely to work, so why even try?

"He's smarter than *you*," he sighed. "Listen, not to be rude but I'd murder for a coffee."

Kim motioned to Underling--or Mr. Woo, but he'd always be Underling to Himchan. He left the room and returned a moment later with a glass.

"I hope iced is acceptable," Kim said.

"Scared I'd throw it in your face, huh?" Himchan observed. As if he'd waste perfectly good coffee. Kim just smiled. Himchan drank it down in three long gulps. It occurred to him he should have asked for water. The coffee hit his empty stomach and the caffeine set to work jump-starting his nervous system; he felt twitchy, his heartbeat already speeding up.

Or maybe it wasn't the caffeine. There was a dusting of white powder at the bottom of his glass. He looked up at Kim, who was already beginning to go fuzzy around the edges.

"What did you do?" he said. His tongue felt thick and clumsy even as the pain in his legs and chest faded. He knew this feeling, he realized. He remembered it very well, though it had been five years since Yongguk had flushed the last of his pills away.

Kim's smile widened.

"Now," he said. "We're going to have some fun."

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

TW for non-consensual drug use.

=====

The bullet's gone right through his chest and all Dae can think is that he isn't ready to die.

He'd managed to keep his feet and keep running after he was shot--like a chicken with its head cut off, he thought wildly as he ducked down the first alley he found--but by the time he makes it to the safehouse he's stumbling.

Worse still, Jae isn't here.

He's sure this was the plan--if you get separated, if something goes wrong, get to the safehouse, Yongguk said--but the younger man should have gotten here first. Dae doesn't want to ponder what it might mean that the house is empty.

There's little he can do, anyway. He makes it upstairs and his knees give out. He wedges himself into the nearest corner, using the wall to try to stem the flow of blood from his back while pressing both hands against the hole in his chest. He doesn't quite have the courage to look. He can't believe the bullet missed his heart. Jae would say something stupid like--like that's just because he doesn't have a heart--Jae--

He's falling over. He just manages to catch himself, banging the back of his head against the wall to wake himself up.

He hears the door downstairs. Reaches for his gun with numbed fingers, just manages to get a hold on it, aim it at the door limp-wristedly. It'll be Jae, it has to be, but this isn't the time to get cocky.

A figure appears at the top of the stairs. Dae drops the gun.

"Not you," he sighs.

Himchan snorts and drops to his knees beside him.

"It's nice to see you too," he says dryly. Dae tries to push him away.

"No--you need to find Jae--" he protests.

"How d'you think I knew to be here with all this?" Himchan has a big duffel bag and when he unzips the top, Dae can see bandages and pill bottles inside. "Jae wasn't sure but he thought

you were hit. Good thing you made it here. He'll keep Mina's people out of the way and meet us back at the garage."

Dae's relief comes as a surprise, though it probably shouldn't. Jae is unquestionably the closest thing he has to a friend in this merry band of fools he's joined up with. He only meant to help them fix up the apartment above their garage, but he finished the plumbing weeks ago, and somehow he's still here.

It's not just Jae, though Dae finds him endlessly entertaining. There's also Yongguk, who scared him for the first week but turned out to be surprisingly easy to talk to, so long as he isn't looking for an answer. There's Junhong, whip-smart and hormonal as hell who activates something irritable but protective in Dae every time he looks at him.

For the first time in a long time, he's found somewhere he wants to stay.

The only one he's not sure of is the one he needs to save his life now.

"Have you ever done this before?" he asks. Himchan pulls his hand away from his chest, pulls him away from the wall to see his back.

"You'd rather I drop you off at the hospital?" he asks. Dae makes a face. Too many outstanding warrants to risk it.

"Just try not to kill me," he says resignedly.

"Yeah, you don't need my help with that," Himchan says. He sounds annoyed, but then, he always sounds annoyed when he talks to Dae. He pulls a sheet out of his bag and flaps it open on the floor. "Lay down on your stomach."

Dae does as he's told, but he gets one last glare in before the angle gets too awkward.

"Your bedside manner sucks."

Himchan ignores this. "How'd you piss Mina off, anyway?"

"I didn't know who she was." Dae's voice is low, his words muffled against the sheet. He hisses when he feels Himchan probing the wound. He will not scream. It's not like this is the first time he's ever taken a bullet.

"You hit on her, didn't you."

Dae groans in annoyance and just the smallest amount of pain as Himchan sets his back on fire.

"Fuck, what are you doing back there?"

"It's called disinfectant, you big baby."

He's the worst. Dae doesn't know why Jae likes him so much. It must be that whole got-him-out-of-prison thing. He has Stockholm Syndrome now, clearly.

"Well, I have good news," Himchan says after a few minutes.

"What."

"The bullet went clean through and the exit wound looks clear, so it's just a matter of stitching you up and feeding you antibiotics for awhile so you don't go septic on us."

This does not, to Daehyun's way of thinking, show quite enough respect for the depths of his suffering, but he supposes he is relieved not to be dying.

Himchan's fast, thankfully, and technically Dae's grateful and all. Himchan finishes by rolling him into a seated position to close up his chest.

"Almost done," he murmurs.

"You're gonna tease me about this forever, aren't you."

He thinks Himchan will give him his trademark smirk, but he scowls.

"You need to be more careful. What if you hadn't made it back here? What if Jae didn't realize you were hurt?"

Dae stares at him. "Aw," he drawls. "Don't tell me you're worried about little old me."

Himchan tuts. He doesn't meet his eyes--though that could be because he's still stitching him up.

"You're one of us," he says shortly. "You're actually useful, so."

"Now I'm tearing up."

"Whatever." Himchan purses his lips as he finishes, then sits back on his heels. Dae risks a look down at himself. The blank white square of bandage is the only visible sign he's been hurt.

Well, and the blood on Himchan's hands.

"Jae was really upset," Himchan says abruptly, and this hits home. There's no recrimination in the older man's voice, just a calm statement of fact, a vertical crease between his eyebrows.

"Sorry," Dae says honestly. "I know I'm here to watch his back."

Himchan cocks his head and there's something softer in his expression now. "Well, yeah," he says. "But we're all here to watch yours, too."

"You want me to go to Incheon? Now?" Daehyun stared at the email on Jae's phone.

"Look, the guy I got in touch with thinks he might have a beat on some leverage on Kim," Jae said. "He said it's kind of weird..."

"Oh, that definitely sounds worth it." Daehyun rolled his eyes. "Leaving right now in search of something *kind of weird*."

"Kind of weird and *helpful*," Jae corrected. Daehyun fixed him with a narrow-eyed glare. "...hopefully," his friend finished.

"You need me here."

"Everyone we know's already looking for Himchan and Kim," Jae said. "And if this plan doesn't work we'll need any leverage you can find."

Daehyun sighed. He knew all this, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"I feel like I'm abandoning him," he said quietly. He leaned against the car, breathing in the comforting garage scents of metal and gasoline. God, he was already homesick and he hadn't even left yet.

Jae was typing information into his phone but he looked up at Daehyun's words. "That's crap and you know it," he said. "This could save his life, Dae." He hesitated. "Although hopefully he'll be home before you are and can give you shit for it when you get back."

Daehyun snorted, but he could just see it--getting the good news and rushing back, finding Himchan seated cross-legged on the desk as usual, giving him his crooked smirk. *Look who finally decided to join us*, he'd say, sounding annoyed but fooling no one. Daehyun wouldn't even rise to the bait. If--*when*--he saw his hyung again, he was giving him the biggest hug of all time.

"Hope so," he said gruffly. Youngjae kicked him and got back to typing.

"The guy's contact info's here, where to go and everything," he said. "You know what to do?"

"Sure. Vague shady meetings are my specialty," Daehyun said, taking his phone back from his friend. Jae stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"I wish I could go with you," he said abruptly. "Or--anyone, really."

Daehyun could see him itching to bite his nails. He returned the kick, gently.

"Nah," he said. "Yongguk hyung's right; better to keep some stuff close. You never know who's listening."

He knew it had cost their leader to admit the possibility that the garage had somehow been infiltrated. When Jongup suggested a bug, they'd all been defensive. No one wanted to think that their home might not be the safe haven they'd always believed. But once the dust settled, they could all see the sense in it--which was when it occurred to Junhong that they also might have trusted someone they shouldn't have.

I don't mean you, he'd added quickly, looking at Jongup. Daehyun knew he was recalling the naked fear on his face when Himchan was taken, the helpless rage when he told them all about Kim's call. He thought of Himchan's expression when he looked at the smaller man. Daehyun had never seen him look at anyone like that before. They would trust Jongup because Himchan did.

But theirs was a large operation, and they'd just learned the truth about Park. There could be other, worse breaches in the gang. This suggestion got under Yongguk's skin--Yongguk always wanted to see the best in everyone--and he decided to keep their backup plan just between the five of them. Daehyun was to handle it alone.

So, no pressure or anything.

Youngjae would be scouring the garage for recording devices, and Jongup and Junhong had a special mission of their own.

"No," Jae agreed. "You never know." He stepped away from the driver's door so Daehyun could get in. "Don't get shot," he said.

*

Four years, seven months and three days after he was released from prison, Moon Jongup walked into a police station.

He kept his hands fisted at his sides. His instinct was to keep his head down, avoid eye contact, but he was afraid this would only look suspicious. He made himself look every police officer they passed squarely in the eye.

"Cut it out," Junhong murmured out of the side of his mouth. "You look like you're trying to pick a fight."

"This was a terrible idea," Jongup muttered back. "If someone realizes who I am--"

"No offense hyung but I don't think you're *quite* that notorious," Junhong said. "Just be cool. It'll be okay."

They made their way to the front desk where a young woman in uniform was typing away at her computer. She didn't look up as they approached.

"Hi," Junhong said, beaming in an especially disarming way. "We need to see Detective Kim?"

The officer looked him up and down, seemingly determined not to be charmed by his dimples.

"Is he expecting you?"

"No, but he did give us this--" Junhong produced one of Yongguk's cousin's cards and displayed it for the woman, smiling at her again. She gave a long-suffering sigh and stood up.

"Wait over there." She motioned to a row of uncomfortable-looking chairs lining the wall. Junhong and Jongup chose the two chairs with the fewest horrifying stains.

"Think this'll work?" Jongup asked. Junhong shrugged.

"Sleepy hyung will help if he can."

"You know him?"

"Mm." Junhong stretched his legs out briefly, then pulled them back in to allow a police officer pushing a handcuffed man to pass. "He's the one who introduced me to Yongguk hyung."

Jongup blinked. "How'd *that* happen?"

(Was that officer looking at him strangely?)

Junhong smiled. "He kept arresting me." His grin widened as he caught Jongup's startled gaze. "Just for dumb shit, mostly. I was really into stealing cars for a little bit? Just to drive around for fun. Sleepy gave me a warning the first time, but I had some issues with, um, impulse control? So he got me sent to the boys' correctional facility. So I broke out, and--"

"You *broke out*?"

Junhong ducked his head modestly. "I mean, it was nothing like, you know--" he nodded at Jongup, which Jongup took to mean, *it was nothing like* real prison. "They were always so understaffed, *that* was the *real* crime. So I'd bust out, be back on the streets for awhile, then Sleepy'd see me again and round me up. He kept getting madder and madder every time." His eyes took on the faraway look of fond reminiscences. Jongup was tempted to laugh, but another cop had come to the main desk. He met Jongup's eye and he dropped his gaze, the laughter dying in his throat.

"Anyway, he finally got so fed up with the whole back-and-forth that one day, instead of bringing me to the station, he brought me out to this house instead. Yongguk's house."

Jongup blinked. "He got sick of arresting you so he brought you to a...um."

"To a criminal, yeah," Junhong agreed. "Well, kind of. There was no gang yet at that point, but he definitely knew where Yongguk hyung was headed."

"Then, you know...why?"

Junhong shrugged. "Figured I was a hopeless case, I guess. Knew Yongguk wouldn't let anything too bad happen to me."

"How old were you?"

"First time I got arrested? Thirteen. Fifteen by the time he took me to Yongguk."

Jongup digested this, his eyes still scanning the police station. He still felt antsy, but the memories of the last time he'd been in a police station--heart-achingly young and frightened and guilty--were dropping to the back of his mind where they belonged. Talking to Junhong helped.

"Did he ever arrest Yongguk?"

"Nah, Yongguk hyung never gets caught. Things are plenty awkward between them, though. Like one day hyung's bailing out one of our guys and fighting with Sleepy about it, the next they're meeting up with their family for Chuseok."

Jongup tried to imagine this. Somehow, from Himchan's stories, he'd gotten the impression of him and Yongguk as feral street urchins with no family to speak of.

"With their family," he repeated softly.

"Yeah, it's--kind of complicated." Junhong sighed at Jongup's questioning look. "Yongguk hyung's parents were--not great. He doesn't talk about it ever, really. But he has an older sister and a twin brother. At some point they all got split up and sent to different foster homes. His sister got lucky, she wound up in a good situation. And his brother's real smart--I mean Yongguk hyung's super smart, but he never had much use for school?--and he got all these scholarships. Yongguk hyung kept running away from his foster homes and going back to the block where he grew up. He'd stay with Himchan hyung for weeks at a time, get caught and dragged out, but he'd always come back and at some point they stopped trying to place him anywhere new. Anyway, his sister's doing pretty well these days and they all get together for holidays and stuff."

"Huh. What about Himchan's family?" Jongup asked. Junhong squinted at him.

"You don't know?"

Jongup shook his head. "We were--we'll talk about it, just haven't had a chance yet," he said. He didn't miss the incongruity of feeling so close to Himchan while still knowing so little about him.

Junhong seemed to see some of this in his face. "Yeah," he said. "Of course. Has he cooked for you yet?"

Jongup blinked at the non sequitur. "Yeah..."

Junhong's expression cleared. "Don't worry, then; you're in," he said confidently. "Himchannie only cooks for people he really likes."

"Uh." Jongup squirmed a little. "Good?" He felt himself flushing. Junhong grinned. Jongup was spared having to answer further by the arrival of the tall detective from the day before.

"Zelo," he greeted Junhong randomly.

"No one calls me that anymore," Junhong protested. He and Jongup stood. Junhong was almost as tall as the detective, and Jongup felt about a meter high in comparison.

The detective looked at him and nodded in recognition.

"C'mon back," he said, motioning for them to follow him through the far door and down the corridor, where they reached a cluster of desks. The woman from the day before was seated at one; she looked over as they arrived.

"You didn't tell me we were having company," she chided Yongguk's cousin.

"We don't have to clean up on *their* account," he said, cuffing the back of Junhong's head. Junhong ducked away, scowling. "Sit." He dragged over two chairs from two of the messy-but-unoccupied desks. They sat.

Junhong explained the events of the day before. The detective's frown deepened. At some point, his partner gave up all pretense that she wasn't listening and joined them, arms folded tightly across her chest.

"Why the fuck didn't Himchan tell me what you were into?" This question was directed at Jongup, who shifted uncomfortably.

"You know we don't do that," Junhong said impatiently.

"You just did," the woman pointed out. Junhong and Jongup exchanged a look, then Jongup spoke for the first time.

"That's because we need your help," he said.

*

Himchan would never get enough of this feeling.

The pain in his chest, the pain in his leg: both faraway and unimportant.

Everything was faraway and unimportant. He'd almost forgotten how nice it was to just...care less.

Don't be an idiot, some quiet part of him tried to intrude. *He's going to kill you--you know that, right?*

His eyes drifted from the ceiling, which he'd been watching with great contentment from his spot on the floor, to Kim Taesong.

His captor had stolen Underling's seat and was typing away at his laptop. The sound of the keys was unnaturally loud in Himchan's ears.

He's going to kill you, and he's going to kill Yongguk.

Shut up.

And Jongup. He's only involved in this because of you, you pathetic asshole.

You're really harshing my buzz, Me.

You want them to find you like this?

It hit him--well, nothing quite as sharp as that, more like...it lightly caressed his mind that no; in fact he did not want his friends to find him this way. He could imagine the horrified resignation on Yongguk's face, the disgust on Jongup's. It was one thing to know that someone was an addict. It was something else altogether to see it in action. It had driven Himchan's sister away years before, had lost him everything he'd worked for.

His hand crept down to his leg. Kim Taesong was too absorbed in his work to notice. Himchan's hand hovered--then he pressed hard on his own injury.

The drugs in his system kept him from crying out, but just barely. The pain sliced through his haze, sharp as a knife. He kept his hand there, pressed harder.

Yongguk. Jongup. Junhong. Youngjae. Daehyun.

He chanted their names like a mantra. No way he was going to let this asshole--he wasn't sure whether he meant himself or Kim Taesong here, but it hardly mattered--get to them.

The door opened. Himchan relaxed his hand as Underling returned, whispered something to Kim. They glanced at Himchan. He let his gaze go unfocused, drifting aimlessly across the room.

The chair creaked, then Kim was standing over him.

"You must be hungry," he said. "Mr. Woo here makes a fine pot of ramyun. A bit pedestrian, I know, but we all have our limits."

Don't eat or drink anything--he just wants to drug you again.

His trepidation, his *awareness*, must have shown on his face, because Kim's eyes darkened. He lowered himself into a crouch by Himchan's side.

"You'll eat," he said softly. "Unless you'd like your next dose by injection."

Himchan glanced at Underling, thought of the even larger man he knew was waiting in the hall. No doubt they'd be able to hold him down, and a dose of these drugs straight to his bloodstream would hit him like a tank. He'd lose what tenuous control he had left.

He made his voice sound slow and lazy. (It wasn't hard. His tongue felt *heavy*.) "Ramyun would be...perfect."

Kim's eyes narrowed, probing his face. Himchan blinked slowly, let his gaze drift to and away from Kim's face, then back again.

He remembered Yongguk slapping him lightly the night he'd found him.

Focus, Channie. Tell me what you took. How many where are they **how many where are they**, his questions bleeding together even as Himchan truly tried to listen, to believe his best friend was really there after all these years--

He was drifting again. He blinked himself back.

Focus, Channie.

Kim relaxed, his smirk returned. Himchan wasn't sure if this could be considered fooling the man; he still felt dangerously distant.

But at least he *knew* it was dangerous.

"Sit tight," Kim said, patting his cheek. Himchan forced himself to be still, not to shy away with disgust from the other man's touch. Kim rose and left the room with Underling.

Leaving Himchan *alone*.

For a long beat--or a short one? Time was always one of the first senses to go--he lay there unbelievably.

Jongup. Yongguk. Dae--

He sat up. His rib screamed in protest. He pushed himself to his feet. His leg whimpered.

He made his stumbling way back to the window. He was prepared for the light this time.

Seoul. He studied it, forced himself to see, to think.

They were south of the city. He could see the glint of the Han river.

Himchan smiled.

Don't celebrate yet.

Spoilsport.

He left the window and made his way back across the room, grateful for the thick carpet muffling his footsteps. He pressed an ear to the door. He couldn't hear anything.

He was sure they'd have locked him in, but the knob turned easily in his hand. He eased the door open soundlessly, peered through the crack.

The hallway was small, narrow, with a set of stairs running down off to the right.

Himchan shifted his gaze left and froze. Kim's bodyguard was there. His bicep was the size of Himchan's thigh. He was turned away, scrolling through something on his phone.

Himchan eased the door shut and backed away, waiting for the man to come bursting through, demanding to know what he was up to. He didn't.

His leg was really throbbing now, and he wanted nothing more than to sit and wait for the next numbing dose of the drug. He could wait for his friends to get him out of this...

Don't be an asshole.

Right. He kept his feet, hobbled across the room again. The second door blended into the wall so well it had taken him awhile to even realize it was there. He opened it to reveal a tiny bathroom. He had already endured the indignity of Underling looming over him while he pissed, but of course he hadn't had a chance to look around.

There wasn't much to see.

The room was small, square, the color of chalky mints. It held a toilet and sink, no shower. It took him a moment to determine that the mirror above the vanity really was just a mirror, not a cabinet with something convenient like a forgotten switchblade or gun inside.

He was arrested by his own reflection for a beat. Somehow, with the familiar feel of the drugs in his system, he'd expected to see himself as he'd been at the height of his addiction, all sharply jutting cheekbones and deep circles under his eyes. But he still looked like himself, filled out and healthy, if clearly in need of a good night's sleep.

The sight bolstered him somehow. He was still here. He was still *him*. He had some fight in him yet.

He ran the water as cold as it would go and splashed his face a few times, then cupped his hands until they were filled. He hesitated, then lowered his face into them. He waited until his nose was submerged, then snorted in the water.

It hurt like a shoot of cold lightning to the brain, the world's worst case of brain freeze. But when he lifted his head again, it felt clear, his reflection less wibbly around the edges.

There was no towel--they'd cleared out the room before bringing him, or maybe there had never been anything here to begin with--so he merely swiped his face dry with his forearm and returned to the main room, closing the bathroom door carefully behind him.

He returned to his spot on the floor, lay down and closed his eyes, his mind racing.

The hallway outside the room had oriented him somewhat: not a hotel or office building, but a house. South of the Han River. Hadn't he read about a series of new housing developments sprouting up all around the outskirts of Seoul? There was some scandal with the building company; they'd built hundreds of new houses, finished them halfway, then moved on without completing the work, leaving hundreds of families waiting in limbo for homes they'd already purchased.

No wonder it was so clean and empty; no one had lived here yet. Himchan was willing to bet if he managed to get downstairs, he'd find the rest of the house still waiting on electrics or flooring or whatever final details to make it inhabitable.

He heard footsteps, voices outside the room, and his pulse sped up. They'd be back soon with a meal laced with his next dose of drugs. His newfound clarity would be gone. The more they forced on him, the harder it would be to get that clarity back.

He made himself think faster. If he was in some half-finished housing development, there'd be no help around for blocks, maybe even kilometers.

Lots of places to hide, though.

Sure, but Kim and his people could fan out and look for him without fear of being seen. And even if Himchan could get a message to Jongup and he and the others figured it out, they'd still have kilometers of empty houses to search through. There was no way. Kim had weapons, his people probably hidden all around the area. If Yongguk and the others chanced on their location, Kim's people would pick them off one by one.

Better not have a showdown here, then.

The coldly sober voice was calm. Himchan knew it was right. If he couldn't be rescued here, he'd just have to get himself someplace else. Get Yongguk and the others looking in the right *direction*, sure--he wouldn't get far on his own. But he'd warn them first, take away Kim's advantage, then get himself away from the bulk of the danger. Somehow.

The door opened, the scent of ramyun wafting in. Himchan's stomach grumbled even as his heart sank.

"Who's hungry?" Kim sang.

*

Sleepy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why would I agree to this?" he asked.

"As a favor to Yongguk?" Junhong ventured.

Sleepy gave him a look to indicate this was not a realistic motivation.

"Or because you want to bring Kim Taesong down," Jongup put in. Sleepy frowned at him.

"I know how my cousin operates," he said. "If I let you guys get to Kim first--especially now he has Himchan--he'll be too dead to stand trial for any of this."

"We won't kill him," Jongup said.

It cost him something to say it. He'd never been especially bloodthirsty; all the fights in prison and the group home had been started by someone else and his participation had been merely self defense. Kim Taesong was the first person he'd truly wanted to hurt.

Just get Himchan back safely, he told himself grimly. *That's all that matters.*

Junhong nodded eagerly. "Yeah, we'll turn him over to you! Service to the community and all that," he said, his eyes wide and innocent. Sleepy looked unconvinced. "We just want to get

Himchan hyung back."

The detective sat back, studying them, before turning to his partner. She shook her head at him wordlessly. He made a face, then stood.

"Wait here."

He left and his partner returned to her desk. She didn't speak, but she kept glancing over at them every few minutes.

"We're not gonna steal anything," Junhong said finally, irritably. His natural good humor had been fading all morning. Jongup kept catching him looking at the clock. He felt it, too: *hurry, hurry*. Anything could be happening to Himchan while they tried to outthink and outplan Kim Taesong, despite the fact that so far he'd remained steadfastly three steps ahead of them.

"Weren't you arrested like six times for theft?" she asked dryly, but her eyes kept flickering to Jongup. "You're familiar," she said. He grimaced a little, although his nerves weren't what they had been an hour earlier. So what if she figured out who he was? He'd done his time and been released, fair and square.

"Yeah?" he said coolly.

"Yeah, you're--Moon something, right?" she said, drawing the words out slowly. He just nodded and her expression cleared.

"Thought so. You have the same nose," she said. Jongup blinked.

"The same nose...as...?"

"As your brother." She turned back to her laptop, apparently losing interest now that the mystery had been solved. Jongup froze.

"What did you say?" His voice sounded strained to his own ears. The detective frowned at him.

"Your brother," she said again. "What was his na--Jonghwan," she said with triumph. Jongup could only gape at her. Junhong was looking back and forth between them curiously.

"How'd you know him?" he asked, apparently realizing Jongup couldn't.

"He worked here a couple years ago." Now she was beginning to look interested. She turned away from her laptop to study Jongup. "And--something tells me you didn't know that."

Jongup's tongue had been replaced with a few sheets of sandpaper.

"We haven't talked in awhile," he managed. "He's--not working here anymore?"

"Must've transferred to another office," she said with a shrug. "I can probably find his number if you want it."

Jongup was spared having to come up with a response to this extraordinary pronouncement by Sleepy's return. The detective was smiling grimly.

"I'm going to regret this," he said.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Previous chapter's trigger warning still applies, plus some violence ahead--not super explicit, but better safe than sorry. <3

=====

"They could have my badge for giving this to you," Sleepy said, handing a flash drive to Junhong. The maknae pocketed it.

"That's everything?" he said. The detective arched an eyebrow.

"It's everything I choose to give you," he corrected. "I'm not handing over a two year case--but it's enough to let you know what you're dealing with, how Kim operates."

"Hmph," Junhong said ungratefully. Sleepy rolled his eyes.

"It's a favor, Junhong-ah, you understand? If you figure out where he's holding Himchan you *call me* and let us handle things the right way." He glared from Junhong to Jongup. Jongup wondered if he understood how unlikely an outcome this was.

"Of course," Junhong said. He had on his innocent maknae expression again. It made him look about thirteen. Jongup wasn't fooled this time.

Judging from the detective's face, he wasn't either. But before he could take it all back, Junhong's phone beeped. He looked at the screen.

"Yongguk says come home," he said.

*

Jongup breathed easier away from the police station.

"Youngjae must not've found anything," Junhong said. "He's like a tech genius, so if there was anything there, he'd know."

Jongup wasn't sure they should be relieved--without a bug or recording device, the question remained of how Kim had known so much about them. He couldn't have picked up Himchan's nickname for Yongguk by simply watching from across the street.

The garage had cleared out by the time they got back. The metal grate was closed for once, and Junhong and Jongup had to go in the side door. The vast space was eerily quiet as they made their way up to the office.

"Sleepy hyung expects a full and accurate report of our activities once we've reviewed the materials," Junhong announced upon entering the room.

"I'm sure Sleepy hyung will learn to manage his disappointment," Yongguk said.

Youngjae was seated on the couch, laptop ignored for once as he ate chips with a blankly exhausted look on his face. He brightened when Junhong tossed him the flash drive, and passed Jongup the bag, returning his attention to his computer.

The detective's words ran on a loop in Jongup's head as Junhong described their meeting to the others.

He worked here a couple years ago. I can probably find his number if you want it.

Jonghwan had been there. He was still in Seoul, maybe.

He'd been there when Jongup was let out of prison. He'd been there through the months he spent on the streets before Park stepped in. He'd been there all along.

Something went cold and hard in Jongup's chest even as a small voice asked, *Well? What did you expect?*

His phone rang, wrenching his thoughts back to the matter at hand. The room went quiet. Jongup looked at the display, then nodded. Yongguk nodded back, the muscles in his jaw flexing, the rest of him still as stone.

"Hello," Jongup answered.

"Oh, Moon, you sound exhausted! Didn't you sleep at all?" Kim chided.

"Put him on."

"Straight to business, eh? Oh well, a deal's a deal--" There was a shuffling from over the phone. Youngjae made a series of complex gestures that Jongup took to mean *put it on speakerphone*. He did so with some trepidation, and everyone in the room leaned in.

"Jongup-ah. You okay?" Himchan's voice sounded warm and alive and *close* and it was fucking torture.

"Am I okay?" Jongup repeated. "Really?" Part of him wanted to laugh, part of him wanted to break something, all of him just wanted Himchan here now.

"You do sound tired." So did Himchan, except that wasn't quite it. There was an almost *dreamy* quality to his voice that Jongup didn't care for.

"I'm fine," he said quickly. "Himchan, are you okay?"

There were a hundred things he wanted to ask--are they hurting you, where are you, have you noticed any weaknesses we could exploit--but they all really boiled down to the all-important refrain of *are you okay are you okay please be okay*. He wondered if Kim was listening in. He had to assume he was.

Himchan paused. *"I mean, the food sucks. If I'd wanted shitty ramyun I could've just stayed home and let Bbang make it."* He let out a chuckle that was so out of place under the circumstances that Jongup felt a stab of fear in response. *"Remind me to tell you about the time he dragged me all the way to the end of the bus line just to try this new ramyun place. We ditched school an' everything."*

There was a gentle slur to his words that twisted Jongup's stomach in knots. He could all-too-easily picture Himchan bruised and bloodied, maybe with a head wound making it difficult for him to form words. He glanced at Yongguk and saw him staring at the phone as though he could look through it to see Himchan on the other end. His face was unnaturally pale. Even his *lips* were white.

"You can catch me up on all your stories when you get home," Jongup said. His hand had clenched into a fist again without him noticing, fingertips digging into the grooves his nails had left the night before.

"Don't worry about me," Himchan said, and he sounded a bit stronger, more himself now. *"I'll be fine, you don't need to do anything, okay?"*

Jongup knew what Himchan was getting at. He must have heard Kim's offer of a trade. He was asking him not to do it.

"We're not leaving you there," he told him, knowing he'd hear the *we* and understand what it meant.

"I know." Himchan sounded resigned. *"I'm sorry. Tell the others, too."*

"Why are you sorry? None of this is your fault." His heart hurt at the clear guilt in Himchan's voice. The other man didn't answer. "Himchan?" he tried again. There was another scuffle, then the drawling voice he'd grown to hate.

"You'll have to forgive him," Kim said. *"I'm afraid he's, ah, indisposed at the moment. In any case, you can hear he's just fine."*

"Fuck *fine*. What did you do to him?" Jongup demanded.

"I'd think you'd be glad he has something to help manage the pain," Kim said slyly. *"Now, where are we on our little project?"*

Jongup's mind was reeling. He didn't want to think what he was thinking, didn't want to interpret Kim's words. He had to force himself to answer.

"It's crazy around here right now, I can't get close to Bang," he said. "You should know they have their people looking for you all across Seoul. You've managed to piss off every gang in

town."

"That hardly matters. They'll fall in line once I have Bang. Or else they'll just fall." Kim sounded so sure. *"I hope I don't have to tell you to hurry. I hate repeating myself."*

He hung up before Jongup could reply.

The four of them were silent for a beat.

"Himchan sounded weird," Jae spoke up first. He looked at Jongup. "Didn't he?"

Yongguk answered. "He's high." Jongup's chin jerked in his direction and the older man met his gaze. "I know what he sounds like. I remember."

Junhong rose from his perch on the end of the sofa. He couldn't seem to be still, rubbing his arms as though he were cold, his young face troubled.

"So...they're drugging him," Jongup said, testing out the idea. It made him want to hurt people. "Because, what? Kim thinks it'll make him give us up or something?"

"Or because it's just a game to him." Yongguk's voice was gravel. "It doesn't really matter *why*. It's happening."

"We can't afford to wait to get him out, then," Jongup said immediately. "We should use one of the trackers and make the trade, now."

Yongguk was nodding before he'd finished speaking.

"Wait, what?" Jae cut in. "No, that's--that's Plan C at *best*. Hyung--" He turned his pleading gaze on Yongguk. "We have to give Daehyun more time, we have to give *Himchan* more time; you heard what he said, he doesn't want us to do anything!"

Yongguk cut around the desk to loom over the younger man.

"You want to *wait*?" he said. It would have been less intimidating if he'd shouted. His voice was eerily soft. Youngjae set his jaw stubbornly, uncowed.

"You know I want him back safe too. But I'd rather not get *you* killed to do it. We've got like five plans in the works right now and none of them are as risky as just *handing you over* to Kim and hoping he doesn't find the tracker or just kill you on the spot. We have to trust Himchan, you know he'd--you know he'd--"

And here he stopped suddenly, head tilting to the side, a faraway look on his face as though he were listening to distant music. Junhong peered into his face and then waved a hand in front of it. He and Jongup exchanged a nonplussed look.

"Jae," Yongguk said. He looked put-out at having their argument stalled in this manner. "Jae."

Youngjae blinked back to life.

"Himchan told me once he's scared of two things," he said slowly. "Something happening to one of us, and the idea that's he'd get back into the drugs again somehow." Sorrow passed across Yongguk's face like a storm cloud and then was gone, leaving him impassive.

"That's why I need to go," he said. But the younger man shook his head.

"Let's think for a second," he said, looking around at Junhong and Jongup. "Is there anything more likely to piss Himchan *all* the way off than being forced to do something he doesn't want to do?" He seemed to be waiting on an answer.

"No," Junhong said helpfully.

"Right, and you know how good he is at turning the tables any time he's pissed off? Seriously, I don't care if he's high, he's got to be *so angry* right now."

"So what?" Jongup said.

Jae began to smile. "So I'm pretty sure he just told us how to find him."

*

It took some time and quite a bit of grumbling, but at last Yongguk thought he recalled the ramyun shop Himchan had mentioned.

"It was a long time ago--how does he remember shit like this?" he complained. Jae patted his shoulder patiently while Jongup and Junhong paced in the background.

"He's a freak," Jae agreed. "But he's *our* freak, so--try."

Yongguk sighed and buried his face in his arms on top of the desk for a beat.

Then he popped back up abruptly.

"We crossed the river," he said. "We went south. I don't know what he was talking about with the rest of it, though. We didn't go all the way to the end of the bus line, that would have taken us out of...the city..." His eyes widened as Himchan's hint hit home.

"That guy," Jae said, his tone both fond and brisk. He stood up and looked at Junhong. "Have everyone spread out south of Seoul."

The maknae departed without a word.

Jongup was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. Himchan had been of sound enough mind to give them a clue--a clue he'd known Jongup would have no way of catching unless he'd told the others. He'd trusted that he would work with them rather than go behind their backs.

"What can I do?" he asked. Youngjae and Yongguk did some silent conversing.

"Sleep," they said in unison. Yongguk gave him an arch look. "I know you didn't last night."

"I'm fine."

Youngjae let out a high incredulous noise. "You sound like Himchannie," he said, clapping him on the back. "We'll wake you if anything happens," he added.

Jongup looked at Yongguk. In truth, he was so bone-deep exhausted he felt drunk with it. But he felt a superstitious distrust of sleep, as though to let down his guard enough to pass out for a few hours would signal to the universe that Himchan wasn't important to him, and he'd pay the price.

"How much does this help?" he asked. "Knowing they're somewhere south."

The elder sighed. "It helps. We can narrow down the number of likely spots."

"What makes a spot likely?"

"Space, privacy," Youngjae ticked things off on his fingers. "There's a fair amount of gang activity in Seoul, so you have to be able to fly under the radar or else have civilians calling the cops on you all the time."

"And how do you fly under the radar?" Jongup was curious. Partly it was the desire to understand more of Himchan's world, more of Himchan himself. Partly it was the knowledge that when they got Himchan back, Jongup wasn't going to leave his orbit anytime soon. Might as well know what he was in for.

"Couple ways," Youngjae said. "You have to know your territory, like *really* know it. We're only a few kilometers from the apartment block where Yongguk and Himchan grew up. Junhong and I were more all over the place and Dae's our most recent import, but honestly, there's not a place in our territory we don't know as well as this garage. It helps.

"Then you get in with the locals. People around here know they can come to us for stuff--jobs sometimes, or if a landlord's trying to take advantage we'll pay him a little visit. Plus we're always putting some of our money into schools and community centers and stuff."

"So you guys are like--criminals with hearts of gold," Jongup said dryly.

"Honestly, I don't know how much of it is actual altruism and how much is just doing stuff that's in our own best interest," Youngjae admitted.

"Probably 40-60," Yongguk said. "But it gives us an advantage over Kim. He doesn't have territory here, no allies, no connections to the community. He's on his own. That narrows down where he could go. And knowing he's south of the city narrows it down even more." He scowled at Jongup. "Now stop stalling. Go to bed. If you're too much of a wreck when we get Himchan back, he'll blame me."

Jae pinched his leader's cheek, smiling tiredly. "'fraidy cat," he said.

"Believe it."

*

They pushed and prodded until Jongup finally collapsed on top of Himchan's bed. He barely got his shoes off, didn't bother pulling back the covers. Jae was pretty sure he was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

"Aw," he said quietly. It hadn't struck him before how *small* Jongup was. He and Himchan would have no trouble sharing a bed once the older man got back.

Well. If.

Jae waved the thought away like a gnat and Yongguk gave him a questioning look. He just shook his head and they returned soundlessly to the office.

"You should sleep, too," he said, though he knew there was no chance. Yongguk let himself drop onto the couch and he flung his arm over his eyes. "I meant in bed."

"I'm not gonna sleep," Yongguk said. He took his arm away to level Jae with a somber look. "He wouldn't if it was me."

"Yeah, well--he wouldn't sleep if things were fine, either. That's kind of the *thing* with insomnia," Jae said fairly, settling on the arm of the couch facing his hyung, elbows resting on his knees. "Hey--you're not mad at me, are you?"

Yongguk frowned. "I'm mad at everything," he said. "I *should* go. We should make that trade. We'll use one of the trackers we stole and--"

"The best tracker-bot in the world won't do us any good if Kim kills you," Jae said. "I'm not being dramatic, hyung. I haven't looked at the stuff Sleepy gave Junhong and Jongup, but I already found some shit online. Kim's kind of known for his public executions."

He hadn't wanted to say so in front of the younger men; Junhong had seen more than anyone his age ever should, but the possible choice between his two hyungs would devastate him. And for Jongup, there *was* no choice, not really. He'd taken a chance, telling them about the deal Kim had offered rather than trying to pull it off. But Jae had his doubts that he'd be able to wait too long if he knew the extent of what Kim was capable of. Jae could barely stand it himself. But sacrificing Yongguk wasn't an option, no matter how willing the elder might be.

His phone rang. He saw with relief that it was Daehyun. He showed Yongguk the screen before answering.

"How's Incheon?" he said.

"Cold," Dae complained. "*What's going on there, any news?*"

Jae filled him in on Kim's phone call and their suspicions about what was happening to Himchan. Dae was silent for a long beat.

Then he cursed enthusiastically and at great length. Jae passed the phone to Yongguk and let him listen for a minute. Yongguk passed it back.

"--choke on an entire bag of dicks!" Dae was saying. He had to stop and catch his breath and Jae darted into the space.

"Yes, yes, agreed, obviously," he said. "So now Yongguk hyung's all gung ho to march in and trade himself for Himchan and probably get himself killed in the process and I'm pretty sure Jongup's about ready to let him, so I'm really hoping you've made some progress?"

"Tell Yongguk hyung not to be crazy. Himchannie will kill him if he does that. As for progress--you know, this contact you found for me to meet? He's like twelve years old."

"What difference does it make if he's useful?" Jae said. "Uh. *Is* he useful?"

Dae hesitated. *"He showed me something,"* he said. *"And you were right about one thing--it's weird as hell."*

*

Himchan was losing his grip.

The second dose of drugs was followed too closely by a third, after the phone call. Kim knew he'd managed to tell Jongup *something*, even if he couldn't pinpoint it. He retaliated with an injection. The guard from the hallway put his knee into Himchan's broken rib to hold him down, and this time he couldn't hold in the scream. The rush of the drug to his system was a relief.

He hated himself for it.

He lay on his side in the room. The floor felt like it was shifting under him, waves under a fragile raft. He wanted nothing more than to slip under them.

He tried to picture Jongup instead, the details of his face: the tiny mole on the side of his nose, the adorably crooked set of his teeth, flashing when he smiled. He could recall the feel of his lips, so soft against his own, with insane clarity.

He was never going to see him again.

He'd thought there might be a chance, thought maybe the worst had come to pass and Kim would simply try to keep him in a drugged-out stupor until his friends found him. He was sure they'd catch onto the clue he'd dropped; he'd heard the slight fuzz of the line that indicated Jongup had his phone's speaker function activated.

But Kim had been furious, squeezing Himchan's chin in his hand, forcing him to look at him while his boulder of a bodyguard pressed Himchan's rib into his lung.

"What did you tell him?" he hissed.

"Nothing," Himchan wheezed. "You heard me, I didn't--" Then he had to take a screaming break as the boulder pressed harder.

They were going to kill him. Himchan could have probably sped things along, gotten the whole thing over with, if not for the simple facts that he didn't want his friends to find his body and he didn't want to die.

The drugs were trying to tell him that everything was fine, none of this mattered. But his breaths were accompanied by a sharp stabbing across his shoulder.

Pneumothorax, he recalled. A minor one, hopefully, but even a small puncture to the lung was dangerous.

Without moving, he scanned the room. They'd left him alone again, but the door was ajar and he could see Boulder out in the hallway.

Himchan ran a hand down his side, biting the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood when he found the rib in question.

One rib, broken. A second rib cracked, maybe. One and a half he could deal with. If he got up to three, his chest wouldn't be able to hold air as he tried to breathe and he'd suffocate.

Let's avoid that, he thought. Then, with some surprise: *I'm scared*.

There was a distance to the thought, though, for which he was grateful. Fear could make you stupid. Fear could make you dead.

If he didn't want to die. If he didn't want his friends hurt. If he couldn't fight his way out of here. If he could barely *think* clearly....

His options were limited.

There must be something he wants, something you can give him or tell him or--

It was his own thought, but it sounded like Jongup's voice, quiet but desperate, begging him to think his way out of this.

But he *hurt*, and the double dose of the drugs was doing its work, pulling him under the waves.

Sorry, Jonguppie. I don't know what to do.

He passed out.

*

Jongup woke up.

The room was both dark and unfamiliar, but there was no blissful moment of forgetfulness before reality caught up to him. He had the scent of Himchan's cologne in his nostrils. His mind had taken him through nightmares of gaping chest wounds, Himchan's blood on his hands as he tried desperately to stem to flow. Himchan's eyes, blank, empty, dead.

Then the older man would gasp to life beneath him and then they were together the way they hadn't yet been in reality, Himchan's breath hot against Jongup's mouth, his neck, his torso, a torturous downward slide, a slick of sweat-dampened skin.

Then sweat became blood and Jongup watched him die again. Around and around he went.

Awake was better.

He rolled off the bed, found the light. It was 3 am; he'd slept almost twelve hours. He felt groggy and sick to his stomach, terrified and guilty--while he'd been unconscious, who knew what Himchan might be going through.

But if they had any news, the others would have woken him.

He was grimy after too many days without a shower. He took a fast one, willing away the memory of his last cold shower at home, his awareness of Himchan on the other side of the billowing curtain.

What he wouldn't give to go back, to throw Himchan's phone against the wall before he could answer, before fucking Kim Taesong could insert himself between them. Jongup would never let Himchan leave.

Pointless daydreams. He dressed and made his way downstairs. He didn't make it as far as the office because the common area was full of people--Youngjae and Yongguk and Junhong and two women he didn't recognize.

He stopped, startled at the sudden light and energy, though everyone was mostly still. One of the women was seated in front of a laptop and Jae and Yongguk were crowded in behind her, looking at what she was doing. The other woman was leaning against the wall and stiffened visibly when Jongup appeared. Her hand drifted toward her jacket, then Yongguk said sharply, "He's one of ours." She shrugged.

Jongup didn't have time to dwell over Yongguk's sudden protective streak, because Junhong sidled over to him.

"You look better, hyung," he said gladly.

"What's going on?"

"Breakthrough, maybe. Hopefully. I was just about to wake you up." Junhong passed him his own cup of coffee and Jongup drank, for once not noticing its bitter, undoctored state. "Mina had an idea."

"See?--here," the woman at the laptop--Mina, Jongup supposed--spoke up, pointing to something on her screen. Jae nodded but Yongguk looked lost.

"What am I looking at?"

"This neighborhood is under construction, at least officially; according to local records there haven't been crews out that way in over a month. And yet we're showing power being routed

in."

Jongup sucked in a breath and Yongguk looked at him.

"Space. Privacy," Jongup said and Yongguk nodded. Hope bloomed in Jongup's chest. "When do we leave?" he asked.

*

The answer, annoyingly enough, was not *immediately*.

"Marching in there without a plan or backup'd be a pretty good way of getting yourselves killed," Mina said, then considered. "So don't rule it out or anything."

"With allies like these, who needs enemies?" Jae asked dryly.

But even Jongup could recognize the sense in Mina's words. So he sat on his hands as they planned. And he sent out a message into the universe: *Hold on Himchan. We're coming.*

*

They argued and debated and planned until dawn filtered through the blinds. Jongup felt alert in a way he knew had nothing to do with either the rest he'd gotten nor the endless cups of coffee he downed beside the others. He should have felt jittery, but he just felt *ready*, his pulse a steady thrum of *today, today, today*.

At last, though, they were all left staring around at each other in a *yep, we planned the shit out of this, so...* kind of way.

Mina and her second-in-command Soojin left. Youngjae and Junhong bookended Jongup on the couch.

"So, your acting skills, on a scale of 1 to 10," Jae prompted.

"I'll be fine."

"He'll be fine," Junhong echoed. "Look, he has the face of a thespian or whatever."

Jongup barely heard him. He was ready, but he was also fucking petrified--if he couldn't pull this off, it could be over before it started. If Kim didn't take the bait, or if he'd moved Himchan in the past twelve hours, they might not get another chance.

"We wait until Mina lets us know they're in place," Yongguk reminded them. He left the room. Junhong's leg was shaking against Jongup's. Jae reached over Jongup to still it.

"Desist, maknae."

"I'm nervous," Junhong admitted. "Waiting's hard."

This was undeniable. Jongup felt ready to vibrate out of his own skin. Instead he offered one hand to Junhong and the other to Youngjae to thumb wrestle. The men accepted the challenge without a word, and so Yongguk found the three of them locked in silent battle when he returned.

"Finest warriors in Seoul," he said dryly. Junhong offered him his free hand and he smiled slightly, taking it, beginning a thumb war of their own. "I thought you should have this back," he said, holding out a gun with his free hand to Jongup. "Hopefully you won't need it, but."

Jongup nodded, though he couldn't take it while his hands were occupied. Jae kept turning his wrist practically upside-down, which was cheating, but Jongup barely noticed. Yongguk put the gun carefully on his knee.

Finally, Mina called to tell them she was in position. It was time.

Kim's number was stored in Jongup's phone. He dialed. It rang four, five times. Shit. If he didn't answer--

He answered.

"Before my coffee, Moon?" he greeted him querulously. Jongup ignored the jibe.

"I got it I got him," he said quickly. "We have to meet now; where are we doing the exchange?"

"You have Bang Yongguk?" Kim's voice was sharp, suspicious. Fine; let him be suspicious.

"Everyone's spread thin looking for you; I finally got him alone. Where should we meet?" Jongup insisted. His voice shook; good. He sounded nervous. He *was* nervous.

"Well. I'm impressed. I'll text you the address. Be there in an hour." Kim disconnected. They all waited, then the *ping* as the text came through.

"Let's go," Yongguk said.

*

Jae drove, Jongup took shotgun, Yongguk and Junhong in the back. Junhong kept a gun pressed into his leader's side in case anyone was watching, although the mere fact of his and Jae's presence would be a dead giveaway if Kim was still having them tailed.

The address Kim had given was much closer to him than to the garage--not that it mattered. That wasn't where they were going.

Jae drove recklessly through the light early morning traffic.

"Can't let Mina and her girls have all the fun before we get there," he said.

They went over the Han River and the buildings shrank and spread out. There was a metal fence up around the housing development. They found the spot Mina had cut through. They

slipped through on foot, leaving the car behind.

It was eerie. The houses looked finished from the outside and the sun shone brightly now. The neighborhood should have been alive with children on their way to school, adults making their way to work, neighbors chatting in driveways. But all was empty, silent.

Jae had a map on his phone to take them to the area that was using power. They crept between the houses, all too aware Kim could have eyes in any of them.

Suddenly the silence cracked open with the sound of gunshots up ahead. They broke into a run. Jongup was dimly aware of Junhong and Jae peeling off to either side. He and Yongguk continued together on the most direct route. It didn't take long.

They rounded a corner and saw them, Mina and Soojin and several women Jongup didn't know, spread out, sheltered behind houses, only popping out long enough to fire on the men who'd exited one of the houses.

One of the men had to be Kim Taesong. Jongup disregarded the biggest two; he knew basic muscle when he saw it. There was another slender young man firing uselessly on the corner where Mina had retreated--but then Jongup's gaze hooked on the fourth man, older. He looked perfectly calm, even amused.

He was standing over a fifth man, crumpled to the ground. Jongup didn't need a closer look to know who it was.

"Cover me," he told Yongguk, and began to run.

He heard Yongguk firing from behind, saw the larger of the muscle men duck. The man standing over the fallen figure turned his gun on Jongup--then dove for cover as bullets pelted the place he'd been seconds before. Jongup didn't stop, even when he felt something like a jackhammer hit to the shoulder. He stumbled, almost fell, caught himself, palms scraping the ground. It was both the longest and shortest trip of his life.

Then he was on his knees beside Himchan, rolling him over into his arms.

"Himchan?"

The older man was frighteningly still and pale, but he was breathing--he was breathing--he was breathing. Jongup pressed his forehead against Himchan's and breathed with him.

"Himchan."

Shots rang out around them. His shoulder throbbed badly and he could feel a hot trickle down his back. He shifted his body so it sheltered Himchan's as much as possible.

Then, abruptly, it was over. He heard the quick pounding of footsteps growing distant. He paid them little heed, hands running over Himchan's torso and the back of his head, expecting a handful of blood any second. There was none, but the other man seemed broken in some unnamable way and his panic only grew the longer he couldn't find the injury. Himchan's breaths had a whistling undertone he could hear now that the gunfire had ceased, and he

understood that whatever was wrong was something internal, more than he could help with his own hands and pressure and will.

More footsteps, this time getting close, then Jae slid to his knees beside him.

"*Hyung*--is he--?" he panted.

"Alive." Jongup didn't spare a glance for the other man. "He needs help."

And then Yongguk was there, silent and tight-lipped, reaching for Himchan. He got an arm under him and Jongup hoisted from the other side, groaning at the weight on his wounded shoulder.

"Fuck, Jongup--here--" Jae tried to take his place but Jongup wouldn't budge.

"I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth. He nodded over Himchan's lolling head at Yongguk and together they lifted him. Jongup spared a wild glance around the street, but Kim and his men were gone.

Scratch that; the smaller of the two muscle men was heaped on the ground, the splay of his limbs nonsensical in death. Mina stood over him, gun still pointed at his temple as though he might try to rise.

Jongup hadn't seen a body since he'd killed his father, but he couldn't spare the attention to care.

"We have to get him to the hospital," he said. He'd drag him there himself if the others tried to argue. They didn't.

A beat later, there was the approaching roar of an engine, and then Junhong was there in the car, a stray corner of fencing still caught in the fender where he'd forced his way through.

"Get in," he said.

Chapter 13

There was a bullet lodged in Jongup's shoulder. Probably he would have to deal with this at some point, but at the moment he was more concerned with the man in his arms.

Himchan was stretched out on the backseat, spilling over onto Jongup and Yongguk. Jae sat in front but kept twisting around in his seat.

"Is he breathing?" he demanded. Yes, he was breathing, his heart was beating, he was alive. But something was very wrong, his complexion waxy, his breaths labored.

"Maybe we shouldn't have moved him," Jae said. "That's a thing, isn't it? What if we make it worse?"

"Too late now," Junhong said.

"We need to get them both checked out," Yongguk said, nodding at Jongup..

"I'm fine," Jongup said automatically.

"You're bleeding all over the backseat," Jae corrected. "Time to get over your fear of hospitals, Jongup-ah."

This turned out to not be a problem. By the time Junhong finally screeched to a halt, Jongup's shoulder felt like fire. It was all he could do to help pull Himchan from the car.

Things happened fast then, with doctors and nurses coming in to separate them, pulling Himchan away on a stretcher and refusing to let Jongup go with him, instead taking him through another set of doors and blocking his view with a curtain. He didn't know what happened to the others.

Things happened fast, then they happened slow as he was left to wait in simultaneous boredom, pain and anxiety. It was torture, knowing Himchan was somewhere in the building but not knowing what was happening.

Eventually, a doctor joined him behind the curtain, poured disinfectant on his wound and began the process of removing the bullet.

Jongup wished for the boredom back.

*

The next time the curtain was pushed back, Jongup flinched, but it wasn't the doctor. It was Sleepy's partner.

"Oh hey, you've been shot," she said. "Almost like you guys didn't call Sungwon for help like you were supposed to."

"Sung--what?"

She rolled her eyes. "Sleepy. I'm Lee, by the way. Gookju."

"Oh. Hi. What are you doing here?"

"The police are notified about all gunshot wounds. We happened to see your names, so--"

"Have you seen my friends?" Jongup interrupted.

It felt a little strange calling them this, but it was better than *my kind-of-hopefully-future-boyfriend-or-whatever's friends*. Besides, with Junhong it seemed to fit, and Jae was getting there. Even Yongguk was...well, decidedly not his enemy, at least.

"They're with Sungwon. He'll try to keep them out of prison, but no promises. Hell, he'll be lucky if he doesn't wind up in there with them."

Jongup winced. Yongguk hadn't hesitated to send them to his cousin for information, but he doubted very much he'd be pleased if the detective got in trouble for it.

"Does anyone else know he helped us?" he asked, meaning, *did you tell anyone*. Gookju arched an eyebrow.

"No," she said, meaning *no, you asshole*.

Something else occurred to Jongup. "My friends didn't actually do anything wrong," he pointed out. "...today..."

"We've got a body on the scene," the detective said. "If one of them--or you--killed him, that's still technically illegal, even if he deserved it."

Jongup shifted uncomfortably. The woman's expression softened.

"Don't worry, Sungwon knows about the, uh, special circumstances. He'll help if he can."

He nodded, a little afraid to ask the next part.

"And Himchan?"

It felt lonely to realize Yongguk, Jae and Junhong weren't in the hospital somewhere too. If he couldn't be by Himchan's side, he'd thought at least his friends were.

Gookju pushed back the curtain.

"I figured you'd ask," she said. "Feel up to taking a walk?"

*

Jongup's arm was in a sling, but he was mobile, if a bit wavering from the painkillers. Gookju led him through the maze of the hospital. There were rather more cops milling around than Jongup would have expected, but for once he didn't have it in him to care.

"Listen, Jongup, I'm going to need to ask you some questions, okay? You were shot; there's really no avoiding it."

Jongup's heart sank but he nodded. "Yeah, okay," he said nervously.

"We'll wait til after your drugs wear off a bit," she said. She stopped walking and nodded to one of the rooms. "I'll be around."

Jongup watched her go, took a breath and slipped inside.

Himchan lay still and silent, looking diminished and frail in a hospital gown. There was a tube snaking up his torso and going into his chest, and he had a cannula hooked under his nose.

For a long moment Jongup stood frozen at the foot of his bed, his brain unable or unwilling to process the sight. He didn't even register the woman in the room until she spoke.

"You're the one who brought him in?"

He jumped, but even in his surprise he didn't spare more than a glance for the doctor. He nodded.

"Is he...will he be all right?" he asked hoarsely.

"He has two broken ribs. One of them punctured his lung. The tube is draining the air from his pleural cavity--that's what's preventing his lungs from inflating properly." Her tone was matter-of-fact but kind. "He has the start of a nasty infection on his thigh, although antibiotics should knock it out. But he also nearly overdosed. Any more drugs in his system and he'd probably be dead now."

Jongup closed his eyes and tried to breathe. When he opened them again, the doctor was holding out a folder.

"I'd like you to take some literature on treatment programs," she said. "I'll have someone come talk to him about his options when he wakes up, but it's often helpful for a friend or loved one to be around for...encouragement."

"No, he's not--" Jongup began, then sighed. The thought of explaining it all was exhausting. He took the pamphlet. "Thanks," he said simply. She nodded, and left the room.

Jongup found himself watching the steady rise and fall of Himchan's chest and he was finally able to move around the bed to his side. He took his hand. Registered the living warmth of it. His knees gave out; he collapsed into a well-placed chair.

He wished he had both hands free; he had to let go of Himchan's hand to brush the hair away from his forehead. He touched his cheek, felt soft new stubble. Touched his lips, recalling how they felt against his own. He let out a shuddering breath and took Himchan's hand again, index finger tracing the scar on the back of it.

"Remind me to ask how you got this someday," he said. Himchan gave no sign he'd heard, but this was what you were supposed to do, wasn't it? Talk to someone in the hospital, even if they were unconscious? Or was that only for coma patients? Shit. He realized belatedly that the doctor had never actually told him if Himchan would be okay.

He could feel his thoughts beginning to spiral out of control. He missed Himchan's voice, gravelly and comforting, even--or maybe especially--when he was teasing him.

He was surprised to find himself missing the others, too: Junhong's friendly presence, Jae and Dae's bickering, even Yongguk's quiet. Surely if *they* were here, Himchan would be awake right now.

"It'd be good if you woke up before the others get here," he told Himchan. His thumb traced the other man's palm. "You don't want to freak them out, do you?"

Himchan was still. Jongup sighed and let go of his hand to move the chair as close to the bed as it could get. He drew his knees up to his chest, watched Himchan breathe. It was mesmerizing, this small comfort.

"I found my brother," he said. "Kind of. Sleepy's partner knows him. He used to work for the police. Maybe he still does; I don't know. I could track him down now, if I wanted."

He couldn't imagine what he'd do in such a reunion. Demand an explanation for Jonghwan's absence all this time--except he thought he already knew. He could apologize, maybe--except even now, he wasn't sure he was actually sorry. What kind of person did that make him? The kind who didn't deserve a family, probably. No wonder his hyung had stayed away.

He watched Himchan's chest rise and fall a few times. His eyes kept being drawn to where the tube disappeared into him. He hadn't fully registered the doctor's explanation of what it was doing, but he'd understood *preventing his lungs from inflating properly* well enough. He shuddered. If they'd waited any longer--if this hadn't worked--

"I really miss you," he said abruptly. "I swear these have been the longest few days of my life."

"Mine...too."

His eyes shot up to meet Himchan's, which were half-open and aware and looking right at him and--Jongup lurched out of his seat to hover over him.

"Himchan?" he whispered, sure that somehow he'd slipped into a dream. He reached blindly for his hand and felt the other man's grip tighten almost imperceptibly.

"Hi." Himchan's voice was hoarse, little more than a croak, but he heard it, saw the ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Hi." His voice cracked on the single word, a single word so grossly inadequate. Jongup felt like he'd burst with the joy of seeing Himchan's eyes again. They drifted down him and the elder's brows furrowed.

"You're hurt," he managed. Jongup looked down at the sling.

"I'm fine," he assured him, but Himchan's frown deepened.

"I don't remember," he said. "What happened to you?"

"I--there was some shooting when we found you," Jongup said. Himchan's eyes widened in alarm and he began to struggle, trying to sit up. "Himchan, stop--"

"You were *shot*? Let me see!" And there it was, the familiar bossy Himchan tone--far weaker than usual, but *there*. Jongup found himself smiling as he gently pressed him back down onto the bed.

"You're going to make me hurt myself," he warned, and this made Himchan go still immediately, just as he'd known it would. Jongup perched on the edge of the bed, as close as he could get to the other man without crawling on top of him. He peeled away the top of his shirt so Himchan could see the bandage.

"See? I'm fine," he said softly. Himchan reached out to touch his arm and hissed in pain. He looked down at himself, noticing the tube for the first time.

"Oh," he said.

"The doctor said you had a few broken ribs and a punctured lung."

Himchan grimaced. "Yeah, I thought so."

"And--" Jongup hesitated. "Enough drugs in your system it was almost an overdose."

Himchan wouldn't meet his eyes. He continued staring at his shoulder, something closing off in his face.

"Is everybody else okay?"

Jongup tilted his head, trying to catch his eye.

"Everyone's fine. A few scrapes from the fight is all. They'd be here now except--the cops." Himchan frowned at this and Jongup hastened to add, "Sleepy's with them, though."

Himchan just nodded. Jongup couldn't read his expression. He seemed to have retreated into himself and Jongup didn't know how to follow. He squeezed his hand.

"How do you feel?" he asked. Himchan blinked slowly a few times before answering.

"Far away," he said. Jongup leaned in and kissed his cheek, nuzzling him with his nose.

"Come back," he said quietly.

When he drew back, Himchan looked slightly more alert. He scanned Jongup's face as though trying to see through him.

"I'm so sorry you got caught up in all this," he said. "It's my fault, I never should have--"

"Don't be sorry. I'm not."

Himchan let out a shaky breath. His eyes were glassy and Jongup could practically feel his exhaustion.

"You should sleep," he said. Himchan shook his head.

"No, I--what happened with Kim? Is he in custody?"

Jongup could see what effort it took for Himchan to stay focused. No way he was going to break the news about Kim's escape to him right now.

"Sleep first, then we'll talk about everything," he said. "I promise."

*

Jongup stayed until Himchan was asleep again, and in time he slept too, curled up in the chair beside the bed. Every so often a nurse would come in, fiddle with one of the machines, tubes or bags Himchan was hooked up to, and then leave. Each time he woke, Jongup counted the rise of the other man's chest, like counting sheep, until he dozed off again.

At one point he woke up and it was getting dark outside, and Yongguk was there.

The older man stood over Himchan, hands stuffed in his pockets, a dark expression on his face.

"Hey," Jongup said quietly, sitting up. "Shit. How are you here right now, I thought--?"

Yongguk gave a start as he spoke, then sighed. "There was some dust-up between Sleepy hyung's guys and the cops south of Seoul, on account of where shit went down. They're all fighting over jurisdiction, so in the meantime--"

"You *escaped*?" Jongup was a little awed. Yongguk smiled slightly.

"Naw, they let us go for now. Someone'll be coming to round us up again soon enough, whoever takes over the case."

Jongup swore again, glancing at Himchan guiltily. So not only did Kim get away but now Himchan's best friends were probably going to get locked up.

Hell, maybe Jongup was going to get locked up.

"I was there too," he said. "Am I--?"

"Don't worry," Yongguk said. "Sleepy's got everyone scrambling after Kim now. They only care about us in the first place because of the guy Mina took out, and she's in the wind. Even if they get their hands on our guns, forensics'll show the bullets don't match."

"You've been through this a few times before," Jongup observed. Yongguk returned his attention to Himchan and grew somber again.

"Not exactly this."

Jongup nodded. He wondered if he should leave; the look on Yongguk's face struck him as deeply personal, and it felt wrong to see it.

"Where are the others?" he asked instead. Yongguk cocked his head toward the door.

"Told them to wait outside. I wanted to see him first." He traced the chest tube with one hand, not quite touching it. "What's this for?"

"He has a punctured lung." (Jongup could relate. He felt like he hadn't taken a proper breath in days.)

Yongguk's hand curled into a fist and he pressed his knuckles hard into the plastic safety rail of the hospital bed.

"He woke up for a little while," Jongup told him. "He was kind of out of it--the drugs, I guess." He stuffed his hands in his pockets, wondering if he should tell Yongguk this part, wondering if Himchan would want him to. "The doctor said he almost overdosed."

The older man let out a shaky breath and he took Himchan's hand in both of his.

"Look what happened, huh?" he said softly. Jongup wasn't sure if he was talking to him or to Himchan. "All our plans and we never saw this shit coming." He shook his head and Jongup saw a glint in his eyes. He looked down at Himchan before he could see a tear fall. "All the work he did to get himself clean and now...I was supposed to *protect* him."

Jongup laughed.

It took him a beat to realize the sound was coming from him, and his surprise cut it off cleanly. Yongguk stared at him, and his face was so startled that Jongup laughed again.

"Fuck," he sputtered. He had to sit down. Fuck, he was tired. "I'm sorry, I just--" He let out another burst of laughter. Yongguk seemed to be considering calling for help, and Jongup didn't blame him. He must look crazy. He tried again. "It's just--you were supposed to--*protect* him. So you brought him into your...gang..."

Yongguk ducked his head but Jongup saw his lips quirk before he pressed them together.

"--and people are trying to kill you guys all the time--" Jongup went on, still giggling. Yongguk's shoulders shook. Either he was laughing or Jongup had made him *cry*, which struck him as a hilarious possibility.

"When you put it like that it doesn't sound like it made much sense," the other man said, lifting his head. He *did* have tears in his eyes but his lips were still twitching and Jongup could see the shadow of the boy from the photograph in him.

The door opened and two heads poked in.

"Um. This is not what I was expecting," Jae said, taking in Jongup, still giggling and now collapsed in the chair, and Yongguk's shaking shoulders. The two looked at each other and laughed even harder.

"Hyungs?" Junhong said worriedly. "What's...happening."

Yongguk waved a hand and Jongup tamped down on his laughter.

"It's not actually funny," he explained.

"No. This is a really inappropriate response," Yongguk agreed, and laughed again. It was surprisingly high and wheezy, given his speaking voice. Jae and Junhong exchanged a glance, then the former came around the bed to stand beside Jongup and the latter put an arm around Yongguk. Each patted their respective nutcase's head supportively.

"You're on a lot of pain meds, I bet," Jae told Jongup.

"You haven't slept in like a week or something," Junhong told Yongguk. They both nodded because sure, why not, they were as good reasons as any for this. Their laughter dried up quickly after that, but somehow Jongup felt better. Everything was still terrible--except this. Himchan was *alive*. Nothing else mattered next to that.

He removed Jae's hand from the top of his head. The older man seemed not to notice, so intent was he on looking over Himchan. Across the bed, Junhong was doing the same thing, his young face anxious.

"I'm assuming you two wouldn't be laughing if he wasn't going to be all right?" Jae said, lifting his voice at the end so the statement became a question.

Yongguk swatted Junhong's hand away gently, then put an arm around him, squeezing his shoulder.

"He'll be fine," he said. "You know Himchan; he's gonna live forever."

The man in question shifted slightly on the bed, and they all froze.

"Might live longer if I could get some sleep around here," Himchan mumbled, cracking an eye open to glare around the room at his friends. There was a chorus of joyful exclamations from Junhong and Youngjae. They pressed in on either side of him.

"Hyung, you're alive! I want to hug you," Junhong said, and pouted. Himchan smiled faintly and motioned to the maknae, who leaned in. "*Hyuuung*," he complained as the older man pinched his cheek, but his dimples showed and he didn't look angry in the slightest.

"Glad you decided to stick around," Jae said, his voice oddly clipped. Jongup frowned. He couldn't see his expression, couldn't place his tone. He met Junhong's eyes across the bed and the maknae performed an exaggerated mimicry of tears. "Shut up your face, Junnie," Jae said,

and now Jongup understood why his voice sounded so thick. He hesitated, then patted his back comfortingly.

"You big softy," Himchan said hoarsely, his smile widening. His eyes found Jongup and creased at the corners in that little extra way they had that made his stomach flip pleasantly.

"I hate all of you except Jongup," Jae declared.

"What'd I do?" Yongguk protested, but his gaze was fixed on Himchan. Himchan turned to him and his smile faded.

"Bbang," he said, and frowned. "Hey, you're not on the run from the law, are you?"

"You know there's no cell can hold me."

"The almighty Bang Yongguk," Himchan muttered. His tone managed to sound both derisive and fond. "You all right?"

Yongguk gave a half shrug. His expression was complicated, relief mingled with regret, and Jongup could still detect his fury and sadness simmering beneath the surface. Himchan nodded.

"Maknaes, will you--wait, where's our Daehyunnie?" He looked around the room wildly as though the missing member of the family might be hiding in a corner, or behind Junhong. "Is he--"

"He's fine, Himchan," Jongup spoke up first. "He's--still in Incheon?" He looked to Jae for confirmation and the other man nodded.

"Yeah, we kind of need to talk about that," he said. "He thinks he's got something that might *actually* get us to Kim."

Jongup winced as Himchan stiffened.

"Kim got away?" he asked, his voice even. He looked from Yongguk to Jongup and Jongup was sure he wasn't imagining the accusation in his eyes, though he didn't know if it was for his failure to capture the asshole or for not telling him the whole truth earlier.

"For the moment," Yongguk said grimly, and Himchan turned back to him. He was sweating, Jongup noticed--and his hands were clenching into fists repeatedly at his sides. Shit. He tried to catch Yongguk's eye to communicate that this was too much, that Himchan needed to rest. But the leader's eyes were firmly fixed on his best friend. "It's only a matter of time."

Himchan snorted slightly, rubbed the bridge of his nose. He was sweating a *lot*.

"Maknaes, give us the room, okay?" he asked tiredly.

Jongup gave a start, unsure whether this was meant to include him. Jae and Junhong both headed for the door. Jongup took half a step after Jae, then Himchan caught his sleeve and he stopped, relieved.

"We'll be right outside if you need anything at all, hyung," Junhong promised.

"Coffee?" Himchan said hopefully.

"Well, no; you're probably not allowed to have *that*."

"Get out."

They left, shoving each other and bickering to hide their relief. Himchan waited until they closed the door.

"Kim," he said.

"Himchan--"

"Bbang, he's dangerous, we can't just *leave* him--"

"We're *not*." Yongguk flicked the end of Himchan's nose lightly. "Getting you back was the most important thing to start. Now you're home, we'll focus on him. *We* will. You'll, you know...do hospital stuff."

Himchan let out a huff and looked at Jongup through his eyelashes, apparently to see whose side he was on. Jongup might have been more inclined to humor him if he'd been a little less worried. He held the back of his hand to Himchan's forehead, his cheek. He was sweating but felt clammy rather than hot. Jongup frowned.

"How d'you feel?" he said. Himchan shifted in the bed a bit, grimacing.

"Fine," he said. Lied.

"Get some rest," Yongguk said firmly.

"Fine," Himchan repeated, so he much have felt terrible. "First, though--Bbang, you have to do something about your face, seriously, you're--looking at me like I'm dead and like you're planning to summon the forces of darkness to avenge me and--"

"Quite the multi-tasker, my face."

"He was actually laughing a minute before you woke up," Jongup put in helpfully. Himchan's expression turned affronted.

"Laughing? While I'm in the hospital? You could be a *little* upset--"

"Shut up, pabo, before I smother you with a pillow," Yongguk said with infinite affection.

"Yeah, yeah," Himchan muttered, disgruntled. He reached for his best friend and Yongguk leaned in. "C'mere you big dummy."

They managed a careful half-hug, Himchan smoothing the hair at the back of the other man's neck.

"It's okay," he said, so softly Jongup could only just make out the words. Yongguk nodded against him, then rose, swallowing hard.

"I need to work," he said. Himchan shook his head.

"Sleep first. You look terrible."

For once, Yongguk didn't argue.

*

Jongup stayed after the others left. Himchan was torn. On the one hand, he never wanted to let him out of his sight again.

On the other hand, looking at Jongup made Himchan almost physically ill with guilt. He didn't know which was worse: the sight of his arm in its sling, the deep circles under his eyes, the constant worry in his face as he looked at Himchan, or the naked fear in his expression when Lee Gookju came in with a uniformed policeman to take him away for questioning.

Himchan's fault, every bit.

He wanted the drugs. He wanted to care just a little less.

He understood this to be a terrible development.

It wasn't withdrawal as he'd once known it; those long-ago weeks with Bbang when his friend's presence was the only thread tethering him to life. That had been endless vomiting and violent shaking and cold sweats. He'd cursed and threatened and pleaded with Yongguk to give him just one hit, one pill to tide him over, to wean him off. But his friend never did anything he didn't want to, and his refusal to capitulate was steadfast and complete.

Himchan would never be able to thank him enough for it.

This was altogether *less*; the craving was distracting and he felt weak and clammy--but then, he had a tube in his fucking chest and an infected leg and he'd been tortured, so that might have explained some of it.

Even so, he felt *dirty* with it, the old addict's voice awakened after so long. The addict's voice promised *we'll keep it under control this time and remember how much better you used to sleep with the pills? Whole nights of uninterrupted rest; even Bbang couldn't deny you that--*

The voice was a liar. Knowing this didn't do much to shut it up.

Jongup had left with the detectives awhile ago. Himchan fidgeted, wishing he could sleep, wishing even more he knew what was happening with his friends.

With Kim. After all this, he was still out there. Himchan knew Jongup and Yongguk were beating themselves up over it, but he couldn't be upset with them. In a way, it was a good thing. It meant he still had a chance to take care of the man himself.

This idea made the addict's voice go quiet.

The door opened and Jongup returned, bringing a tidal wave of relief along with him. He brightened when his gaze met Himchan's.

"I thought you'd be asleep," he said, smiling. He perched on the edge of the bed and Himchan felt a strange mix of joy and...*unworthiness* at his proximity. It didn't matter what Jongup had done in his past; he simply exuded goodness, and Himchan felt dirty and weak beside him.

"Are you okay?" he said. If the police tried to take Jongup, he vowed he'd say anything to clear him. He wouldn't go back to jail because of Himchan.

"I think so." Jongup's smile faded. "Seems like they're still arguing over jurisdiction. But I think Yongguk's cousin is doing everything he can."

"And you didn't do anything wrong," Himchan added firmly. "No one even has to lie about that."

"Yeah. It'll be fine." Jongup brushed aside the topic, though Himchan knew it must still be troubling him. Dealing with the police could only bring back awful memories. The younger man ran a hand down Himchan's face and he flinched away--and immediately cursed himself as he saw Jongup's hurt. He began to draw back but Himchan grabbed his sleeve.

"Sorry, Jongup--ah, it's--it's not you. I just feel so disgusting--"

Jongup's expression relaxed somewhat, though Himchan could feel his tension through his shirt.

"You're fine, Himchan."

He shook his head. "I'm gonna be honest with you, okay?" He may not have had much to offer, but he had this. Jongup nodded, looking nervous again. Himchan had to swallow. "I kind of want drugs right now," he said, and Jongup froze. Himchan went on doggedly. "It's not the worst it's ever been, but--it's happening. And I'm--I don't know if this is withdrawal or if it's all in my head, but I'm--struggling, a little. I'll be fine--" He hastened to add as he saw the other man's worry. "But Jongup, you don't have to be here for this. You've already done so much more than you ever should've had to. You're off the hook. If you still want--something, anything--with me, I'll find you once I've got my head on straight."

Jongup's worried look faded so that Himchan could no longer read him. The younger man studied him.

"Is this your way of letting me down easy because you'd rather not be with me?"

"What? No, Jongup--" Himchan sputtered. How badly he wanted to be with Moon Jongup. How badly he wished he didn't have to see him this way.

"Okay." Jongup's hand was on his shoulder, holding him in place. "Then...I'm gonna be honest with you, too."

Himchan braced himself, anticipating some blow. Jongup took a breath.

"I was scared I'd never see you again," he said softly. "I was scared you were dead, and that was it, and we'd never get to figure out what...*this* could be." He waved at the air between them. "I was so scared I was gonna fuck something up and get you or one of your friends killed."

Himchan made a small comforting sound before he could catch himself. Jongup looked at him and traced the contour of his face with the tip of his finger.

"But after all that, you're lying here and you're *alive*," he said. "So...the drugs? They don't scare me. I'm not gonna disappear the first time things get rough. Not unless you want me to."

The addict's voice was drowned out. Himchan's chest felt overfilled, expansive.

"I don't," he said. Jongup not-smiled at him.

"Good." At some point he'd taken his hand again. Himchan's eyes were drawn to their linked fingers, suddenly unable to meet Jongup's eyes, which were full of something Himchan was quite sure he didn't deserve.

"Good," he agreed. Jongup raised their hands to his mouth and pressed his lips against Himchan's scar. Himchan had to swallow before he could speak. "We still need to finish things with Kim."

Jongup smiled humorlessly.

"He doesn't stand a chance."

*

Oh, there was not enough coffee in the *world*. Jonghwan couldn't remember the last time he'd been home for a real night's sleep, but tonight was the night. He dropped the thick manila folder on the captain's desk. Jung glanced up at him over his glasses.

"This better be something I want," he said.

"How about proof positive Cheng poisoned her brother?" Jonghwan offered. His boss's eyes lit up and he nodded. "Arsenic."

"Classic," Jung remarked. He thumbed through the first few pages of the report. "Where's Cheng now?"

Jonghwan cocked his head toward the hall beyond the offices. "Lockup B, spilling her guts to Park."

"Well, spank me rosy. You're into that kind of thing, right?"

"I'm into sleeping," Jonghwan corrected, grinning. "Preferably in my own bed for once."

"Ah, a man of simple pleasures I see." Jung rose and clapped Jonghwan on the shoulder. "I suppose you've earned it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just, ah--before you go, I have something--" Jung began rifling through the chaos on his desk. Jonghwan tried not to sigh too audibly. "Here." The captain held out a slim folder and Jonghwan took it with reluctance.

"What's this?"

"You had some notification set up in the system," Jung said, shrugging. "It got flagged this morning."

Jonghwan frowned and he flipped open the folder.

His eyes caught on the name at the top: *Moon Jongup*.

Everything stopped.

He scanned the page as best he could; his hand was shaking. He saw enough. Gunshot wound. A notorious Seoul gang. He swore.

Jung was watching him cannily. "Time for bed?" he asked. Jonghwan gave him a steely glare before turning on his heel to leave the office. Bed could wait.

Chapter 14

"I know, I know--tea, right?" the vendor guesses.

"Please," Jonghwan says. The man peers over the top of his sunglasses at him. He's always wearing sunglasses, even on cloudy days in the middle of winter, like today.

"Lemme ask you something," he says. Jonghwan's shoulders tense. This isn't part of the script. This is his favorite food cart not just for its location, but for the fact he isn't required to participate in small talk. Usually.

The vendor sees his hesitation. "You let me ask, tea's on the house," he offers.

He couldn't have made a better proposal; Jonghwan has to scrounge the office vending machines for spare coin every week to afford the round-trip bus ticket and a small tea. If today's tea is free, he can splurge on a coffee before work tomorrow.

"Okay..."

"You've been coming here for almost six months," the man says. "Every Tuesday, first thing."

He waits, but he hasn't asked a question yet so Jonghwan doesn't waste an answer.

"You buy your tea, go sit over there--" He points to a low stone wall behind his cart. Jonghwan's favorite spot is between two huge stone planters; they almost block him from view but he can look between them to see the bus stop across the street. "And you just stay for hours. I've seen you stay all damn day before."

Jonghwan peers around the cart at his spot. "Is that--part of your property or someth--"

"Naw, kid, fuck, you're not in trouble--I was just curious. What the hell do you sit there for?"

Jonghwan thinks. "Tuesday's my only day off," he says finally. "I like to spend it outside."

The first half is true. The man's expression says he smells the lie in the second, but he merely shakes his head and pours out Jonghwan's tea.

"To each his own," he says.

Jonghwan sits on the wall, angles himself facing the bus stop. The tea is hot enough to burn his fingers through the thin paper cup and his threadbare gloves, but he barely notices. His focus here is complete and unwavering. He's always known how to be still--a survival skill from childhood, not that it did him any good in the end.

Every time a bus comes, he sits up straighter, eyes straining, then he slumps in disappointment. He sips his tea slowly, trying to make it last.

He's lost track of how many buses it's been when he finally sees the small figure he came for.

Jongup's jacket is far too thin for the weather. He's hunched down in it, the collar tugged high, hands shoved in his pockets. Jonghwan can't see his face but he's seen him enough times by now to recognize him, even so many years older than the last time they were together.

Jonghwan doesn't like to think about the last time they were together.

He'd never been in a courtroom before, so he didn't realize at the time that an unusual number of people showed up to his brother's trial. All he knew was there were too many voices, too many cameras flashing in his face, too many strangers expressing sympathy while seeming to look right through him.

The lawyer was the worst, telling him he'd been through "an unimaginable ordeal," patting him on the shoulder but barely looking up from his papers, not answering his repeated questions: Where's my brother? Where's Jonguppie?

When they finally led Jongup in, he looked so damn small. Jonghwan saw the handcuffs around his wrists and wondered how they'd found a pair so tiny. Then he'd stopped thinking and tried to go to him, and was swarmed and stopped by grownups. By the time he stopped struggling, they'd taken Jongup out again so Jonghwan could give his testimony "unimpeded."

He was the elder, he was supposed to be the strong one, but he'd never been all that strong. He'd never had to be; he was only one-third of a whole. After Jongin left, he thought he could manage to be a half, him and Jongup against the world.

Then their father was dead and the police took Jongup away. For the first time in his life, Jonghwan was alone.

The lawyer told him to tell the truth, and he wanted to, he tried, but there were so many faces in the courtroom and he froze and he froze and he froze. Finally, his lawyer talked quietly to the judge for a few minutes. They let Jonghwan testify in private, recorded.

His testimony sent his baby brother to jail.

Jongup's been out for months now--well, "out"--he's been moved from the prison to some sort of group home. Jonghwan spotted the telltale metal shine of a tracker around his ankle once in the summer. Jongup's never alone on these bus trips, but accompanied by another boy and a stone-faced man three times his size. They never speak.

Jonghwan followed them, in the beginning. They always wind up at the food bank. The large man will wait outside, smoking cigarette after cigarette, reading. Jongup and his companion will appear hours later, somewhat sweatier and grubbier than when they arrived.

Sometimes when he sees his brother, he's covered in bruises. Once, he was on crutches. That day they stopped at a doctor's office before returning to the usual routine. Jonghwan nearly approached them that time. He wants to talk to Jongup so badly he feels starved from it. The large man's presence stops him.

His own fear stops him. He's Jongup's hyung. He was supposed to protect him. The thought that Jongup might see him and be angry--or worse, not even recognize him--paralyzes him week to week.

He tells himself it's fine to wait. Jongup's only a few months away from being released for real, and Jonghwan will be ready. He's almost done with school, and once he does he's almost guaranteed a job with the police department where he's been interning. He's got his eye on a two-bedroom apartment. He's been saving money since he got his first job at fourteen. When Jongup gets out, Jonghwan will make all this up to him. Somehow, he'll make it right.

He sits on the stone wall and watches his brother walk away.

*

Lee Gookju sounded both pleased and unsurprised to hear from Jonghwan when he called around his old unit.

"Yeah, I saw him," she said of Jongup. "Pretty sure he's still at the hospital. Officer in charge'll probably let you through, as you're family and all."

So here he was. The OIC had indeed let him through, though he was well outside his jurisdiction. The blood buzzed in Jonghwan's veins; every time he turned the corner his breath caught in anticipation. Any minute, any second now, he could run into his brother.

And then there he was.

At the other end of the long corridor, arm in a sling, talking to a much-taller boy, was Jongup.

Jonghwan's legs forgot how to walk. He slowed to a halt, staring, taking in the changes the past four years had wrought.

His brother no longer had the unfinished look of adolescence. His features were sharp, his body compact. For a second, Jonghwan forgot how to breathe.

The tall boy said something and Jongup grinned, and even from a distance Jonghwan *knew* that smile. It still lit up his baby brother's face, still made him look impossibly young. Jonghwan hadn't thought he'd ever see that smile again.

Jongup and the other boy veered down another hallway and Jonghwan hastened to follow. He closed the gap between them but didn't call out, not yet. How many times had he dreamed of this moment over the past eleven years? Would Jongup even recognize him? He'd been so *young* the last time they'd seen each other.

The boys slowed and Jonghwan slowed his pace to match. They went into one of the patient rooms. Jonghwan paused, debating, grappling with his nerves. Before he could make up his mind the tall boy came out again, calling something over his shoulder that Jonghwan couldn't quite make out.

He waited until he disappeared around the corner, then went to the doorway. From here he could see the end of the hospital bed, and that someone was in it. He couldn't see his brother.

Four years ago he'd waited, and it had cost him. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. He went inside.

Jongup sat in the chair beside the bed. He didn't immediately look around when Jonghwan came in, but the man in the bed did. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully at the sight of him, and after a beat, Jongup followed his gaze.

For a long moment, his expression was frozen.

"Hi," Jonghwan said. Jongup opened his mouth but nothing came out. The other man was looking at him with concern, and Jonghwan noticed for the first time that they were holding hands.

"Jongup?" the man murmured, and this seemed to rouse him.

"What are you doing here?" he said a bit shakily. His voice had deepened but it was still soft, still sweet. Still Jongup. Jonghwan suddenly felt stupid for ever wondering if his brother would recognize him. Up close for the first time, he could see how much they looked alike.

"I'm--I work for the police," Jonghwan explained. "I put your name in the system so if it ever came up in a report, I'd be notified. Lee Gookju told me I could probably find you here, and--she was right...obviously..." He closed his mouth with a snap. He'd thought he'd grown out of the old habit of nervous babbling--hell, he'd done interrogations, for crying out loud; if his coworkers could see him now--

Jongup didn't look as surprised by this as he'd expected. He looked at the man in the bed, who raised his eyebrows. They did some silent communication for a beat.

"Oh," Jongup said finally. "Well. This is Himchan, by the way. Himchan, this is--" He coughed slightly. "My brother. Jonghwan."

Himchan gave Jonghwan a starkly appraising look that Jonghwan barely noticed. He couldn't take his eyes off Jongup.

There was a sudden bustle from the door, and a muscular orderly pushed in.

"Hi there," he greeted the room at large. "Himchan, you ready to get that tube out of your chest?"

"I was just starting to like it," Himchan said, and the orderly laughed.

"Well, start saying your goodbyes," he said, turning away to pull a wheelchair into the room.

Jongup's attention had drawn back to Himchan. He looked suddenly anxious.

"It's a simple procedure, I'll probably be back in an hour," Himchan murmured, glancing at Jonghwan. Jongup nodded quickly. He glanced from his brother to the orderly, who was

turned away, typing something into the computer set up across from the bed. Jongup rose from his seat and kissed Himchan lightly.

"See you soon," he said.

Jonghwan's head was so full he wasn't sure he could feel proper surprise at this point. He joined his brother on the far side of the room and watched Himchan be taken out.

They were left alone, standing much closer to each other than before. Jongup wasn't quite Jonghwan's height, but he thought his shoulders might be broader.

"Hi," he said again. "Are you okay?" He motioned to the sling. Jongup looked down at it much longer than he needed to.

"Yeah," he said.

"Can we talk?"

The look Jongup gave him was wary, but he sat. Jonghwan perched on the wide window ledge, just looking at his brother, trying to see the boy he'd been. He was there, in the too-stiff set of his shoulders, even the unreadable look in his eyes. He'd always gone very blank when their father was drinking.

"Why did you put me in the system like that?" Jongup asked.

"Why do you think? I wanted to find you."

His brother's eyes narrowed. "I wasn't hiding," he said. "Especially from a cop or whatever you are. I was in the same group home for years."

"I know." Shame suffused him. "I used to... I used to watch you at the bus stop. When you went to work at the food bank?"

Jongup's brows furrowed. "You used to *watch*."

"I was afraid to come talk to you; I didn't know if that man who was always there would let me near you, or if I'd get you in trouble or something."

Jongup still looked confused. "You knew where I was," he said. "The whole time, you knew."

Jonghwan rushed to explain. "I was living on the other end of the city then, I was in school and working and--I came out as often as I could to see you. I was saving up, I wanted you to move in with me as soon as you got out."

"So, what, you--changed your mind?" Jongup said. His voice was even and his expression didn't change, but his right thumb and forefinger were wrapped around his left wrist, twisting, the way he always did when he was upset.

"Of course not." Jonghwan took a breath. He didn't want to tell him this part. "I was interning with the police department for the last few months before your release. I set up a search in the

system. For Jongin. It flagged something the week before you got out."

Jongup's spine straightened. The sudden hope in his eyes made something tear in Jonghwan's heart.

He said it fast, like ripping off the world's worst band-aid.

"He was in a car accident. Hit by a car, I mean, a drunk driver. He was on life support for five days. I was with him when he died."

Jongup reared back in his seat as though Jonghwan had struck him. His guarded expression fell, then he slouched forward and put his face to his knees, hand clutching the back of his head. Jonghwan slid off the window and crouched beside him. He didn't think, just rubbed the back of his neck and pressed his forehead to the crown of his brother's head, ignoring the tickle of his soft hair. Jongup didn't shy away from the contact. Jonghwan wasn't sure he even felt it. He was shaking.

The horrible story was almost done.

"By the time I got back, you were already out. I asked everyone I could think of, your old case worker and the guards from the group home, but no one knew where you'd gone." He could still feel the old desperation, the *disbelief*. How could it come to pass that after all these years, he'd lost both of his brothers again in the same week? "Jongup-ah, I wanted to find you more than anything, I fucking swear to God, I'm so sorry--"

Jongup's hand moved from his own hair to Jonghwan's hand, still resting on the back of his neck. He grasped it tightly.

"I thought you hated me," he said. The idea was so absurd Jonghwan almost laughed.

"How could I hate you?"

Jongup lifted his head. His expression was raw, open. "I killed Appa."

Jonghwan had long since overcome his guilt at how little he cared that his father was dead. All that mattered now was this last piece of their shattered family.

"He'd have killed both of us eventually, one way or another," he said, then hesitated. "It was my fault you went to prison. I kind of thought you hated *me*."

His brother looked bewildered. "How was it *your* fault?"

Before Jonghwan could answer, the door opened behind them and the tall boy from earlier entered. He stopped short when he took in the brothers.

"Jongup?"

Jongup straightened up and released Jonghwan's hand.

"They're taking the chest tube out now," he said. The other boy nodded, his eyes flickering between the brothers.

"Okay. Daehyun hyung's almost back. D'you think Himchan'll be up to all of us together or should we go back to the garage?"

Jonghwan didn't miss the implication that Jongup was the one to ask this question, and for the first time he remembered that kiss.

Himchan could only be Kim Himchan. Jonghwan had done his research on his train ride to Seoul, looking into just who this gang was that had ensnared his brother. Kim Himchan had a six page list of priors, though few of the charges seemed to stick. But he was believed to be second-in-command of the gang--a criminal and drug addict, according to his file. Not so much the kind of company Jonghwan wanted Jongup keeping.

The tall boy was still looking at him curiously. Jonghwan stood and held out a hand.

"I'm Moon Jonghwan," he said.

The boy didn't take his hand for a beat. When he did, it was with clear reluctance, and he let go quickly.

"You're a cop," he said, his tone going flat. So he must be another member of the gang. Jonghwan wondered which one. Surely he was too young to be Bang Yongguk. Yoo, maybe.

"Yes," he said simply. "But I'm just here for my brother." They both looked at Jongup.

"You're leaving?" the boy demanded. "Now?"

Jongup stood up. "I'm not going anywhere," he said firmly. "Himchan'll be back soon. And he'll want to see Daehyun. We should stay."

His tone was authoritative and unmistakably adult. It jarred Jonghwan as badly as the kiss, a painful reminder that he didn't know his brother at all.

Jongup glanced at him. "Junhong, just--give me a few minutes, all right?"

Junhong nodded, though he looked far from pleased as he left the brothers alone.

"So. Your friends are--interesting," Jonghwan said. Jongup glared at him, but he wasn't the only who had grown up in the last eleven years. Jonghwan hadn't been the cowering boy he once was in a very long time. "That's *Choi* Junhong, right? And before, that was Kim Himchan?"

His brother tensed at Himchan's name. "So?"

"So? Do I need to tell you about the rep sheets on these guys? Are you trying to get sent back to prison?" His worry made it come out angrier than he'd intended. His brother stiffened.

"You don't know anything about them."

"Are you sure you do?" Jonghwan countered. "I know they almost got you killed. I know groups like theirs are a fucking cancer on this city." He made himself stop, take a breath. When he found his voice again, he made it soft. "What are you doing with them, Jonguppie?"

And how long have you been doing it. His brother's name had been nowhere in the system since he was let out of prison. Jonghwan had to hope this meant that his association with the gang was new--new, and could still be broken.

Jongup flinched at his use of his nickname. His shoulders rose slightly, and suddenly he was the boy Jonghwan had watched at the bus station. He'd closed himself off, and it was Jonghwan's fault.

"I think you should go," he said quietly.

"No fucking way. Ten minutes after I found you? No way."

Jongup let out an impatient breath. "What do you want me to do?" he snapped. "I'm not turning my back on the first person to care about me in--" He broke off as if calculating. "...ever," he finished. Jonghwan's heart sank. It would have been easier if it was just the gang, but whatever his brother had going on with Himchan clearly ran deeper. So much for easily-broken ties.

"Jongup--"

"No." His brother took a step back. "No, just--give me your number or something. I need some time. I can't think about this right now."

Jonghwan wanted to protest. He wanted to grab his brother by the arm and drag him out, drag him *home* where he belonged. But Jongup wasn't a kid and he couldn't treat him like one. He took a painful breath and let it out in a sigh.

"Give me your phone," he said. "I'll put my number in."

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"Bilateral breath sounds; that's a good sign," the doctor said. Himchan hummed absently and tried not to drum his fingers impatiently on his leg.

Jongup was alone with his brother. This should not have caused Himchan so much anxiety; it was a *good* thing, surely, his hyung tracking him down. About damn time.

Except he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd get back to his room and Jongup would be gone.

"Himchan?" The doctor had clearly said his name several times. He blinked her into focus.

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Just that it says here you're refusing the pain medication before the procedure. Normally we administer an IV narcotic, morphine is com--"

"No morphine. I'll be fine."

The doctor folded her arms over her clipboard and frowned at him, not unkindly.

"I understand you nearly overdosed."

"Not by choice."

"I understand you've been through quite the ordeal."

He *itched* beneath her fucking understanding. He forced himself to breathe before he spoke. All day he'd been on a short fuse, struggling not to snap at his friends and even Jongup. He knew full well it wasn't really about them, but rather the drugs leaving his system. That was the source of his cold sweats and the nightmares that had plagued his shallow sleep. The last thing he wanted was to let the doctor pump him full of still more drugs now.

"If you really want to put me on something, make it ketorolac; otherwise I'm fine," he said. The doctor's eyebrows reached for her hairline.

"If you know the name ketorolac you know that's really more of an anti-inflammatory than a painkiller," she said. "It's not a bad alternative but this will still be very painful." She waited and Himchan did too. After a beat, she sighed. "All right. They took you through Valsalva's maneuver?"

Himchan demonstrated the breath exercise he'd need to perform while they slid the tube out of his body. The doctor nodded.

"Then let's get started."

*

It hurt, of course. Himchan tried to distract himself by going through the procedure's steps in his head, but at the end of the day they were pulling something out of his chest, and, well. It hurt like hell. Then they were putting on the bandage to prevent air from seeping back into the pleural space, and this was fine, totally fine. He managed not to cry out as they closed the sutures around the insertion site. He'd had worse.

"You should be more comfortable now," the doctor said finally, her voice slightly muffled through her mask. Himchan just nodded. He'd breathe easier when he got back to Jongup.

*

It seemed to take an age before the burly orderly was back with the wheelchair. Himchan wished he could *walk*, dammit, or run. But he was still weak, and his leg throbbed badly where they'd bandaged the infection.

A few pills would take care of that for you.

He pushed the addict's voice away. The orderly pushed him back into his room. For a moment he couldn't breathe again--it was as empty as he'd feared.

Then there was movement from the corner; Jongup had curled up on the ledge by the window, his clothes blending in with the industrial curtains. He unfurled and stood.

"How'd it go?" he asked anxiously. Himchan wanted to ask him the same question, but he stayed quiet and let the orderly give him a cheerful update as he helped Himchan back onto the bed.

"Just--I'm okay," he said, holding out a hand to stop him. He wasn't ready to lie down just yet, and instead perched on the edge of the bed. Jongup was at his side in an instant, good arm wrapping around his back.

"I've got him, thank you," he told the orderly, who took the hint.

Himchan paid no attention to his departure, instead scanning Jongup's face, which he couldn't read.

"Are you all right?" he said when they were alone. Jongup gave him a smile that looked more like a grimace. Himchan arched an eyebrow, unimpressed, and Jongup let it slip away.

"No," he said. He looked down, swallowing hard. "My. My brother's dead."

For a horrible minute Himchan looked around the room wildly for the body, before he remembered that there had been *three* Moon brothers.

"Jongin?" he recalled quietly. Jongup nodded and a tear spilled out of his eye. He tried to wipe it away on his injured shoulder and winced. "Hey," Himchan said, wiping it away for him with the pad of his thumb. Jongup's eyes were swimming and his lips were pressed together very tightly.

There was nothing Himchan could say. There was no making this better. He didn't need an explanation. He wanted to hold him, but between his ribs and Jongup's shoulder, there was no way. He took his hand instead, leaned against Jongup's good side. After a beat the younger man rested his face in the crook of Himchan's neck.

He didn't sob, but Himchan could feel the warm steady seep of tears through the fabric of his hospital gown. He rubbed circles on his back and ran his fingers through his hair, scratching gently at his scalp.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed that way before Jongup pulled carefully away, dabbing at his face with the shirt sleeve he'd pulled over his hand.

"Sorry," he said. "It's stupid, I hadn't even seen him since--"

"Don't do that. Your brother's your brother. Of course you care." Himchan took his hand and laced their fingers together. "I'm sorry about Jongin," he said.

Jongup was silent for a long time before he began to speak. He told Himchan about Jonghwan's story, the horrible chain of events that had kept them apart an extra four years.

His voice grew less mechanical and more angry as he reached the end, to his hyung's insistence that he disentangle himself from the group.

"He doesn't know anything about you," he raged.

Himchan was touched, but also doubtful.

"Sounds like he's seen my record," he pointed out fairly. "Maybe he knows more about me than you do." He tried to smile, to make it a joke, but it didn't quite work.

Jongup scowled. "That's what *he* said." He studied Himchan and Himchan held his breath, wondering if this was the moment the younger man would ask himself why he was bothering with a guy like him. "No," Jongup said finally, answering the question Himchan couldn't voice. "I know you."

He sounded very sure. Himchan fought his relief to stop himself smiling.

"Well. Can't expect a cop to be thrilled about his dongsaeng dating a gang member," he said lightly. "Or--whatever." He made a face at the word *dating*, which he was pretty sure was an idea reserved for clean-cut high school kids, not addicts with a double-digit body count to their name.

Jongup seemed to be thinking along the same lines, although knowing him he was thinking that father-killers probably made shitty boyfriends and blah blah blah. Himchan nudged his side.

"Hey," he said. "He came looking for you. He's your family. Don't be mad at him on our account, okay?" Jongup still looked guilty. "You know I don't mind being the boyfriend your brother disapproves of. Could be fun."

Jongup blinked at him a few times, then to Himchan's relief he laughed a little. "Okay. Chuseok's gonna be awkward as hell but I don't mind if you don't."

Himchan pulled him in and kissed him lightly. Jongup's smile after was stronger, realer.

"Hey, how are you?" he asked, looking down Himchan's torso.

"Fine. It's a really minor procedure," Himchan said. In truth, it still hurt where his sutures had been closed. But his head was clear; that was the important thing. "I think I'm ready to get out of here, honestly."

Jongup frowned doubtfully. "Your ribs are still broken."

"They're going to be broken for a month," Himchan said. "They can be broken at home."

For some reason this didn't seem to reassure Jongup.

"Are you in a lot of pain?"

"Nah."

"Are you lying?"

"Unconvincingly, it seems."

Jongup's frown deepened. Before he could continue the interrogation, though, there was a commotion at the door. Daehyun rushed in, followed closely by an exasperated-looking Jae.

"Hyung!"

Jongup held out a hand automatically to shield Himchan from his friend, who looked ready to tackle him.

"Broken ribs broken ribs broken *ribs*, Dae," Jae chanted. Daehyun ignored him and dodged Jongup's hand to wrap both arms around Himchan. He let them hover a few centimeters above his skin, however.

"Placeholder for a real hug, hyung," he said. "You *scared* me."

Himchan sighed. "This is very awkward, Dae." He pinched his side and Daehyun yelped, then hugged him gently around the neck. Himchan patted his back a few times, ignoring the sharp pain the action sent through his chest.

Dae released him and stepped back, looking him up and down worriedly.

"Should you be sitting up?"

"Sure. I can sit up, walk, even go to the bathroom all by myself."

"Well that's good," Daehyun said, ignoring the sarcasm. He winked at Jongup. "Nothing kills the romance faster than having to change a bedpan, am I right?"

"I think they have people whose job it is to do that, so--"

"Just ignore him, Jonguppie," Himchan said, but he couldn't help smiling at his friend. It had unsettled him, Dae being off without them. "What took you so long?"

"Passed the garage on my way back to town, just stopped to get a, uh, phone charger--"

"He means a snack," Jae said with a snort. Daehyun waved him off and pushed carefully between Jongup and Himchan, perching on the bed in the middle.

"Well I ran into Snail, wandering around like a lost kitten."

"What was he doing there? We sent everyone home," Jae said. He glanced at Himchan. "Told 'em to pull in the shoes, the whole thing--just til this shit with Kim's finished."

Himchan nodded his understanding. Yongguk was protective of every one of their people, and he wouldn't want anyone else getting hurt.

"Pull in the shoes?" Jongup repeated.

Daehyun nodded. "Yeah, you know, you hang a pair of shoes over the power line outside a house to signal you can buy--drugs there--" He faltered slightly, his gaze shifting to Himchan and away again. He cleared his throat. "Ah, anyway, we'll just close up shop for a bit--"

"If the shoes are gone, how will I know where to get my next fix?" Himchan asked.

"That's not funny," Jae and Jongup said in unison, Jongup's voice quiet and hurt-sounding, Jae's sharp. Himchan winced.

"I know, I'm sorry, just--" He nudged Daehyun. "Don't start being *careful* with me now, okay? Nothing's changed."

"That's true. Your sense of humor still sucks," Daehyun said. Some of the tension seeped away. Himchan tried to help it along, changing the subject.

"You sent Snail on his way, then?"

"Yeah, he was just bored anyway. Think he was hoping to get in on the *action*."

"He's welcome to it," Himchan grumbled. "But speaking of, I hear you've got news for us--"

Yongguk and Junhong came in. Yongguk looked more rested than the night before, the dark circles under his eyes faded, some color returned to his face.

"Why are you sitting up?" he asked Himchan in a quiet voice that would have terrified the dongsangs. Himchan rolled his eyes but scooted back, fiddling with the controls so the head of the bed rose to support him.

They settled themselves around him and Himchan found himself oddly moved.

We're all here, he thought. He'd never thought they felt incomplete before, but with Jongup things felt *right*. Whole.

He wondered how long Moon Jonghwan would let it last.

"Tell us about Incheon," Yongguk prompted Daehyun.

Daehyun had moved to the windowsill beside Jae. He sat up a little straighter as everyone's attention fell on him.

"Okay, well so we were hoping I'd find some vulnerability we could exploit," he said. "Some kid Kim had stashed away or a mistress he actually cared about or something."

Himchan glanced at Jongup to see how he'd react to this bit of cold calculation. It was an unlovely truth of the game that sometimes they had to use loved ones to press their enemies. They tried not to do it often, but it worked every time. Jongup looked back at him. He didn't look pleased but he didn't look terribly surprised, either.

"I didn't find anyone," Daehyun said. "From what I managed to get out of Jae's contact out there and the few people who'd actually talk to me, Kim's got a few guys he'll trust with the

big stuff--they're in charge of his territory in Incheon while he's up here--but it sounds like he plays them against each other so they won't think of banding together against him. No mention of family at all."

"I can't really imagine a sadist like him with family or friends, can you?" Jae mused. Daehyun nodded.

"Yeah, well--I thought I was shit out of luck; our contact wasn't giving me much at first. Then I guess he finally figured I was serious, so he showed me something. Turns out our guy Taesong has a thing for birds. And by *thing* I mean--he has an aviary, I guess that's what it's called. Raises peregrine falcons, and I guess that's where he gets his money because get this, he's got some government contract and lends his birds out to airports to kill smaller birds in the area to keep them from flying into engines."

No one spoke for a long moment.

"Is this a joke?" Himchan said finally.

"I swear to God, I saw it myself. The falcons are pretty cool, actually. He's got his most trusted people looking after them--I don't know if it's cause he actually cares about the birds or if it's because they're his steadiest source of income--the kid showed me some figures, and these government contracts are no joke."

"I'm sure he got a few contacts to go with them that didn't hurt," Yongguk murmured. Daehyun nodded.

"Exactly, there's more than a little corruption going on and he's managed to make it work for himself. He's got his hand in the pockets of half the cops and commissioners in Incheon; it's no wonder Sleepy couldn't get anywhere through official channels."

"So what do we do?" Junhong asked. "Go falcon-hunting?" He made two finger pistols and mimed shooting. "Bbang-a!"

"Bloodthirsty monkey," Jae said fondly, petting his hair.

Yongguk looked at Himchan, finger tapping his chin as he mulled this over.

"We should give it to Sleepy," Himchan said. "Make it easier for him to follow the money trail." He didn't bother to add that this could go a long way towards keeping his friends out of jail. If Sleepy could show his superiors that Yongguk and the others had given him useful information, surely they'd be able to cut a deal. That kind of thing happened all the time.

"Fuck that," Yongguk said angrily. "Kim's *ours* to take out. We'll give Sleepy what he needs to go after his people once we're finished."

Himchan huffed, which was a mistake; his chest ached. He ignored it, but his next words came out slightly breathless.

"Sounds like a good way to get yourself arrested, Bbang," he wheezed. Yongguk's face softened with worry and Jongup took a step closer, frowning. Himchan caught his breath,

frustrated. He wanted to shout at his friends, to make them stop looking at him like that; he wasn't *broken*.

A little bent, maybe.

He looked from Yongguk to Jongup, trying to communicate this without having to say it out loud. Jongup scrunched his nose at him in an expression somehow both understanding and apologetic, then turned to the others.

"I think you're both right," he said. "Kim has to pay for what he did. *We* have to make him pay."

Yongguk nodded his agreement, and Jongup hastened to add, "But we don't have to kill him to do that."

"What'd you have in mind?" Jae asked. Jongup glanced around at them. He was starting to smile.

"Something fun," he said.

Chapter 15

"We need code names," Daehyun said, because of course he did.

"We really don't," Yongguk said. "Stop hogging the binoculars."

Daehyun passed them over. "*Night vision* binocs, hyung," he corrected. He was bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet.

"What would your code name be?" Jongup asked. He ignored Yongguk's glare; behind him, Junhong ducked his head, laughing. Daehyun lit up.

"Something cool, like--like Night Falcon, or--"

Junhong and Yongguk gave identical motorboat snorts. Daehyun looked put-out.

"What? What?" he demanded.

"A little too on the nose, don't you think?" Yongguk said drily.

"I think it's good," Jongup said, trying not to smile. "You should definitely tell Jae when we get back."

Daehyun gave him a suspicious look as he tried to tell if he was joking.

"That's the signal," Yongguk said abruptly, lowering the binoculars and standing. They made quite the foursome, dressed all in black, with thick gloves and arm guards. Jongup could kind of understand Daehyun's urge to rename them. They looked like a team of assassins or something.

They'd been holed up in this abandoned building for hours awaiting sunset; now they made their silent way outside.

Well, "silent."

"What if this doesn't work?" Daehyun hissed.

"Oh, there's a really good chance we'll fail," Jongup assured him.

"*That's* the spirit," Junhong muttered.

"All of you, shut up," Yongguk said.

Their target was a tall, boarded-up building down the block. They stopped short at the base, peering up, then all jumped in unison as a figure swam out from the shadows. He was smaller even than Jongup, and looked like he'd only recently made it through puberty.

"Hey," the kid greeted Daehyun. They bumped fists quickly.

"Hey. This is my crew," Daehyun said. He gave Yongguk a distinctly challenging look. "The *Bang Avengers*."

Yongguk shook his head in despair. The kid looked unimpressed.

"Really?" he said. He didn't wait for a response, turning back to the building. "This way."

Jongup gave Daehyun's shoulder a consoling pat as they went in. Their black outfits turned gray with dust as they crawled through the cracked board on the side of the building, and any impressiveness they might have had was sweated out as they trudged up nineteen flights of stairs, a chorus of ragged breaths growing louder as they neared the top.

Jongup's shoulder ached, but at least the sling was gone. Still, he vowed to use his un-bullet-riddled side as much as possible in the event he made it to the roof without his heart just exploding.

There was an awkward shuffle as the stairs finally ran out and the five made their way in perfect blackness. Someone trod on Jongup's foot--either a dinosaur or Junhong.

"Next time we need night vision *goggles*, not binoculars," Daehyun grumbled. Then the boy threw open the door and moonlight poured in. They followed him out and Jongup blinked, gaze drawn up, up. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust enough to see the wire frame against the night sky.

"Don't look up too much," the kid said. "Unless you want falcon shit in your eyes."

They all looked down hastily, Daehyun shielding his eyes with one hand, and the boy laughed meanly. "Kidding."

"How does no one notice an aviary right in the middle of the city like this?" Yongguk asked.

"It's not like it's illegal," the kid said. "He's got all the right permits and stuff."

"You telling me Kim goes through *that* every time he needs to pick up his falcons for a job?" Yongguk said, trying to brush some of the dust off his front.

"Nah, there's a normal entrance in back with a service elevator."

The Bang Avengers (dammit, Dae) turned their glares on the boy. He shrugged.

"Thought you'd want to avoid his security cameras."

There was a sudden rush of feathers overhead and Jongup ducked instinctively.

"Oh, God," Junhong said, skimming the top of his hair with one shaky hand. "Is this safe?"

"No," the kid said impatiently. "They're birds of *prey*. That means they're dangerous." He looked at Daehyun. "Did you bring what I told you?"

Daehyun unslung his backpack and held it aloft.

"Yes," he said. "It was very gross."

The kid shrugged. "If you'd rather get your face clawed off. It'd be faster."

Preparations for this little heist had required rather more research--and more dead rats--than Jongup had predicted when he came up with the idea. He and Himchan had spent hours squashed into the same hospital bed with a laptop, prepping for tonight. Himchan had been both dubious and amused by the enterprise. Jongup knew he was anxious about them going without him, but also relieved that the risk was lower than it would have been going after Kim directly.

For his part, Jongup had been unprepared for how uncomfortable he would be leaving Himchan. If not for the fact that this whole thing had been his idea, he would have been the one staying behind with him.

Just get this done so you can get home, he told himself. He was careful not to think about the fact that *home* had become wherever Himchan happened to be.

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"How d'you think it's going?" Jae asked. He was chewing his nails again. If he were closer, Himchan would have yanked his hand away from his mouth and covered his fingers in wasabi.

"I'm trying not to think about it," he replied. Jae softened.

"I'm sure it's fine," he said quickly.

"Sorry you got stuck baby-sitting me," Himchan said. He'd been trying not to feel sorry for himself, but he'd been failing. He was unused to being left behind, basically helpless.

At least he was out of the hospital. Yongguk had wanted him to go to one of the safehouses, but Himchan refused. He was done hiding.

His chest still ached. He had to force himself to take proper breaths. By rights he should be downing painkillers like candy, as that was about all that could be done for broken ribs.

He spent a lot of his time reminding himself why pain was the preferable option.

It had helped having Jongup around. Tonight was the first time he'd left Himchan's side since he left the hospital. All week he'd been there, quick to notice if Himchan needed anything, be it a snack or sleep or for someone to pinch Daehyun when he couldn't reach.

From anyone else, the attention would have felt stifling. Himchan had never needed quite Yongguk's amount of solitude, but he'd always valued having *some*. But it was no drain to have Jongup nearby.

Himchan liked watching him watch TV; his face would grow so animated and it would make his chest ache for a wholly different reason than his ribs. He liked watching Jongup interact

with the others, to see the comfort growing, the easy camaraderie with Junhong and Jae, the way he could still intimidate Daehyun, the way he refused to be intimidated by Yongguk.

He liked it when they were alone. The first night home from the hospital after they finally said goodnight to the others and returned to Himchan's room, there was a beat as they both stared at the bed.

They'd moved at once, arranging themselves carefully on top of the covers, Jongup lying on his uninjured side against Himchan. He propped himself up on his elbow to look at his face.

"You know, when I imagined us spending the night together, this wasn't quite what I had in mind," Himchan admitted. Jongup smiled in his not-smiling way. He silently traced the lines of Himchan's face with his finger, and Himchan went still. They were both fully clothed but it was the most intimate moment he could remember.

"I never imagined anything this good," Jongup said finally, and kissed him. His lips moved softly against Himchan's and he was still touching his face and Himchan clutched his shirt in one fist to stop himself pulling Jongup over him, and for the moment it didn't matter that it hurt to breathe because he didn't need to.

In bed together, in the dark, they talked. *Jongup* talked, more than he ever had before, and Himchan didn't think he'd ever get enough of the sound of his voice. He talked about his brothers and Himchan listened, understanding he needed to unpack his grief. He didn't push or ask questions, but he knew that soon Jonghwan would be back in the picture, and he'd bring complications with him. Himchan would welcome them. Jongup deserved to have what was left of his family back.

"Budge up," Jae said. Himchan blinked up at him, torn from his reverie, then scooted over on his bed. His friend stretched out beside him.

"I'm not baby-sitting," Jae told him. "You know it'd be stupid for us to leave you alone right now."

"Yeah," Himchan agreed dryly. "Kind of like how it'd be stupid to leave a three-year-old alone."

Jae pinched him. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're very lucky to have me."

Himchan snorted. "Oh yeah?"

"Of course. You'd never get any decent snacks without me; I know all of Dae's best hiding places. Plus I'm great company. Plus...other good stuff, probably."

"Well, when you put it that way."

"I think it's a good idea. Jongup's plan. He's smart."

Himchan craned his neck to see his friend better. "That's quite the compliment coming from you."

Jae shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, I'm still the smartest guy in Seoul. But I like him. If you wanted to keep him around, I think that'd be good." His tone was blasé, almost disinterested, but Himchan knew him well enough to understand how much his words meant.

"Thanks, Jae. But it's not totally up to me."

Youngjae frowned. "You think there's a chance he doesn't want to stick around? He hasn't been able to tear himself away from you all week."

Himchan just shrugged. "I just mean it's not a simple thing."

"Why not?"

Himchan shrugged again. It hurt. He should probably stop doing that.

A shrill ringing cut through the quiet: the garage's makeshift doorbell. Jae sat up abruptly. He and Himchan exchanged a glance, then rolled opposite ways off the bed. Himchan shelved his chest pain for the moment; he'd deal with it later.

"I swear, if it's Snail *again*," Jae muttered. "He came around earlier wanting to see you; I told him you were passed out and couldn't have visitors."

"You're a true friend," Himchan said dryly.

"Wait here," the younger man said.

"Fuck that," Himchan returned. They went downstairs, Himchan grabbing a sidearm on the way. Jae motioned for him to stay back and this time he did, keeping to the shadows, gun drawn and ready should it be needed.

The sun had set hours ago but they'd turned on the bright parking lot lights, and they fell squarely on the figure outside when Jae opened the door.

"I'm looking for Himchan," Jonghwan said.

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Watching the falcons eat the rats was kind of gross, but Jongup still felt a little sorry for them as the drugs hit them and they collapsed.

"This won't kill them, right?" Yongguk said as they carefully moved the birds to the boxes they'd brought to transport them. The kid shrugged.

"Depends if you guys got the dose right," he said.

"Jae did the math on it, hyung, it's fine," Daehyun said confidently and Yongguk nodded, relieved.

"Your timing's good, anyway, but you'd better let Kim know you've got these guys right away," the kid said. "He'll especially want them back because of the fledglings."

"The what?" Junhong said.

The kid popped a thumb in the direction of a series of tall poles in the middle of the roof. Jongup could just make out the nests at the top of each.

"Babies hatched a few days ago," the kid said. Yongguk looked horrified before he remembered to smooth out his expression..

"We're bird-napping new mothers?" he hissed.

"And fathers," the kid confirmed. Yongguk turned what was probably a terrifying glare on Jongup. Thankfully it was too dark for Jongup to fully see it.

"We'll be fast," he promised. "It's more incentive for Kim to do what we want, right? Besides, they'll only be knocked out for--" He glanced at Daehyun for confirmation.

"Twelve hours," Daehyun said. "It's gonna be tight--we'll probably have to hit 'em again."

"Just try not to kill them," the boy said.

"Why are you helping us?" Jongup asked. He couldn't imagine any of Yongguk's people ever betraying him this way, although admittedly his opinion on the matter was probably skewed by the fact that his sample was made up entirely of the leader's closest friends. There must be more guys like Park out there who wouldn't hesitate to sell out to the highest bidder.

"I liked the way it was before," the kid said after a pause. "Nothing's ever enough for Kim, he's still going after new territory, and he's so fucking over the top about it. All this cloak and dagger, murder fire arson shit. Most of us just wanna work our corners and make our living, you know? Live our lives."

Jongup could relate.

They took the birds down, the trip even slower than the trip up had been. The whole time Jongup couldn't shake his disbelief that this first phase of his ridiculous plan was going so smoothly.

The hard part would come next. They would try to make an exchange--the birds for Kim's departure from Seoul. There were a few thousands ways this could go wrong, but the falcons were the best bit of leverage they'd found on Kim. He'd need them back safe and sound, particularly if the new fledglings' survival depended on it. Himchan already had Yongguk half-convinced to tell Sleepy about the arrangement rather than kill Kim as soon as he showed up.

It had been good to have something to plan for a few days. It had given Jongup something to do besides pretend he didn't see the pained look on Himchan's face when he sat up or breathed too deeply. It gave him something to do besides think about his dead hyung and his living hyung and wonder how Jonghwan and Himchan could exist in the same future.

He still couldn't quite believe Jonghwan had found him. He couldn't believe he'd wanted to.

He couldn't believe Jongin was dead.

He hadn't seen his oldest brother in so long that he'd thought he'd accepted he would never see him again, but having it confirmed left a painfully empty space inside.

But there was Jonghwan, who was adult in a way Jongup never could have imagined. He had to admit his brother's spine could never have grown so straight under the crushing pressure of their father.

But even so changed, Jonghwan was Jonghwan, right? He probably still left every cabinet open and cracked his knuckles when he was nervous. There had been a time when Jongup knew his brother's rhythms as well as his own. The thought that he might learn them again made him...hopeful.

He wondered if Jonghwan liked pancakes.

They made it out of the building. Money changed hands between Daehyun and the kid, and then they were back in the car, precious cargo on their laps as Junhong drove.

Yongguk sat beside Jongup in the backseat. He cracked the lid of his box open and poked at his birds gently. Jongup had stopped being surprised at these moments of tenderness from the leader. He was the same with his dongsaengs, one minute brusque and intimidating, the next pushing the hair out of Junhong's eyes, rubbing Jae's shoulders when he'd been hunched over his laptop too long, taking the snack out of Daehyun's hands and gently prodding him towards bed when he needed sleep.

Jongup sensed more than saw his attention towards Himchan, and understood that he was trying not to be overbearing, trying not to hover and drive him crazy.

Jongup was slightly worried that he himself might be driving Himchan crazy because he couldn't seem to drag himself away. This trip to Incheon had worried him more because he didn't like leaving Himchan's side than because he was afraid of the very real possibility that they'd be caught.

He checked on his own bird, mapped the slight rise and fall of its chest.

"I think they're okay," he told Yongguk. The leader just grunted. He felt easier to talk to distracted like this, so Jongup went on. "D'you think Kim'll go for this?"

"I think he'll know it's a trap," Yongguk said. "He's not stupid. But I also think it's the best chance we're gonna get." He smiled grimly at Jongup. "One way or another, this'll be over soon."

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Himchan poured Moon Jonghwan a soju.

"Thanks," the cop murmured. He sat on the edge of the couch cushion, which was a little difficult on such a squashy piece of furniture. Himchan didn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for him as he watched him try to get comfortable.

He looked so much like Jongup, in that funhouse mirror way of many siblings. The mole was just above his lip rather than on his nose, which was slightly wider, while his chin was sharper. The lips were almost the same. He had no way of comparing their smiles because he hadn't seen Jonghwan's.

Jae leaned in the doorway, the furthest Himchan could prod him to go. Jae in protective mode was never one for following orders.

"What brings you by?" Himchan asked. He had his suspicions, of course.

"I thought we should meet," Jonghwan said. "I actually thought my brother might be here."

There wasn't much Himchan could say to this that wouldn't be a lie or reveal more than he was willing, so he stayed quiet.

"How long have you been seeing each other?" Jonghwan asked after a beat.

Himchan wasn't quite sure what they were doing *could* be classified as *seeing each other*. Jonghwan took his hesitation as reluctance and gave an impatient huff.

"Look, you can probably guess why I'm here," he said. "I know who you are and I know what you've done and I don't want my brother near any of it."

Himchan cocked his head to the side. "Isn't this a conversation you should be having with him?"

The other man flushed a little. "I'm trying to give him time. I was hoping you'd care about him enough to see the big picture here."

Himchan would *not* get angry. "How about this picture," he said. "Jongup's been alone half his life. You don't know a fraction of what he's been through. I *do* care about him, and as long as he wants to be here, I'm not going to turn him away."

Jonghwan was frowning. As Himchan glared back, the other man's eyebrow twitched slightly, and it was so *Jongup* that he softened despite himself.

"Please don't make him choose between us," he said.

Jonghwan sighed and downed his shot of soju, collapsing back onto the couch, the slouch making him suddenly look young.

"I don't even know him," he said quietly. "I know it's my own fault, but--"

"How's it your fault?" Himchan said. "He told me what happened with Jongin--it must've been awful. Wasn't your fault."

Jonghwan shook his head. "Did he tell you it was my fault he went to prison in the first place?"

"How's that now?" Himchan said skeptically.

"I testified, and--I was such a mess, you know? They told me to tell the truth and I tried, but--I could only get out the *facts*. Every time I tried to explain what it had been like all those years, living with our father--my damn throat closed up and I couldn't get it out. So all they got was this one night, all mechanical." He met Himchan's eyes. "I got a hold of the testimony recording a few years back, and fuck. It sounds like I was scared of *Jongup*, and that wasn't what I meant at all."

He looked no older than Junhong in his misery, and for a minute Himchan was tempted to join him on the couch.

"That's not on you any more than what Jongup did was really on him," he said. "You were kids. It's not your fault there was no one looking out for you."

Jonghwan looked at him, then *really* looked at him, in an attempted-x-ray-vision kind of way.

"What do you want from my brother?" he asked.

Everything, Himchan thought.

"Anything I can get," he said.

There was a crash from downstairs. Himchan sat up straight and turned to Jae before his ribs could remind him *not so fast asshole*.

"Stay here," Jae said, disappearing back down the hall. There came another crash. Himchan met Jonghwan's eyes and it turned out they could agree on one thing at least, which was that it was safe to ignore orders from Yoo Youngjae.

They rose at once and moved towards the sounds of chaos.

*

It wasn't a terribly long drive home from Incheon, but it was long enough for Jongup to fall asleep. He woke up when they reached the safehouse where they'd be keeping the birds until they could get in touch with Kim to negotiate for their return. Jongup was almost asleep again when they turned the corner to reach the garage and pulses of red and blue washed over him.

Junhong swore enthusiastically from the driver's seat.

Fatigue forgotten, Jongup pressed against Yongguk as they both strained to see. The lot outside the garage was filled with half a dozen cop cars, lights still strobing. An ambulance was parked crookedly near the garage entrance. The metal grate had been thrown open for the first time all week.

"Hyung?" Junhong said.

"Go," Yongguk rasped. "I don't care, just--"

Junhong nodded and pulled in. They were all out of the car before he'd even turned it off. There were some police officers milling around outside when they approached the garage. Two of them came forward, arms outstretched.

"Ey, ey, you can't go in there," one barked incorrectly. Jongup ducked under his arm only to be grabbed by another cop. He could hear Daehyun explaining that they lived here, but he paid little attention. Himchan. Where was Himchan?

Someone else touched his shoulder and he whirled on them, ready to rip himself away, but it was only Yongguk.

"We *live* here," the older man told the police again, his voice cutting through the noise more decisively than Daehyun's had managed. "What happened? Our friends--"

"Oh," the cop said, his gaze drifting. Jongup followed it to the ambulance where--everything stopped as he saw the stretcher. There was a figure on it, covered in a sheet.

He was halfway across the lot to it before he even registered his own feet moving.

"Jongup!" Someone blocked his way and for a long beat he didn't recognize Jonghwan. His brother had a split lip and a bruise had already set in around his mouth.

"What the hell--" Jongup managed half of a question, relief and worry blending together.

"There was a break-in," his hyung interrupted. "It's okay, though, look--" And he pointed to another of the cop cars.

Himchan was leaning against the door, talking to one of the officers while a paramedic in blue examined his torso.

"Your friend Jae's around here somewh--there," Jonghwan was saying, but Jongup didn't take his eyes off Himchan right away, searching him for new injuries.

As if he could feel Jongup's gaze, Himchan's eyes found him across the parking lot. Jongup couldn't read his expression, but his shoulders tensed and he stood up straighter at the sight of him.

"Kim must have sent them," Yongguk practically growled, making Jongup jump. He hadn't realized he was still behind him.

"I don't know who they were," Jonghwan said. He glanced behind him at the figure on the stretcher. "The first one got away but this one was Himchan's handiwork."

"Is he in trouble?" Jongup demanded. If they tried to take him away now--

"Don't worry, Jonguppie, I'm a witness--it was self-defense," his brother said. Jongup looked at Himchan again. It was true he wasn't handcuffed; that was something.

Except as he watched, the officer Himchan was talking to opened the back door to his car and motioned for Himchan to get in. He cast one final look at Jongup and ducked inside.

"*Hyung*," Jongup said sharply. His brother nodded.

"I'll meet him at the station. It's normal procedure, they'll need to ask him and Jae some questions--me too, actually. I'll be in touch."

He strode away, leaving Jongup with Yongguk to watch the police car holding Himchan as it pulled out of the lot.

He was getting very fucking tired of people taking Himchan away.

"What the hell do we do now?" he asked.

*

Himchan had been questioned by the police enough times he had a favorite interrogation room. The first one always ran the AC too high while the one beside it was hopelessly stuffy and made him sweat in a guilty-looking way whenever they used it. The one across the hall was just right.

They took him to the cold one and left him to shiver.

The interrogation rooms were fitted with cameras, one he could see and one he couldn't. He didn't know if the second was running, so he tried not to fidget.

It had happened fast. Kim's thug had known they would hear him break in and he moved quickly. He was already halfway across the garage by the time Jae got to the top of the stairs, was firing shots by the time Himchan and Jonghwan joined him.

There were guns stashed all around the garage and it was the work of a minute for the three of them to arm themselves. Unfortunately there were also plenty of cars for Kim's man to hide behind.

Jae went in first, Jonghwan close behind. Himchan held his position at the top of the stairs to provide cover fire, which would have worked out great if not for the second man who'd snuck in the back entrance and come up behind him.

The door opened and a cop stepped inside.

"So, *you're* having quite the week," Sleepy observed.

Himchan ignored his tone. "Did they bring Jae in?"

Sleepy took the seat across from him. "And Moon Jonghwan," he confirmed. "You wanna tell me what a cop from Yongin was doing in your garage tonight?"

"Why don't you ask him? Something tells me you'd trust his answers more than mine."

Sleepy gave him a stony look.

"When his brother runs with you guys now? Remember I'm not one of those idiots who doesn't believe in corrupt police."

Himchan snorted. "Ease up on the gas there, Detective. He was just there to chew me out because I'm...kind of involved with his brother."

Sleepy blinked.

"You're...*involved* with Moon Jongup," he said.

"That doesn't need to go in your report."

"Yeah, try again. His cop brother was there at the scene of a killing. It's going in my report."

"Do I need my lawyer here for this?" Himchan asked.

"That's up to you. There are clear signs that this was a break-in, and that you and Jae and Moon were defending yourselves. Now, the fact that we've got a body on the scene is a problem. Your gun permit's up to date, I hope?"

"Of course." They operated very much outside of the law in many matters, but he and Yongguk had always agreed that it was best to toe the line wherever possible. As such, they all had current gun permits and some legally registered weapons.

"That helps. Walk me through what happened."

*

He was back in the police station, but Jongup barely noticed. His leg jittered anxiously, and he was pretty sure his tongue was bleeding from biting it so hard.

In contrast, Yongguk was a solid, unmoving presence at his side. Daehyun and Junhong had stayed behind to clear up the mess at the garage.

"You freak out very quietly," Yongguk said. Jongup jumped.

"Uh?"

"It's kind of refreshing. I'm so used to Jae and Daehyun and Himchan."

"Himchan freaks out loudly?"

"When he's with the other two, he insists on matching them decibel for decibel." He gave Jongup a sideways look. "You're not what I expected for him."

"You still wanna scare me off?" Jongup asked. Yongguk smiled slightly.

"I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Wouldn't work anyway."

"That's why I don't need to try."

The door they'd both been staring holes in opened and Jonghwan came out with Gookju. She nodded at Jongup and clapped his brother on the shoulder before retreating back the way she'd come. Jonghwan took the seat beside Jongup.

"Are you okay?" Jongup asked, twisting to see his brother's face. It looked even worse than it had two hours ago, the bruise purpling and spreading yellow tendrils down his chin.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Jonghwan said, smiling at him tiredly. "I think they should be done with your friends soon."

He didn't sound especially worried and Jongup let himself relax a bit. Jonghwan leaned around him to look at Yongguk.

"You mind giving me a minute with my brother?"

Yongguk gave him a dead-eyed glare and looked slowly around the police station foyer as if to ask where he was going to go. Jonghwan pointed at a narrow corridor beside the door.

"Vending machines that way. You look thirsty."

His tone brooked no refusal. Yongguk smirked but glanced at Jongup, who gave him an apologetic look. Without a word, Yongguk rose and disappeared down the hallway, searching his pockets for change.

Jongup turned on his hyung. "What were you doing there?" he asked quietly.

"I went to talk to Himchan." Jonghwan met his eyes squarely. "I wanted to...I don't know. Get some sense of him beyond his record."

"And?" Jongup didn't want to care about the answer. It mattered what *he* thought about Himchan, not his brother.

But now, faced with his hyung again, Jongup cared. He cared so much it hurt.

"He's--very decent, isn't he," Jonghwan said slowly. "He cares about *you* a ton."

Jongup felt himself flush, but he didn't try to deny it.

"I care about him too."

"And are you...part of the gang, or--?"

"No," Jongup said, though some part of him had to wonder whether this was still strictly true. He explained briefly how he'd met the group, how Himchan had shown up at his diner, how they'd become friends.

"That's nice," Jonghwan said a bit grudgingly.

"He was someone to talk to," Jongup agreed. Someone to talk to, something to look forward to. Those days at the diner felt so distant now. Things had been so simple then.

"Look, I'm not gonna try to tell you what to do," Jonghwan said. "It's your life, I just--I don't want you to get hurt." He glanced at Jongup's shoulder. "...again."

The door to the back opened again, this time discharging Jae, Sleepy, and Himchan. Jongup stood up quickly.

"I won't get hurt," he murmured.

Himchan looked exhausted and his limp had grown more pronounced. Jongup wanted nothing more than to pull him into his arms, breathe in that space in the crook of his neck. But this wasn't the place.

"Hey," Himchan greeted him. His eyes creased in the corner, his precursor to a smile. "You didn't have to wait."

"Course I waited. We. Yongguk's here too--" Jongup glanced at the other corridor in time to see the older man emerge, brightly colored can of energy drink clutched loosely in his hand. He sped up at the sight of his friends.

"Are you all right?" he demanded. His hand went to the welt on Jae's cheek and he scowled at it. Jongup had no doubt that if wounds were capable of being frightened off, Yongguk's glare would do the trick.

"Fine," Himchan said shortly. He was frowning now too, at Yongguk. "You didn't need to come."

"Aw, don't worry Channie, we don't arrest criminals *just* for walking through the door," Sleepy drawled. Yongguk turned his attention on his cousin for the first time. Jongup could feel the dislike crackle in the air between them.

"I seem to remember being handcuffed for less," Yongguk said.

Sleepy inhaled in indignation but Jae interjected before he could respond.

"Hey so it's super late and we were shot at a lot and that always puts me in a *mood*, you know? Like--the mood *not* to watch the millionth round in the oldest grudge match in history?"

Yongguk turned his glare on his dongsaeng. Jae took half a step back and his hand went to the bruise on his cheek.

"Ow, hyung, my face hurts," he said in a small voice. Jongup met Himchan's eyes and they both ducked their heads to keep from laughing. Jongup chanced a glance at Yongguk in time to see amusement soften his expression.

"Yah, okay, pabo," he muttered, cuffing him lightly on the chin. Jae's face turned self-satisfied in an instant. Yongguk looked at Sleepy. "Are they free to go or what?"

*

Jonghwan drove Jongup back behind Yongguk's car. He'd been torn between him and Himchan, but the latter nudged him toward his brother.

"I'll see you at home," he said quietly.

Jongup made Jonghwan tell him the whole story in detail on the way back.

"This Kim guy's really got it in for you guys, huh?" he said. "Your friends can handle themselves, but--maybe you should come stay with me for awhile."

Jongup winced. He understood why his brother was offering, but he didn't think he'd be able to take a proper breath until he was in his room with Himchan and could finally touch him.

"I'm safe enough with the others," he said. "I mean--thanks, though."

Jonghwan didn't look surprised. He made no move to get out of the car when he pulled into the lot outside the garage. "Well," he said. "Offer's on the table, okay? I...could use a roommate. If you ever wanted."

Yes, Jongup thought before he could think, if that made sense. It was what he'd daydreamed about for all those years in prison.

Of course, that had been before he knew there could be anyone like Himchan.

"I'll think about it," he said.

Chapter 16

Daehyun and Junhong had the garage more or less clean when the others returned, but Jongup could see the hints of destruction in the neat piles of broken glass that had been swept off to the side, in the shattered windows of one of the cars, in the newly pockmarked wall at the top of the stairs. He shuddered to think of Himchan, Jae and Jonghwan in the path of the bullets.

The group gathered in the common room, passing around a few bottles of soju while Jae told the story of the break-in and Daehyun told the story of the bird-napping.

Himchan was very quiet. Jongup couldn't make sense of the fact that he'd killed someone tonight. He believed it had been self-defense, but how much did that really help? He wanted to pull Himchan back to their room, but he could see him taking comfort in his friends' presence. He wouldn't be the one to take him away.

In time, though, they were all yawning more than they were talking. When a massive one split Daehyun's face in the middle of his sentence, Himchan ruffled his hair.

"All right, that's enough," he declared, pushing his friend to stand. "Bed, all of you. We need to be awake if we're gonna outsmart Kim tomorrow."

The grumbles were half-hearted at best. Jongup waited in the doorway and watched Himchan and Yongguk talk in low voices for a moment. They looked very serious, but then Himchan mimed strangling Yongguk and the leader smiled, holding both hands up in surrender.

Himchan joined Jongup, sliding a warm hand between his shoulder blades and nudging him down the hall.

As soon as he closed the door behind them, Jongup slid his arms carefully around the other man. Himchan lowered his face to the crook of his neck and wrapped his arms around his waist.

"And *you* said I was being paranoid," Jongup muttered into his shoulder, recalling his worries about leaving Himchan at the garage when they went to Incheon. He felt Himchan laugh a little.

"I admit my mistake," he said. "*Fuck* I'm glad you're back."

He straightened up and Jongup kissed him. He had to go up slightly on tip-toe to reach, but Himchan's arms were still around him, pulling him in. He was careful, ever conscious of Himchan's ribs, painfully aware that he couldn't crush the other man to him the way he wanted. Instead he kissed him lightly, tugging his lower lip gently between his teeth. Himchan tasted like soju and smelled faintly of smoke. He inhaled sharply when Jongup bit down on his lip, and then he was deepening the kiss, one hand slipping under Jongup's shirt and running up his back, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

Jongup's hands went to Himchan's shirt, undoing the buttons insistently.

This is stupid be careful you're gonna hurt him you idiot his brain tried to remind him, but Himchan wasn't stopping and Himchan was *alive* and Jongup wouldn't, couldn't stop. He pushed the shirt carefully off his shoulders, still marveling that he was allowed to do this, that he was allowed to touch him. Himchan let him go long enough to slide his shirt all the way off, and then he was holding Jongup's face in both hands.

They parted long enough to breathe. Himchan was smiling and his smile was Jongup's favorite thing, it was better than pancakes or not being in prison or--

A shadow caught his eye and he glanced down. A series of fresh bruises mottled Himchan's torso. Jongup swore and pulled back to get a better look.

"The paramedics checked me out. Apparently I have some broken ribs," Himchan said dryly. He ran a thumb along Jongup's jaw and to his chin, lifting it gently so he looked up at him. "I'm *fine*."

Jongup shook his head, furious at himself. "I should have been here."

"I'm glad you weren't." His eyes snapped back up to meet Himchan's solemn gaze. "I'm starting to think you should go stay with your brother for awhile," he said. Jongup stiffened.

"Did he talk to you about that?" he demanded.

"He wants you safe. That's all I want too."

Jongup sighed and released him. "I don't want to fight." He kicked off his shoes and collapsed onto the bed. Himchan followed suit, albeit more carefully. He couldn't quite hide his pained grimace as he stretched out. Jongup winced in sympathy.

"There's not--you can't take *anything* for the pain?" he asked hesitantly.

"Aspirin doesn't really cut it in this case," Himchan said. "And don't change the subject." Jongup rolled his eyes at this side-step around the drug issue. Himchan still refused to talk about it, refused to complain, although his face often gave him away. Jongup had done some research online and knew how painful broken ribs were supposed to be. Hell, he'd been in near agony with just a *cracked* one. But Himchan had already tried to send him away rather than let him see any hint of his addiction. Jongup was afraid of pushing him too hard.

"I forget what we were talking about," he said. Himchan pursed his lips. His hand found Jongup's and he traced the lines on his palm.

"You already got shot because of me," he said.

"Shut up; that wasn't your fault."

Himchan scrunched his nose at him. "It *literally* was."

Jongup knew they could go back and forth on this issue all night. He let it go.

"We're gonna get Kim Taesong," he said with more confidence than he felt. "Once he's gone, everything'll be fine."

(He just had to figure out his future and how he fit into Himchan's group and life and how to reconnect with Jonghwan and see whether Kyung had just completely written him off for being incommunicado for a week and--)

Himchan tapped his forehead gently. "Lot of deep thoughts for this hour," he said, his voice quiet.

Jongup felt himself sink into that voice (that *voice*) and relax slightly. He snuggled against the other man, careful not to jostle him. He traced the outlines of the bruises. Himchan didn't shy away from his touch, trusting him not to press too hard.

"You could have died tonight. Is that--is it like this a lot?" He'd hoped it was just Kim, that all this was an aberration. But Himchan barely seemed shaken by it, and Jongup couldn't help but wonder how many times he'd almost been killed. And how many times he'd had to kill to prevent it.

Himchan didn't answer right away. "Not...exactly like this, but...kind of. Sometimes." He watched Jongup closely. "It's okay if it's too much. I'd understand."

Jongup nipped at his finger. He was sure he'd rather have too much with Himchan than get used to never having enough without him, but he felt too shy to say so.

"I want to be here," he said instead. He rested his cheek on the pillow, still watching Himchan. Himchan craned his neck to watch him back. He didn't look surprised or disbelieving, so that was something.

"I want you here," he said. "You should spend time with Jonghwan, though. You need to get to know each other again."

Jongup nodded. "He asked me to move in with him," he said. "But he doesn't live in Seoul, so."

"He's not so far."

"He's far from *you*." Jongup's eyes kept drawing back to those new bruises.

"Well. If you ever want to go, we'll figure it out." Himchan wrapped his hand around Jongup's. "But you don't have to decide anything right now." His voice soothed Jongup, his very nearness soothed Jongup. "You should sleep."

"*You* should sleep."

"Do we have to draw straws or can we both sleep?" Himchan asked, grinning lopsidedly. Jongup wanted to kiss the smile right off his face, so he did. There was little of the heat from earlier, the intent cooled, but he still felt it straight through to his toes.

There would be time for more later.

*

Himchan's insomnia hadn't disappeared when he started sleeping next to Moon Jongup, but now he stayed in bed, fucking around with his phone or watching the younger man sleep, in what he hoped was a not-creepy way.

Or, okay, he *tried* to stay in bed. He meant to stay in bed. But his chest ached miserably and Jongup's innocent question reverberated through his mind: *You can't take anything for the pain?*

No. He couldn't take anything he couldn't take anything *stop thinking about it* he couldn't take anything.

He tried to think about other things, but everything was a mess and it wasn't any better to wonder what else Kim might have planned for them or to contemplate the fact that he'd killed someone a few hours before or to imagine how much safer and better off Jongup would be if he went to live with his brother and never saw Himchan again. It wasn't better to wonder how they might get out of this Kim business alive without getting locked up for it, not when he was *still* one step ahead--

He stopped as something occurred to him. He sat up, careful not to disturb Jongup.

Son of a bitch.

*

Himchan rapped lightly on the door. Nothing. He knocked louder, glancing behind him at the still, dark neighborhood. He'd managed to leave the garage without waking Jongup or the others. He'd left a note on the pillow in case Jongup should wake, but he didn't think he would. He'd told him a few times what a light sleeper he was, and Himchan had no doubt this had been true while he was in prison and the group home. But he'd been gratified to find how deeply Jongup slept in his bed. It took no fewer than three kisses to rouse him in the morning, as he'd found with some pleasant trial and error.

He heard shuffling footsteps from inside and he readied himself. The door opened to reveal the house's bleary-eyed occupant. Himchan only paused long enough to identify the other man, and then he was pushing him back inside with one hand on his throat and a gun pressed to his gut. He kicked the door shut behind him.

"Himch--ow, hyung, what are you doing?" Snail cried as Himchan slammed him against the wall. The impact jarred Himchan's ribs and he gritted his teeth against the pain.

"Is anyone else here?"

"Why, what's going--" Snail tried to ask, then let out a groan as Himchan dug the gun into the soft spot of his belly.

"Is anyone else here." He didn't raise his voice. The younger man shook his head, eyes wide and fearful.

"No."

Himchan nodded and loosened his grip on Snail's neck. He listened to the house, for any sign he was lying, but all was quiet. This was some small bit of luck, then. He didn't want to involve anyone else.

"You sold us out, Snail," he said. He felt the boy's breath catch, and then a horrible look of resignation crossed his face. Himchan's tiny flicker of hope puffed out. He'd wanted to be wrong.

"I never meant to--"

Even with two broken ribs, Himchan was fast. He brought the gun up and smashed the barrel into Snail's face. A quick hit; he heard his nose break even through his scream. He let the boy drop to the floor, blood pouring through his hands. He knelt in front of him and watched dispassionately as the blue carpet was stained maroon.

"I didn't want to tell them anything," Snail said. Kind of; his words were thick and distorted with blood, and Himchan could only just make them out. "They jumped me, man, you saw what they did!" He motioned to his stomach where Himchan knew he still bore the scars of Kim's phone number with the crooked smile beneath. "They said if I didn't help them they'd kill me and let you find my body. What would you have done?"

"I'd have told us the truth after. We would have protected you," Himchan said, and struck him again. Snail's head snapped to the side and hit the wall hard. He collapsed further, gasping.

"*Instead*, you watched us. You told him how we work." (A punch to Snail's back, right over his kidneys. He screamed.) "You told him personal details. Nicknames. *Friends*." He stood and kicked Snail in the gut, flipping him onto his back. His face was a ruin, though Himchan knew that was just the usual torrent that came with a broken nose. "You told him it was just me and Jae at the garage last night, and he sent his men after us."

Snail held out both hands to Himchan.

"P-please," he stammered weakly. "Please hyung, don't--"

Himchan knelt again and Snail shied away.

"Look at me."

Snail took his hands away from his face and met Himchan's eyes with his tear-filled ones. Himchan pointed his gun at him.

"You need to leave Seoul," he said. Confusion crossed the boy's face. "Do you understand what Bang will do when he finds out what you did?"

For all Yongguk's deep-seeded pacifism, he hadn't risen to his position without being able to do what was needed. And Himchan knew that in this case, after what Kim had done to him, Yongguk would take his time working his rage issues out on Snail, and still have plenty

leftover to dole out to Kim Taesong himself. The latter Himchan might allow. But this one was his.

"He'd kill m-me," Snail said. Himchan nodded.

"Slowly," he agreed. "Loyalty was about the only thing you had going for you, Snail. Bad idea to piss that away." He stood, tucking the gun away in his jacket, feeling the fresh twinges of pain in his chest. *Not yet, not yet, not yet.*

"Where am I supposed to go?" Snail said, pushing himself up a little. He'd given up trying to stem the flow of blood and the front of his shirt was soaked.

"I don't care," Himchan said. "But make it fast. If you want to live? You'd better get yourself someplace Yongguk won't ever find you."

*

He drove back to the garage. The adrenaline had faded and the events from the evening finally caught up to him. By the time he made it home, he was in so much pain that he could only sit in his car in the lot, trying to breathe. When he reached for the door handle, the movement shot a spike so sharp through his chest that he cried out. For a long time, he couldn't catch his breath and he thought *that's it, then.*

But the thought of dying alone in a parking lot with his friends sleeping fifty meters away was too pathetic. He managed a shuddering, agonized breath, and then another.

His phone was within reach. He looked at it for a long time, fighting his humiliation, before he dialed.

"Wha?"

"I...think I need help."

"Channie? Where are you?"

"Just outside."

Jae was there fast, wrapped in an enormous hoodie. He had a gun, but he stashed it when he got a good look at Himchan, wrenching the car door open.

"Hyung, what happened? What are you doing out here?" he demanded, crouching beside the car. He looked Himchan over worriedly.

Himchan told him about Snail, his own realization of just how Kim had known so damned much about them. Jae gaped, then glowered.

"That *fuck*," he spat. "I can't believe you didn't kill him. Were you saving him for Yongguk hyung?"

Himchan shook his head, told him the rest, his order to the younger man to get out of town.

"Why?" Jae asked quietly. "You could have died, hyung, and it would've been his fault."

Himchan just shook his head shortly. Talking hurt. Everything hurt.

"I don't think I can--" he managed, trying to turn in his seat to get out of the car. He stopped short, gasping. Youngjae held out a hand anxiously.

"Shit, stop, stop," he said. Himchan tried to smile.

"Now you--see why I called."

"Let me go get Yon--"

"No."

Jae had started to rise but now he ducked again.

"It's not that I don't appreciate your faith in my muscles, hyung, but I'm gonna need some help getting you inside," he said. "Jongup, then."

Himchan slumped miserably in his seat. Maybe this wasn't such a terrible place to spend the night. Maybe by morning he'd feel up to moving and Jongup would never have to know he'd left at all.

Jae gave him a warning look. "Get those dumbass thoughts out of your head," he said. "You know he'll be pissed if he wakes up tomorrow to find you all paralyzed or whatever and you didn't bother to get him--"

"Okay, God, just--" Himchan couldn't manage more than a defeated nod towards the garage. Jae paused.

"It'll be fine," he said. "Promise." Then he was up and jogging away. Himchan considered calling him back, having him grab Daehyun or Junhong instead. But he knew he was right. Jongup would be furious--or worse, hurt--if Himchan tried to hide this from him.

It wasn't long before Jae returned, Jongup close behind. For an odd moment, Himchan wondered how Jae had figured out his three-kisses technique and he almost laughed. But the dark look on Jongup's face wiped out even his exhausted amusement.

The younger man leaned into the car, looking him over swiftly. Himchan saw his eyes catch on his hand--or rather, the blood that had dried into his knuckles.

Jae crowded in beside Jongup.

"Okay," he said briskly. "I hate to say it, but this is gonna hurt."

*

He was right. Himchan did his best to swallow his gasp as Jongup got under his arm and boosted him from the car. Jae was at his other side a beat later, and between them they

managed to get Himchan inside. The *walk, just fucking walk* orders his brain was sending his legs kept getting lost somewhere around his midsection. He missed every other step, but the others didn't let him fall.

They had to stop inside for a long moment as Himchan forced himself to breathe. This was where painkillers would have really come in handy. He knew technically he *could* breathe; his lungs were healing. Except every time they expanded, he felt it in his damn ribs so sharply that holding his breath seemed like the nicer option.

"Himchan?" Jongup looked horribly worried, but Himchan couldn't spare the breath to reassure him. He just nodded and forced himself to stand. Jongup and Jae propped him up and without further discussion, they made it upstairs. By the time Himchan spread out gingerly on his bed, he felt like he'd been through battle.

Jongup perched beside him and Jae disappeared--probably blabbing to Yongguk after all, but Himchan no longer cared. He pressed a hand to his chest and made himself breathe, and breathe, and breathe.

Jongup put his hand over his and watched him anxiously.

"Sorry--to wake you," Himchan said when he could.

"Don't be stupid," Jongup said. "Where'd you go?"

"Just had--something to take care of."

"Had *what* to take care of?"

Himchan sighed, then regretted it. If he ever healed, he was never taking breathing for granted again. Just watching the steady rise and fall of Jongup's chest made him jealous.

"I figured out...who sold us out to Kim," he wheezed. Jongup's eyes widened but then Jae was back.

He had a pill bottle in his hand.

"Okay, hear me out," he said. Himchan tried to back away but it didn't work so well lying in bed and all he managed to do was shuffle sideways a little.

"No," he said. Jae came around to the other side of the bed and sat so Himchan was sandwiched between him and Jongup.

"You probably aggravated your injuries doing whatever it was you did to Snail," Jae said firmly. "Either we're taking you back to the hospital right now--"

"They wouldn't be able to do anything."

"--or you're taking two of these." He held up the bottle for Himchan to see. He recognized the basic muscle relaxers he'd given Jongup months ago. "C'mon, hyung, you always say it doesn't bother you to have these around."

"That was before," Himchan said, looking away. Before he'd gotten drugs back in his system, before he'd started craving them again. He knew where this particular path led and he was in no hurry to go down it again.

"Nothing's changed," Jae insisted. "And even if you did want to--you know--we wouldn't let you."

Himchan glanced at Jongup. He was biting his lip and staring at the bottle in Jae's hand.

Jae kept talking, because he was Jae. "Plus I did some research and the internet says it can actually be dangerous *not* to take any kind of painkillers with broken ribs because it's that much harder for you to breathe when it hurts so bad--"

"Never get medical advice from the internet, Jae."

"I'm just saying--"

"What's going on?"

They all jumped a little at the new voice. Yongguk stood in the doorway, looking young and rumpled in a giant t-shirt and pajama pants. Himchan closed his eyes, cursing silently. When he opened them again, his best friend stood next to the bed, glaring down at him.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Himchan lied immediately. "Go back to sleep. Actually, you *are* asleep. This is just a dream."

"Shut up, asshole, I'm not talking to you." Yongguk looked expectantly between Jae and Jongup. Jae explained quickly about Snail and Yongguk's expression turned murderous.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded, apparently having gotten over his not-talking-to-Himchan thing.

"Just trying to avoid you killing him and making everything worse," Himchan said. "You know even Sleepy couldn't make that one go away."

"Assuming I get caught," Yongguk shot back. Himchan rolled his eyes, pleased to find he could at least do that much without pain.

"I'm trying to convince him to take a few of these so he's not in fucking agony anymore," Jae interjected, holding out the bottle for Yongguk to see. He took it and turned it over in his hands, then looked down at Himchan. His scowl faded.

"How bad?"

"I'm *fine*," Himchan wheezed, too emphatically, and winced. Yongguk shook his head, then looked at Jongup and held out the pill bottle. Jongup hesitated, then took it. Yongguk turned to Jae.

"Get back to bed," he said. Jae made as if to protest. "Go on, now."

The younger man relented, patting Himchan's shoulder gently before leaving. Yongguk took his place. Himchan shifted uncomfortably, unable to look at either man flanking him.

"You are twelve kinds of stupid," Yongguk said, not without affection. "Take the pills, Channie."

Himchan shook his head mutely.

His friend sighed. "You know perfectly well these are fine," he said. "Know how I know? 'Cause you fucking *told* me so, three years ago. Remember? After that car wreck with Junnie?"

"I'd been clean two years then," Himchan said. "Right now I haven't even been clean two *weeks*."

"This wasn't a relapse," Jongup said quietly. "Wasn't your fault."

Himchan grimaced. *Not his fault* was a slippery slope, in his experience.

But he also knew they were right. His lungs wouldn't properly heal if he couldn't breathe normally because of the pain. Plus the whole "constant agony" thing.

"Two," he said finally. "Then take them away. I won't need another dose for at *least* twelve hours, understand?" He looked at Yongguk and his friend nodded.

They brought him water and he downed the pills. For a scary second he thought they'd come up again, so absolute was his dread at where this might lead. Then he looked at Jongup, who managed to look both anxious and relieved, and his stomach settled.

Yongguk left them alone and this time Jongup insisted they both actually change for bed.

"That way you can't sneak out on me again," he muttered. He wouldn't look at Himchan, turning away to don a pair of sweatpants (and, it had to be said, giving Himchan a hell of a view).

He turned back and caught him staring and Himchan averted his gaze quickly.

"Bed, pabo," Jongup said, pointing. When Himchan chanced a glance at him he saw he was blushing.

He lay out gingerly on the bed again and Jongup joined him, lying on his stomach and propped up on his elbows so he could look at Himchan's face.

"What?" Himchan asked, a little self-consciously. He was uncomfortably aware that not only had he killed someone tonight, but he'd beaten another to a pulp. That the first had been an accident, not to mention self-defense, and the second justified, did little to shake the persistent feeling that he hadn't exactly been showing Jongup his best self lately.

Jongup didn't answer right away. He was studying him with an unreadable look on his face.

"You did it because Yongguk would have killed him," he said finally, and Himchan's heart broke a little. Here he was, trying to make sense of what Himchan had done.

"People can't cross us like that, Jongup. Not without consequences."

"Like what you did to Park?"

Himchan winced. The pattern didn't show him in the best light. It was accurate, though.

"I told you," he said softly. "I told you if you knew things I'd done, you'd--look at me differently."

Jongup shook his head slowly. "I don't understand how you can do it," he said, and Himchan's stomach dropped. "Not so much 'cause it doesn't make sense as because--because it's *you*, you know? You--made me pancakes."

Himchan almost laughed at this evidence of his own goodness, but he really wasn't all that amused. He'd known this might happen if he let Jongup into his real life. He couldn't blame him for being disturbed by it.

"I've done some fucked up shit to survive," he said. "You have to stop thinking I'm a good person, 'cause I'm really not."

Jongup digested this for a moment.

"Junhong told me this story while you were in the hospital," he said finally. "About when he got his wisdom teeth out?"

Himchan gave a grunt of recognition as a memory of a swollen-cheeked Junhong flashed in his mind.

"It wasn't so long after you moved in with him and Yongguk. He had to have, like, emergency surgery to get them out? And Yongguk was so cool about getting him whatever he needed, but he had so much other stuff going on, setting up business deals to start the group and all, so he wasn't home much. Junhong said you two hadn't really gotten to know each other that well yet. But he was all miserable and in pain and you just--stayed. He'd thought you were always annoyed with him before, but then you *stayed*, and--watched dumb movies with him and talked to him and--picked the M&Ms out of his ice cream so he could eat it--"

If it wouldn't have hurt too much, Himchan would have laughed.

"I can't believe he told you that," he said. There had been a giant pile of the candies, color bleeding out of them as the ice cream melted off, by the end of the weekend. "I kept telling him we could just buy him some damn ice cream without the candy, but he swore he could still taste the M&Ms after I took them out and he liked it better that way."

Jongup nodded as if this proved his point. "You took care of him," he said again. "You take care of everyone. You made me pancakes, and--and you talked to me when nobody *ever*

thought to talk to me. You even kind of protected the guy who sold you out, kept Yongguk from getting to him. You're *good*, and--I'm in love with you."

Himchan must have misheard. Jongup was still watching him steadily, and there was a flush to his cheeks.

"Come again?" Himchan said.

Jongup's blush intensified but he didn't drop his gaze.

"I'm in love with you," he repeated, jutting out his chin defiantly as if to say *so there*.

Himchan had to bite his lip to keep his smile from spreading through the whole garage and waking the others up. He hooked a finger in the collar of Jongup's t-shirt and tugged.

"C'mere."

Jongup slid up the bed and placed his hands on either side of Himchan's shoulders, leaning over him without putting any weight on him. Himchan marked the flutter of the pulse in his neck, the sharp line of his jaw.

He touched his soft lower lip, watched him swallow hard. Then he was slipping his finger past his lips, feeling Jongup's tongue press against it (and *there*, a flush of heat strong enough to obliterate the miserable ache in his chest), and pulling him down by the teeth.

He still wasn't used to kissing him. He'd kissed plenty of people in the past, sloppy drunk make-out sessions in private rooms at the club, perfunctory post-coital kisses from men he knew he'd never see again.

This wasn't that. This was toe-curling, earth-shaking, hi-can-I-interest-you-in-a-heart-attack kissing. This was Jongup's tongue in his mouth, fucking *possessing* him, and Himchan not minding in the least. This was Jongup's hand cupping his jaw while he held himself up with one arm so he didn't put the slightest pressure on Himchan's chest, even if this couldn't stop the pressure from building up elsewhere. This was emotion translated into action. This was the man who *loved* him.

Holy hell.

They didn't part for a long time, but eventually they had to come up for air, and also if they didn't stop soon their inability to go further was going to make Himchan come in his pants, which wasn't really how he wanted their first time to go.

Jongup rose slightly, face only centimeters from Himchan's. He was trembling, but Himchan didn't think it was from the strain of holding himself up--holding himself *back*, maybe.

"I love you," Himchan told him. He wasn't sure if this was half a step further than saying he was *in* love, but he knew it was true.

Jongup closed his eyes and his head sagged for a beat, then he was swinging one leg over Himchan's body to straddle him and they were kissing again, this time Jongup holding

Himchan's face in both hands and holding himself up with what Himchan was fairly certain was an especially magnificent pair of thighs.

They kissed again and again, sometimes drawing back to stare at each other with frank wonder, and then they were laughing and kissing, saying *I love you* again and again but without the words this time. Himchan felt floaty and happier than he could remember, and if you asked him whether that was the drugs kicking in or Moon Jongup's lips on his, he knew without a doubt which he'd choose.

"Himchan?" Jongup panted out finally, and he sounded so wrecked Himchan almost groaned. The younger man sat up carefully and Himchan let him go with reluctance, palming his thighs in case he tried to get up. He didn't. "I love you," Jongup repeated. "but if you ever leave without telling me again, I'll kick your ass."

*

Yongguk used to sleep so well. Whole *nights* of rest. As recently as a few months ago he could usually manage six hours in a row at least. But something about his dongsaengs being hunted by a maniac with a cell phone, his best friend being kidnapped and tortured, and now this new revelation that it had been one of their own exposing their weak spots--well, it wasn't so conducive to sweet dreams.

After he left Himchan's room, he returned to his own, but he couldn't settle. He gave himself what felt like an hour (but which, according to his phone, was only twenty minutes) before wandering down the hall to the common room.

Junhong was sprawled out on the couch with one leg thrown over the back of it in what couldn't possibly be a comfortable position.

The maknae had always preferred passing out in common spaces rather than his own room. The first week he took him in, Yongguk had pretended not to notice the way the younger boy would slip into his room at night to sleep, although his thrashing nightmares woke him every time. Finally, without comment, he'd dragged Junhong's mattress into his room. They shared until Himchan had been with them awhile, at which point Junhong started splitting his nights between them.

These days, with so many more of them, and with Junhong so much older, he tended to pass out in the common room while the others were still up. Tonight, someone had draped a blanket over him before going to bed, but he'd kicked it off. Yongguk paused to spread it back over him. Junhong didn't stir. His nightmares had left him years ago.

Yongguk continued on to the office. He half-expected Jae to be there, fretting over his laptop, but the room was empty. Yongguk spread out on the couch and thought.

Kim would know it was a trap when they called him about his birds. He'd plan for it. He clearly hadn't given up trying to kill them. If Jae and Himchan had been just a bit slower tonight---

But Yongguk backed away quickly from *that* thought.

If everything they knew about Kim's business was true, he'd need the animals back. He probably cared more about them than any of his own people. But that didn't mean he wouldn't come prepared.

Yongguk's thoughts circled the same conclusion like water around a drain.

Fuck. He really, really didn't want to do this.

But Himchan had basically destroyed himself taking care of Snail so Yongguk's natural inclinations wouldn't lead him straight to prison. He'd needed *pills* after, and no one knew better than Yongguk how badly this scared him. He wouldn't piss on that sacrifice a few hours later.

Sighing, he pulled his phone from his pocket. (Why did pajama pants have pockets, anyway? That was stupid. If he didn't have pockets he wouldn't have his phone with him and he wouldn't be able to make this call right now because that was how logic worked.)

He checked the time. 4:22 am. Well. At least he could have some fun before he swallowed his pride. He dialed. It rang for a long time before it was answered by a long string of swears. Yongguk grinned.

"Oh, did I wake you?"

"The fuck do you want at this hour," Sleepy growled. Yongguk took a beat to enjoy the irritation in his cousin's voice.

"Well," he said. "I have some information on Kim Taesong, if you're still interested." He made a face at no one. "Actually, if you're up for it--we could use your help."

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Two quick things:

First, I'm sorry this took so long! I got knocked out with the flu for a couple weeks.

Second and more fun, my talented friend Kiki made a gorgeous piece of fan art based on a scene in the last chapter! Check it out here: <https://yamazakiki-art.tumblr.com/post/163213060616/youre-good-andim-in-love-with-you-i-love> and leave our girl some love if you do! <3

As always, thanks for reading. Onwards!

Blood seeped up between Himchan's fingers, warm and vital. He swore and rose higher on his knees, putting more pressure on the wound. *One* of the wounds. The chest under his hands was a wreck, more torn flesh than whole. He didn't have enough *hands*--

He fought back the panic, made himself meet the familiar eyes of the man in front of him.

"You're fine," he told him. By some miracle, his voice didn't shake. "I've got you, you're gonna be fine--"

For a horrible second, he thought he was already gone. Then the dying man blinked.

"Liar," he whispered.

*

Rewind

*

There was a cop in the garage. This was an unwelcome development.

"I mean. You *did* invite him," Jae reminded Yongguk under his breath. The leader glared at him. Jae took the hint and went to hide behind Junhong.

They were all in the office. Sleepy perched on the edge of the desk as though he *belonged* there. He didn't even seem all that impressed now that he was behind enemy lines for the first time. Yongguk had let him *upstairs*. It was an *honor*.

Yongguk spotted Himchan shaking his head at him and smirking. He pulled his lower lip back from the brink of a pout. Fine, fine; he could be mature about this.

"So, Bang filled me in on everything," Sleepy was telling the others. He paused and cast Yongguk a distrustful glare. "It *was* everything this time, right?"

Yongguk nodded. Sure, everything--save one or two details about Snail. He wasn't going to forget the boy's part in this any time soon, and he'd be damned if he let his cousin take that revenge out from under him, too.

Sleepy let his scowl rest on him for a beat. Before he could continue, Daehyun interjected.

"So what's the plan? You and your cop friends get to swoop in and save the day?" He sounded properly disgusted with the idea and Yongguk gave him a small, pleased nod.

"We don't actually...*swoop*...that much," Sleepy said.

"Sure, why not--let them do the hard part for once," Yongguk told Daehyun. "All we ask in return is immunity." He gave his cousin a pointed look.

He didn't know whether the cops would be able to pin a charge on any of them for everything that had gone down so far, but he wasn't taking any chances. They'd been on the scene with two bodies already and Yongguk knew how these things worked. *Someone* in the police department would be working up a case against them.

Sleepy gave him a grudging nod as Jae poked his head around Junhong.

"Immunity? Really?"

"Price of doing dirty business," Sleepy said. He was clearly as repulsed by the thought of helping them as the group was by accepting it, and Yongguk found himself cheered slightly. "If you can really help bring in Kim Taesong--and *try* not to do anything else illegal in the next few hours, right?--then I can protect you. This time."

"So--what? We arrange the meeting with Kim and your guys surround the place?" Himchan said. He was seated on the couch next to Jongup. There was something different about them this morning, but Yongguk couldn't put his finger on it. He'd have worried they were fighting, but Jongup seemed less inclined than ever to leave Himchan's side. Himchan's hand rested casually on Jongup's knee.

Sleepy nodded, but Yongguk said, "Not *we*." Everyone looked at him. He looked at Himchan. "You're not coming."

"Like hell I'm not," Himchan said immediately.

"If something goes wrong you can't fight right now. Plus you've got a history with Kim." Yongguk wasn't sure how traumatizing it would be for his friend to face his torturer again, but he didn't want to find out.

"You won't have to fight; that's the whole point in bringing us in," Sleepy pointed out. They ignored him.

"That history's exactly why I have to go," Himchan said. "Besides all the other reasons. If I'm not there, he'll think he--*broke* me." His expression twisted in distaste at the thought.

Yongguk sighed. It wasn't like he *wanted* to go without Himchan. They always did these meetings together. Himchan would do most of the talking, all clever antagonism, while Yongguk glowered intimidatingly. They'd perfected the routine.

Except the last time they'd done it, Himchan had been stolen right out from under Yongguk's nose. And while he knew technically it was different this time--they had the jump on Kim for once, not to mention all the swooping police--for the first time, the idea of his best friend being beside him brought him more anxiety than comfort.

But this was exactly the kind of thing he couldn't say in front of the others unless he wanted Himchan to take a swing at him.

"Himchan's right, hyung," Daehyun spoke up. "And I mean, it makes more sense to take him than--Jae or someone--"

Jae squawked indignantly. "The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Just that you're like--our dainty computer guy--"

Junhong snickered and Jae turned outraged eyes on him. "Oh, and you're better? All you can do at close range is *loom*."

Yongguk could see Junhong swell with protest and he held up a hand to forestall him. "Enough. I'm convinced; Himchan's better than the lot of you. Not that that's saying much." He glared around at them and they shrank back, except Himchan.

"You started it," he muttered.

"I can't believe you idiots have foiled me for so long," Sleepy said disgustedly. "But yeah, *swooping* notwithstanding, I've got a task force that'll be in position at the meeting place."

"I hope you trust your people. Kim's got a long reach; I bet he wouldn't risk coming to Seoul without *someone* inside the police department," Jae warned. Sleepy nodded.

"I'm keeping it close--my partner Gookju, and a few guys who've been on the case with us from the start. Oh, and your brother wants to come along," he added, looking at Jongup. The younger man gave a start.

"What? Why?"

"I bet he's going through cop withdrawal," Junhong said sagely. "He hasn't arrested anyone in *days*."

Jae began tickling the maknae in rebuttal and Junhong whined loudly, making Daehyun laugh. Himchan elbowed Jongup gently.

"Just his way of looking out for you, Jongup-ah," he said, his voice carrying just enough so Yongguk could hear it across the room. Jongup nodded, though he looked torn between skepticism and confusion. Yongguk had a feeling it would take him time to adjust to having a brother again. He caught Himchan watching the younger man and had to look away; it wasn't an expression meant to be seen by anyone else.

"Yeah, *anyway*, if you guys vouch for him I figure I'll take all the help I can get," Sleepy said loudly, drawing everyone's attention back to the matter at hand. "Gookju's filling him in on the case. So listen up: here's how it'll go down."

They listened. It stung, letting him call the shots, but Yongguk supposed there was something to respect in the no-muss no-fuss plan the cops had cooked up.

"Think you can remember all that to tell Kim?" Sleepy asked. "Should I write it down for you? Maybe draw you some pictures?"

"Fuck off," Yongguk said.

He made the call. As expected, Kim was displeased to learn his biggest source of income had been stolen. He expressed his consternation through a long series of very colorful threats. Yongguk waited patiently for him to finish, then specified the location for Kim to retrieve his birds.

"*Myeongdong's bound to be crowded this time of day*," Kim said, his voice ringing out on the phone's speaker. Himchan had gone very still at the sound of it. "*You're not worried about innocent bystanders?*"

"We all come unarmed. Me with one of my people, plus your birds. You can bring a friend if you want, but you probably don't want to go waving a gun around unless you want security coming down on your ass."

"*Oh, I feel I'm equal to the task of facing Seoul's finest*," Kim said disdainfully, and Yongguk felt an unsettling beat of solidarity as the insult hit its mark, making Sleepy scowl.

"Maybe so," he agreed. "But the whole place is full of people--which means it's also full of cameras. If you want to keep your whole anonymous vibe going, you'll come in, take your birds and get the fuck out of Seoul."

"*Point taken. But then what's to make me keep my side of the bargain once I have my falcons in hand? Asking for a friend.*"

"Oh, didn't I mention?" Yongguk said. "We're only bringing the male birds. You can have the females once you're back in Incheon."

Kim was satisfyingly silent. Himchan smiled slightly.

"I'd drive fast," Yongguk advised. "Those fledglings aren't going to feed themselves."

He pushed away the pang of guilt at the thought. When Kim spoke again, his voice was sour.

"You've thought of everything," he said. *"Two hours, then."*

"Two hours," Yongguk agreed, and disconnected. Sleepy shook his head.

"I've been on this for a *year*," he said. "This is the first time I've heard his voice."

"Hard to believe, considering how chatty he is," Jae muttered. "You're lucky we came along, huh?" He either ignored or didn't notice the glare the cop sent his way. "Hyung, you know he was lying, right?"

Yongguk nodded as Sleepy's frown turned to confusion.

"What are you talking about? He can't do anything without getting caught and he knows it."

"Don't underestimate him," Himchan said. "We keep learning that the hard way." Jongup shifted closer to him.

"The professionals are on it now," Sleepy told them confidently. As one, the six of them rolled their eyes in somewhat less-than-impressed fashion. But for once, Yongguk wasn't in the mood to argue with his cousin.

"Is two hours enough time for your people to get in position?" he asked.

Sleepy pulled his phone out. "I guess it'll have to be."

*

Daehyun and Jae left to retrieve the birds. Jongup didn't ask how exactly they planned to tell the male falcons from the females.

He trailed behind Himchan to their room, trying to catch his eye, but he avoided his gaze. He went to his closet and began rifling through his options. He pulled out a black t-shirt and held it up for Jongup.

"Does this convey...*you may have tortured me but I'm totally over it?*" he said, his tone artificially bright. It hurt Jongup to hear it.

"Himchan..."

"Don't, okay? Just--let me have my inappropriately-timed humor." Himchan turned away and began tugging ineffectually at the shirt he had on. When Jongup heard his hiss of pain, he relented and went to help, gently pulling it over Himchan's head. He took advantage of their proximity to make the taller man meet his gaze.

"You don't have to do this," he said softly. "Let Daehyun go."

Himchan sighed, sliding his arms into the fresh shirt and letting Jongup help him pull it on.

"You already know why I can't do that."

"Yeah, but this stupid plan doesn't even let me be there to watch your back," Jongup grumbled. Himchan softened, pulling him in closer, nudging Jongup's nose with his own.

"I know. I'm sorry; I'd hate it if things were the other way around," he said. Jongup just nodded, trying not to show how much this pleased him. He didn't think Himchan would have admitted this before last night. Apparently, *I love you* changed things.

He still couldn't quite believe he'd said it--although that disbelief was nothing compared to the shock that Himchan had said it *back*. This was new territory for both of them, but Jongup liked the way it felt, like he and Himchan belonged to each other in a way they hadn't before.

"Bbang'll have my back," Himchan said. "And Sleepy. *And* Jonghwan." He smiled. "And Sleepy's right; Kim's gone under the radar this long; I doubt he's gonna throw it away today."

Jongup nodded, trying to let this reassure him. "In a few hours, this'll all be over," he marveled.

Himchan smiled so his eye dimple showed. "What'll we do then?" he asked.

*

Sleepy's task force would be assembling at Myeongdong, but Gookju and Jonghwan came to the garage first to pick him up. Jonghwan went to Jongup, looking him up and down.

"Did you sleep at all last night? You look awful," he said.

"Thanks a lot. You know you don't have to go, right?" Jongup said. The thought of his brother looking out for Himchan had been a comfort, but now it occurred to him that he wanted someone looking out for his brother, too.

Jonghwan cocked an eyebrow at him.

"You worried about me, kid?"

"I just know how you feel about all this gang activity," Jongup said acidly, and Jonghwan grinned.

"You're all degenerates," he agreed. His smile faded. "Nah, seriously, Gookju filled me in on this Kim Taesong guy. What he's done...what he did to you guys." His eyes drifted to Himchan and Jongup followed his gaze. "Guess I can't blame you for wanting payback."

Something thawed in Jongup's chest. If his brother could understand this, maybe...

Jonghwan cleared his throat. "Anyway, I'm glad you're going through the right channels this time," he added. "Kim doesn't sound like the type who's going to show up without a plan."

"You think?" Jongup said. "Listen--be careful, okay? And--" He looked at Himchan again.

"Don't worry about us," Jonghwan said. "We'll see you soon."

Himchan joined them. He didn't touch Jongup but all of Jongup's nerves came alive in his presence anyway.

A few hours and all this would be *over*, and then--and then--Jongup's imagination failed to fill in the blanks. But it would involve Himchan and Jonghwan and this funny family that had somehow stretched to include Jongup. Whatever happened next would be *good*.

Himchan met his gaze for a long, steady beat. But they'd already said their real goodbye in private. "Time to go," was all he said.

*

Myeongdong was crowded with shoppers, as always. It was the kind of day that came too rarely, sunny but not so hot Himchan was sweating through his jacket after five minutes.

As he and Yongguk skirted the edge of a group of laughing teenagers, he knew they were both thinking the same thing. If Sleepy had miscalculated or if they had misjudged Kim--again--a lot of innocent people stood to get hurt.

"Himchan..." Yongguk muttered. He could see his friend's distress, just under the surface. He pushed his nerves down. This was part of his job.

"It'll be fine," he said firmly. "C'mon, the fountain--"

They made for the sound of splashing, found an empty spot on the far side of the huge stone fountain. Yongguk set down the cardboard box of birds, their precious cargo, then slid his hands in his pockets.

To the casual observer, he'd seem at his ease, but Himchan knew his fists were clenched tight enough to cramp. He couldn't stop scanning the crowd himself, trying to prepare himself for the sight of Kim, or maybe his old friend Mr. Woo. He wished they'd said fuck it to Sleepy's plan and brought the others, just in case. He'd feel better with Junhong perched up high somewhere, gun drawn and ready.

"You sure you're good?" Yongguk asked. He was still feigning nonchalance, but Himchan knew his apparently casual people-watching was as razor focused as his own.

"I'm fine. I'm great."

Oops, too far. Yongguk arched an eyebrow at him.

"Great?" he repeated.

Himchan squirmed. "I mean--I slept some, that's all."

His friend just looked at him. Himchan never could lie to him. He sighed.

"This--doesn't really seem like the time to--"

"You know Kim's gonna make us wait so he can make a big entrance," Yongguk said. "C'mon, you've been weird this morning. Out with it."

Himchan bit his lip, turned his attention back to the crowds. He wondered if Jongup had ever been here before. Himchan hadn't been in ages--little interest and even less time. But he thought it'd be fun with Jongup, wandering around the funny little shops, gawking at the big chains and laughing at tourists. Normal stuff that would be completely new to both of them.

"Just. Jongup," he told Yongguk. He chanced a glance at him to see if this answer would suffice. His friend rolled his eyes expectantly. "He, um. Turns out he loves me...so."

Yongguk looked taken aback. "Oh," he said. "Do you--? Um."

"I mean...yeah, obviously."

They nodded at each other solemnly before they burst out laughing. Himchan clutched his ribs, trying not to shake too much.

"Aren't you glad you asked?" he managed. Yongguk shook his head, grinning.

"Wait'll Dae gets wind of this, he'll throw you two a party," he said. Daehyun was always looking for an excuse. "Anyway, it's not like it's a surprise."

"It was to *me*."

"That's just 'cause you didn't see him when Kim had you." Yongguk grew serious. "It's not a surprise," he repeated quietly. "I'm happy for you, Channie."

"Shut up," Himchan said, meaning thanks. Yongguk grinned at him again, but then his gaze hooked on something over Himchan's shoulder and the smile vanished. Himchan braced himself before turning, knowing what--who--he would see.

Kim stood out in the crowd. Himchan wasn't sure whether it was the cloud of evil he fancied he could see floating around him, or the fact that he was wearing a bright teal suit. It was probably very expensive, not that all the money in the world could excuse the existence of such an outfit, in Himchan's opinion.

It was possible he was focusing on his sartorial choices because that was easier than looking in the face of the man who had tortured him with a smile. He forced himself to meet his eyes.

"Well, good morning," Kim said, slowing to a stop a few meters away. He had come alone, unless he had someone in the crowd somewhere. "Himchannie, I've *missed* you. So good to see you back on your feet."

His voice crawled over Himchan's skin like a swarm of insects. He covered his shudder with a yawn. Kim's smile widened and he turned his attention to Yongguk. "And what a pleasure to finally meet the infamous Mr. Bang."

Yongguk regarded him for a long moment, gaze flickering over him, taking his time. Himchan hid a smile. No one wielded silence better than Bang Yongguk. Kim's smile took on a fixed quality as he waited for him to say something.

"You want your birds?" Yongguk said finally. He nudged the cardboard box with the toe of his boot. For the first time, Kim tensed slightly.

"If you've damaged them--" he began. Yongguk *tched* dismissively.

"They're fine. You want *them*--" He gave the box a harder kick, sending it sliding towards Kim. He stepped forward to intercept it, face stormy. "and I want you out of my fucking city."

Kim clenched his jaw. He looked at Himchan.

"It didn't have to be this way," he said. Himchan gave him an incredulous look.

"Take your pigeons and get the fuck out of here," he said. "Before we do to you what we did to Snail." A little bluffing never hurt anyone.

For the briefest flash, Kim actually looked startled. Then his customary smile returned.

"I wondered when you'd figure that one out," he said. "I have to tell you, he was so much more useful than I'd have guessed. The way he looked up to you two...always keeping track of your comings and goings. I hope you made it quick, at least."

"Quicker than it'll be for you," Yongguk said.

Kim finally turned his attention to the box, kneeling to pick it up in one smooth motion, peering under the lid. He nudged the birds with a finger, his expression softening. It was an almost grotesque sight, the emotion not fitting the man.

"You'll bring the others to me?" he said briskly, eyes going flat again as he shut the lid.

"In Incheon," Yongguk agreed. Kim nodded.

"Well then. It's been fun," he said with a shrug. "No hard feelings, I hope. I always did dream too big."

"Pull up, Icarus," Himchan agreed dryly. Kim laughed. The sound made Himchan's stomach turn. He was glad he hadn't eaten breakfast.

"See you soon," Kim said. "We'll do drinks or something."

Himchan could only guess what Kim might try to slip into their drinks if they were stupid enough to have any. He had to remind himself that there would be no trip to Incheon, that Sleepy and his people were laying in wait for Kim at this very moment.

"Can't wait," he said. Kim lifted one hand in ironic salute. He backed away through the crowd. As soon as his back was turned, Yongguk was at Himchan's side, hand at his back.

"Breathe," he said. Himchan hadn't realized he wasn't. He sucked in a lungful of oxygen and coughed it out, clutching his rib at the resulting pain--muted, thanks to the pills.

"I'm fine," he said automatically. He tracked Kim's retreating form. "If Sleepy's not in position--"

"He's had plenty of time, he'll be there." Yongguk sounded awfully confident for someone who'd drunkenly ranted to Himchan on many occasions about how useless his cousin was.

Kim turned a corner and was gone. Himchan stared fixedly at the point where he'd disappeared.

"Sleepy'll text when they've got him," Yongguk said. One hand was a solid weight on Himchan's back. The other held his phone out, flat in his palm. They both looked at it, willing it to chime with the good news.

"How long should it take?" Himchan asked.

"Longer than three seconds, pabo."

"Yeah, but--"

Here he was cut off mid-thought, not by the phone, but as the roar of an explosion tore the morning apart.

*

Himchan and Yongguk had been gone for all of five minutes when Daehyun found Jongup sitting on the steps, hands pressed together between his knees. He bumped his shoulder.

"Stop moping," he said. "Let's go."

Jongup stared at him, then past him to Jae and Junhong. The latter was swinging a set of keys around his index finger and grinning.

"Go? Where?"

Daehyun rolled his eyes, but his expression was affectionate rather than impatient.

"To Myeongdong," he said. "Obviously."

Jongup frowned. "I thought--"

"We're not allowed to meet Kim," Jae interrupted. "They never said anything about watching from a safe distance." His grin was sharp and did not bespeak *safety*. Jongup found himself grinning back.

"That's a good point," he said.

*

Myeongdong wasn't what he'd expected. Everywhere Jongup looked there were *people*, people having fun in ways he didn't often see in the diner, and absolutely never in the warehouse. Girls in bright clothes, friends laughing together, tourists taking pictures. He had to work not to gape. He'd lived in Seoul for years but had somehow missed seeing anything like this.

"Ahhh, d'you think Yongguk hyung will let us go shopping when this is over?" Junhong asked. He was gazing longingly at a shoe store, but Jongup had a feeling he was more interested in their sock selection.

"How can you think of shopping at a time like this?" Daehyun demanded. "We could get breakfast, though."

"As the kettle said to the pot," Jae said with a snicker.

Daehyun almost ran into a cluster of tiny humans, so focused was he on a bibimbap display they were passing. The children streamed past him and around Junhong and the maknae froze, arms in the air. He looked to Jongup like an explorer fording a river on foot, and seemed relieved when the last of the kids trickled away.

"How are we supposed to find them in this?" Jongup asked, inching closer to Junhong. At least he'd be less likely to lose him in the crowd.

"They're meeting by the fountain, it's this way--" Jae took charge and Jongup was glad to let him, to focus only on the other man's back. He wished Himchan were with them. The farther they went, the worse the crowds pressed in, and he could feel himself shrinking, his shoulders rising around his ears. All that time he'd spent in a tiny cell, he'd never have guessed it was other people that would make him claustrophobic.

He was relieved when Jae led them up some stairs running between two buildings. It was quieter here; just a large cafe with tables overlooking the street--and, there, a fountain. Jongup practically pressed his nose to the glass when he spotted what he thought was Himchan's familiar form, and some of the stress from the morning lifted.

"I see them," he said needlessly as the others joined him at the window.

"I'll, uh, get us some drinks so they don't mind us using these tables..." Daehyun said, trailing away to the counter. Jongup kept his eyes trained on the crowd, though there was no chance he'd be able to pick Kim out of the horde. He's only seen him once, and he'd been focused on Himchan at the time.

"Any minute now," Jae muttered. He was chewing his thumbnail determinedly and Jongup saw a flash of blood when he glanced at him.

"There--" Junhong said sharply. Jongup craned his neck, trying to see. A couple taking a selfie moved, and there, in a hideously bright suit, a new man talking to Himchan and Yongguk.

"He came alone," Jae observed. "Do you think that's a good thing?"

"Who knows? It seems like overconfidence is kind of his main characteristic, so--"

Jongup tuned them out, willing his stupid eyes to focus. Everything more than a store front away remained stubbornly blurred. He couldn't make out Himchan's expression at all, though he was facing him. The set of his shoulders seemed relaxed enough but Jongup knew Himchan would rather die than show tension to Kim.

"Yongguk hyung doesn't look too happy, does he?"

"This would be an inappropriate time for him to look *happy*."

"I'm just saying--"

They bickered on and Jongup held his breath until finally, *finally*, the ugly teal blur of Kim Taesong was moving away, away from Yongguk, away from Himchan.

"So that's him, huh? I didn't get a look at him before," Junhong said. The teal blur was headed their way. Jongup ignored it, straining his eyes to see Himchan. His blob had merged with Yongguk's blob. Were they hugging? Had Jongup's eyes always been this useless?

"Ugly fucker." Daehyun had joined them, and now Jongup followed his gaze as Kim walked right under their window, the box of birds tucked carefully under his arm. He *was* ugly. His eyes were creepily flat, almost reptilian in their blankness. Jongup imagined them watching unblinkingly as Himchan was tortured--

Kim was gone. Jongup blinked the image away. Himchan was fine. As if sensing his thoughts, Junhong patted his shoulder.

"Sleepy's up," he said.

"Good. Let the cops do something *useful* for a change," Daehyun said.

"We should watch," Jae said, heading for the stairs. "Just to make sure."

Jongup followed. He thought he'd very much enjoy watching Sleepy and Jonghwan put Kim in cuffs.

They were about halfway down when it happened. Jongup's first thought was that it was an earthquake, because the whole world seemed to *shudder*. But there was also the sound, a huge *boom* that left Jongup's ears ringing so badly he could barely hear the screams that started up after it. A plume of smoke and dust rushed up the stairs. Jongup's eyes began to water and everyone began coughing.

A body crashed into him from behind. He lost his tenuous footing and fell, and everything went dark.

*

It was the sound of the world ripping apart, so Himchan was surprised to find himself still standing when it was over.

The screams started seconds later, after a brief hush in which it seemed like everyone in Myeongdong caught their collective breath. Then people were starting to run away from the sound, away from the smoke Himchan could see rushing from the point where Kim had disappeared.

It was too loud to talk; Yongguk caught his arm and together they pushed through the panicked crowd.

Himchan's mind was a white haze, a question mark.

What the fuck? was his only thought, repeated over and over. *What the fuck?*

The crowd was working against them, pushing between them. Himchan lost his grip on Yongguk's arm. Someone slammed into his side in their haste and he gasped, tried to stop, the crowd pushing him back the way he'd come.

Then there was a hand on his arm again, strong as a vise. Yongguk. He got an arm around Himchan and managed to pull him through the worst of the crowd. The smoke was thicker here, but now the only people were trickling out of a pair of nearby buildings that seemed to have caught the edge of the blast. A shop sign dangled, electrical cords frayed, sending sparks onto the street below. Himchan and Yongguk dodged them, then stopped for a beat. Himchan tried to make sense of what he was looking at.

His first thought was that this hadn't had anything to do with Kim at all, because it looked like a *car* had exploded. There were bodies littered around it, and this, yes, this was almost good, because now Himchan felt the calm veil of his old training slip over him as he automatically went into triage mode.

There were two men close to what must have been the blast site. One was badly singed around the edges, blood oozing from a cut on his head. The other was far worse, a mess of blood and blackened flesh.

"Oh my god," he heard Yongguk mutter. "Himchan, *fuck--*"

He didn't have a chance to say anything before he realized what--*who* he was looking at. He was running before he could think, and there was a fresh crash of pain in his chest that had nothing to do with his ribs as he skidded to his knees beside the second man. The ground was covered in broken glass and shredded the knees of his pants to ribbons. He barely felt the pain.

"Sleepy hyung!" Yongguk was at the other man's side, lifting his bleeding head into his lap. He'd gone very pale. "Himchan, what do I do?"

"Make sure he's breathing." Himchan made his own assessment, marveling as the wreck of a man before him gave a gasping breath. Himchan shrugged out of his jacket and folded it into a pad of sorts. There was no way to see where the wounds were; the man's chest seemed to be *all* wound. He pressed the pad against it, heard the squelch of blood, and the man's eyes flew open.

Fuck. His face was blackened from the explosion, but Himchan knew those eyes.

Jongup. It's Jongup--he thought frantically before he pulled himself back from the edge of panic.

"Jonghwan, you're gonna be all right," he said. Because of course it wasn't Jongup; Jongup was safely back at the garage. He was safe, he was safe, he was--

Hot blood seeped up through his fingers. There was so *much*.

Himchan heard coughing behind him, Sleepy's hoarse voice saying Yongguk's name.

"Don't try to move, hyung, Himchan'll get to you next," Yongguk said. "Right, Himchannie?"

"See if he can move. *Carefully*," Himchan said without taking his attention away from his current patient. "You're fine," he told him. "I've got you, you're gonna be fine--"

He could finally hear sirens in the distance now, getting closer.

"Liar," Jonghwan whispered. There was a dangerous slur to his voice; his eyes--eyes *so much* like Jongup's--were losing focus. Himchan couldn't let him die.

"Sleepy, what the fuck happened?" he demanded, glancing back long enough to see the cop was sitting up, supported by Yongguk's arm.

"It was Kim," he said hoarsely. "We'd all spread out; we didn't know which way he'd come from. Moon and I guessed right. We cornered him here. Should've waited for backup, but--"

Himchan shook his head uncomprehendingly. Kim Taesong was nowhere to be seen, and he didn't see how he could possibly have done all of *this*.

"We went to arrest him and he--fucking *smiled*," Sleepy went on. "Said something like--about making sure the rest of his birds made it to Incheon. Then he--*apologized* to the fucking box he was holding, and--opened his jacket and--Guk, this fucker was strapped with about six tons of explosives--"

Of course. Himchan's heart dipped as he understood. Kim was nowhere to be seen because the explosion had ripped him apart, just as he'd meant it to. One last bit of crazy for the road. He'd killed himself out of *spite*.

"Himchan?" Sleepy said.

"Hang on, ambulance is on its way," Himchan said, hoping very much this was true.

"Is Moon gonna be okay? He stepped right in front of me when he saw the explosives, saved my life--"

"He'll be *fine*," Himchan said firmly, more to Jonghwan than to Sleepy. "Hey. Stay with me, okay?"

Jonghwan blinked slowly. He opened his mouth to speak and coughed instead. He was drowning in his own blood and there was nothing Himchan could do.

"Jongup--" Jonghwan managed. His eyes were fearful, confused.

"Jongup's safe, he's at the garage, he's fine," Himchan reassured him quickly. Where was that fucking ambulance? Where the fuck were the other fucking *cops*?

Jonghwan focused on him with what appeared to be monumental effort.

"You--have to--" he said thickly. Himchan wanted to lift his head so he could speak more easily, but he knew better than to move him. "You have to--tell Jonguppie--tell him--" Jonghwan's face twisted with effort, and while he was deciding how to finish his sentence, he died.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The stairwell was full of smoke.

Someone behind Jae had either panicked or stumbled--or both--and pushed into him, driving him hard to his knees. He managed to grab the railing on his way down, wrenching his shoulder practically out of its socket in the process. It was still better than the alternative. The stairs were cement, their edges sharp.

Jae waited, gasping and coughing, until the ringing in his ears faded enough so all he could hear was his own heartbeat pounding instead. Then he carefully got his legs under him and pulled himself back to check on his friends.

Junhong was directly behind him, crouched over a third figure--Jongup. Jae's heart thumped even faster when he saw the blood, the unnatural pallor of the younger man's face. He put a hand on Junhong's shoulder and the maknae jumped, turning back to him. Jae saw more than heard him:

He fell.

Daehyun must have still been in the cafe when it happened, because now he hurried down the steps, eyes wide and fearful. He said something Jae couldn't quite make out; he shook his head hard, willing his hearing to come back, and knelt on Jongup's other side. There was a nasty gash on his head, the skin around it already purpling and swelling.

What was it Himchan always said? *Cuts to the head always bleed like crazy?* Except if Jongup had hit his head falling on these stairs, this was no artificial wound.

"Are you guys okay?" Daehyun's voice solidified somewhat in his ears and Jae glanced Junhong over again. His eyes were red from the smoke, but to Jae's relief he looked unscathed.

"We're fine, but Jongup--" Jae's voice sounded weird and cotton-stuffed to his own ears.

"I'll get help." Dae was gone in a flash, down the stairs and into the street.

Jongup's limp body began to slide down the steps and Junhong swore, catching him. Jae helped, ignoring his shoulder, surreptitiously checking Jongup's pulse. It was steady, so that was something.

"I fell into him, it's my fault, it was my fault--" Junhong babbled. Jae squeezed his forearm.

"It was not; I fell too."

The maknae blinked back tears. "What the hell happened?" he asked.

Jae didn't need to know the specifics.

"Kim happened," he said.

*

"Himchan. *Himchan*."

It took him a long moment to register Yongguk's voice. He tried to tear his eyes away from Jonghwan's. They were still open. They were still looking at him--except not really. Moon Jonghwan would never look at anything again.

The blood on Himchan's hands was growing tacky and cold--that was probably why he couldn't stop shivering. It had been warm before but--oh. He'd had his jacket on before. Now it was saturated with Jonghwan's blood.

"For all the good that did," Himchan said dully.

"Hey." Yongguk was next to him now, hand on his arm. "Himchan, he's--you can stop."

Stop? Himchan realized he was still pressing on Jonghwan's chest. He let Yongguk pull him back. His legs were cramped from his position and his knees hurt badly from skidding on broken glass. He rested his useless bloody hands palm-up on his thighs. Yongguk touched his chin, drew his gaze away from the dead man with Jongup's face.

"You still with me?" he asked quietly.

Himchan blinked. He bit the inside of his cheek hard. The sudden pain had a sobering effect.

"Yes," he said. He turned to Sleepy, who was propped up on his elbows, phone to his ear.

"On the south side," he was saying. "A few buildings caught the edge of the blast, possible casualties inside. And we have a--" He stopped, swallowed hard as he looked at Jonghwan. "We have an officer down. Yeah, I--what?" He listened. Himchan looked at Yongguk.

"After all that, Kim beat us again."

Yongguk shook his head. "You can't outthink crazy," he said.

Sleepy pocketed his phone with a grimace. "Supposedly there's a few paramedics coming on foot, someone flagged them down, they should be--right there."

He pointed and they turned. Three paramedics in blue were headed their way. Himchan might have felt a pang at the sight of his old work uniform, but Yongguk's voice distracted him, loud and suddenly sharp.

"Is that *Daehyun*?"

Sure enough, leading the medics at a run, motioning towards a stairwell between two of the buildings, was Jung Daehyun.

"The hell is he doing here?" Himchan asked as Yongguk shouted the younger man's name. Daehyun slowed, searching for the sound, before his gaze landed on them. His eyes widened. He said something to the paramedics, gesturing frantically at the stairwell again. They continued on without him and he ran over to Yongguk and Himchan, eyes widening as he took in the scene.

"Oh shit oh *fuck* hyungs," he said weakly as he dropped to a crouch beside them, staring at Jonghwan.

"What are you *doing* here? You're supposed to be home," Yongguk said, furious in his worry. He ran a hand down the back of Daehyun's head, looking him over for injuries. Daehyun barely seemed to notice.

"Like we'd really let you come out here without backup?" he said. He glanced at Sleepy. "I mean no offense, but--look what happened."

"For all the good *you* did," Sleepy said, bristling. Daehyun opened his mouth to retort.

"Not now," Yongguk said quietly. "Where are the others?"

Daehyun started to point, then hesitated and looked at Himchan. There was clear guilt in his eyes.

"Jongup's here, isn't he," Himchan said. He began to struggle to his feet, brushing the broken glass off his knees. The tiny shards caught in Jonghwan's blood and he froze. "He can't see this, Dae."

"He won't," Daehyun muttered. He rose and gave Himchan a shamefaced wince. "He was--hurt when it happened; I'm not sure he's awa--"

New fear coursed through Himchan--at some point he should be running out of adrenaline, right?--and he was on his way to the stairwell before Daehyun had stopped speaking.

"Himchan, wait!" the younger man tried, but he ignored him. The medics was just descending the stairs, a stretcher between them.

Jongup lay strapped to it.

Himchan stopped dead at the sight of his face, which was shockingly white except for the half that was shockingly covered in blood.

"*Hyung*, wait--" Daehyun was at his elbow, grabbing for him, which turned out to be a good thing because he swayed on the spot. Dimly he heard Daehyun hailing another medic, and then there was someone in his face, talking to him about being in shock or whatever.

Things were happening fast all of a sudden. There was a convergence of cop cars and finally an ambulance, a new influx of people. Jae appeared at Himchan's side like magic, and when Himchan glanced back at Yongguk, he was talking to Junhong, though he kept glancing over at him.

The upshot was, they got Jongup into an ambulance, and through some wheedling by Daehyun, they let Himchan in beside him.

"Is he going to be all right?" he kept asking, but no one seemed all that concerned with answering him. But he knew it was a bad sign Jongup was still unconscious. Himchan's brain kept cycling through possible diagnoses: *intracerebral hemorrhage, hematoma, edema, skull fracture* and possible outcomes: *surgery, coma, memory loss, brain dead--*

When he began hyperventilating, someone blocked his view of Jongup and placed an oxygen mask on his face. As cold as flow went into his lungs, Himchan closed his eyes and waited for it to be over.

*

Of course, nothing stopped. They got to the hospital and took Jongup away, dragging Himchan off to some other wing for people with bullshit non-injuries where a first-year med student took the glass shards out of his knees with a pair of tweezers and gave him a blanket. Someone put a shallow tray of water beside him and he finally washed the blood off his hands, watching the water turn pink, then dark red.

What the fuck was he going to say to Jongup?

Assuming still knew his own name when he woke up, of course.

After his legs were bandaged, Himchan was left alone. He took his phone out and stared at it blankly for a beat before calling Yongguk. It rang endlessly. Same with Jae, Daehyun, Junhong. So there was nothing for it. He slid off the table, wincing at the sting in his knees, and went to find Jongup.

*

He was nowhere, and then he was staring at grey nothing and there was pain. His mouth was so dry it *hurt*.

Jongup blinked and tried to swallow, and there was movement beside him, the scrape of a chair against the floor. Himchan's face, floating above him, handsome and worried.

"Jonguppie?"

He tried to answer but the words caught in his throat. He had to try a few times.

"Water?"

"Yes--hold on--" Himchan disappeared and Jongup frowned, but he was remembering his body now and he turned his head to keep Himchan in sight. Details filtered in around him. He was in a hospital room. Himchan poured him a cup of water from a pitcher beside his bed. He angled a bendy straw so Jongup could drink, and held the cup to his lips. "Here."

Jongup drank gratefully.

"Thanks," he said. "Hi."

Himchan reached for his hand.

"Hi. How are you feeling? Do you know who I am?"

Jongup's brow creased--ouch. "Shouldn't I?"

"You fell, hit your head in the explosion." There was something uncharacteristically careful in Himchan's expression, but Jongup's attention was on the memories of the morning--was that still just this morning?--now pouring in.

"The stairs," he recalled. "We were going...to watch Kim get arrested." His eyes flew to Himchan's face. "An explos--what happened?"

Himchan sighed. "We underestimated Kim's unwillingness to get arrested," he said. "He came strapped with a ton of explosives. As soon as--the police approached him, he went off."

"Jesus." Kim had been talking to Himchan only moments before. If things had gone badly...He tightened his grip on the other man's hand. "Are you okay? Was anyone else hurt?" He thought of the endless crowd in Myeongdong. Kim really was a piece of shit. Good riddance.

Himchan flinched at the question and looked down at their linked hands.

"Jongup," he said, and stopped. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

"Himchan?"

"You had to have surgery," Himchan said finally. "They had to cut away a little piece of your skull to allow for swelling. They weren't sure if...when...you'd wake up."

Oh. His consternation made sense. He must have been so scared.

"I'm okay, I think," Jongup said, tilting his head to try to meet his eyes. "I'd know you anywhere, Junhong."

He hoped for Himchan's real laugh, but he only smiled, and it faded fast.

"That's not funny."

"You're right, I'm sorry."

Himchan's eyes searched his. "I should get the doctor--are you sure you're--? You can see okay and everything?"

"I can see *okay*," Jongup said. "I think I need glasses, but I noticed that before."

Himchan smiled softly. "Then we'll get you glasses," he said. "I'm gonna get the doctor."

He flagged down a doctor and there were more questions--yes, Jongup knew the year, the city, what had happened that day. He followed a finger, then had a light shined in both eyes, before the doctor concluded his brain was probably okay.

Well, this might be true, but there was still something wrong. Jongup could sense Himchan's distress from across the room. He was clearly relieved, but something was wrong, and Jongup had a sinking feeling he knew what it was. He found it deeply suspicious that none of the others had burst in on them yet.

He waited until the doctor finally left to hold out a hand to Himchan. He took it without hesitation, but was still avoiding his gaze.

"Tell me the rest," Jongup said.

"What?"

"Kim's gone but you don't look happy about it. Something else happened. Tell me."

Himchan swallowed hard.

"The cops who approached Kim," he said finally, "were Sleepy and Jonghwan."

Jongup started to nod, then froze as his mind made the connection. He tried to sit up and Himchan pressed his shoulders back into the bed.

"Is he okay?" he demanded urgently. "Is he in surgery?"

"I'm so sorry, Jongup."

He shook his head, uncomprehending. Unwilling. Maybe his brain was fucked up, after all. Better that than...this.

"No," he said.

"Jongup..."

"No. You're lying." Because Himchan was a liar, Jongup *knew* he was a liar, he'd lied to Jongup about the gang for fucking *months*. He was looking at him sorrowfully now and it only served to piss Jongup off. He tried to pull his hand away but Himchan held on tight.

"I'm not lying. Why would I do that?" he asked quietly.

The question broke him. Because, of course, there *was* no reason. It wouldn't happen. Which meant that Himchan's unspoken statement was true. Jonghwan was dead. Just like Jongin. Just like their father.

I'm the last one left.

It was such a lonely thought he almost forgot himself and squeezed Himchan's hand tighter, pulled him closer. His anger toward the other man dissolved, leaving cool certainty in its

place.

If you stay with him, he'll die, too.

Even as he thought it, some part of him knew it wasn't fair--Jongin's death had had nothing to do with him, just a random accident--but it *felt* true. His mother had chosen to leave. He'd killed his father. And now both of his brothers were dead. If the four of these hadn't all been directly his fault, it seemed obvious he carried bad luck with him wherever he went. He couldn't bear to watch it latch onto Himchan.

He wrenched his hand away, refusing to look at him.

"Get away from me."

"Jon--"

"Get *away* from me." He couldn't bear to look, to watch his words hit home. Himchan drew back. He was still, watching Jongup--waiting for him to change his mind, maybe. Tears pricked the corners of Jongup's eyes and he took a steadying breath through his nose, willing himself not to cry.

Finally, Himchan left.

Jongup let go.

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Himchan made it to the end of the hallway before turning back. He made it to Jongup's doorway, hesitated.

Get away from me.

Not a whole lot of ways to interpret that one. Himchan's heart hurt. Jongup had looked so *small* with that fucking giant bandage on his head and Himchan wanted nothing more than to pull him into his arms and--invent time travel to *fix this*.

He'd start by stopping himself from ever going to that damn diner. Jongup would never have been involved in this if not for him.

Himchan retreated down the hall again. There was a small alcove with chairs in the corner and he collapsed into one.

He didn't know how long he sat there, staring into space, debating going back to Jongup's room. He was *grieving*, he shouldn't be alone right now--but then, this was Himchan's fault. Who could blame Jongup for not wanting him around?

Then, a hand on his shoulder. He jumped and found Yongguk and Junhong standing over him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. His voice was rough--from the smoke before, or from the tears he'd been suppressing. Yongguk frowned at the sound of it.

"They're checking Sleepy out." He sat in one of the other chairs and Junhong perched on the arm of Himchan's.

"How's Jongup?"

Himchan filled them in on his injuries, the minor surgery.

"But he passed all the mental acuity tests with flying colors so it doesn't seem like there was any lasting damage."

"Thank God," Yongguk said sincerely. Junhong nudged him.

"How come you're out here, hyung?"

Himchan let out a short, humorless laugh. "He doesn't want me in there." He met Yongguk's eyes. "I told him about his brother. He threw me out of the room. I guess I don't blame him."

His friend was studying him through narrowed eyes. "Junhong-ah, why don't you go check on him?" he said.

"If he wants to be alone--" Junhong objected.

"What happened wasn't *your* fault," Himchan said pointedly. "He'll be glad you're okay."

He may have let the slightest bit of self pity into his voice. Junhong frowned, but he went.

"This wasn't your fault. Are you crazy?" Yongguk said as soon as he'd gone.

"If he hadn't gotten involved with me, he wouldn't have had part of his *skull* taken off today," Himchan said, anger flaring in his chest unexpectedly. It wasn't really meant for Yongguk, but his friend could take it. "He wouldn't have gotten shot. Jonghwan would still be alive. Those are facts, Bbang. I fucking *ruined* him."

"If you hadn't gotten involved with him, Jonghwan might never have found him," Yongguk said. "It's--there's no good here, I know, but--at least he knows his brother loved him, after all those years of thinking he was angry."

Himchan shook his head stubbornly. "They could've found each other some other way. We don't know."

"Exactly; we *don't* know. You didn't know any of this would happen. It's Kim Taesong's fault, Himchan, not yours. Of course Jongup's upset right now. That doesn't mean he blames you."

Himchan sighed. Junhong had disappeared, so Jongup must have let him in the room. So he really *didn't* just want to be alone; he really just wanted to be away from Himchan.

"He loves you," Yongguk said.

But this hurt to think about. Himchan sat up straighter, mentally slapping himself.

"How's Sleepy?" he said briskly. "What did I miss?"

Yongguk let him change the subject. "He's singed around the edges, but okay."

"I still don't understand what happened. Where the hell was his team?"

"They'd spread out. They didn't know what Kim looked like so they couldn't track him coming in; they just saw him when he started talking to us. There were a few ways he could have left, and they had those covered. Once he set off the fucking explosives, it was such pandemonium, people were panicking, the others had trouble getting back to the scene."

Himchan sighed. "I can't believe it went down this way. I knew he was crazy, but this is a whole different level."

"Yeah. Well. I sent Jae and Daehyun to Incheon."

"What? What for?"

His friend blinked at him. "To get the other birds back to the fledglings."

Himchan almost laughed. "The things you think of at a time like this."

Yongguk shrugged. "I'm not into birdicide. Plus...I was thinking you might need some quiet at the garage for a day or two."

The last thing Himchan wanted was quiet. He longed for his friends' voices, loud and constantly overlapping and drowning out his thoughts.

"Oh," he said noncomitally.

"Plus, we could use the contacts in Incheon. Word is they've got a decent supply out there. From the sound of it, they'll be pretty grateful to have Kim out of their hair. We help them get back on their feet, we could get some new business, make up for staying low these past few months."

Himchan nodded even as his stomach dropped. He should be grateful for a return to business as usual. It would keep him busy, keep him distracted.

But all he felt was dread at the thought of picking things up again like nothing had happened. He'd been so hopeful about a future with Jongup. Going backwards without him felt a little like dying.

"Smart," was all he said. From Yongguk's face he could see his friend knew he was holding back, but he didn't push. For now.

Yongguk sat up straight suddenly and Himchan saw Sleepy approaching. A square white bandage graced his forehead, the only sign of the morning's events.

"How is he?" he asked Himchan when he reached them. Himchan let Yongguk answer. Sleepy nodded soberly. "I shouldn't have let Moon come along. It was outside his jurisdiction anyway," he said. Yongguk scoffed but Himchan got it. There was blame to share.

"Well, anyway," Sleepy sighed. "We've got another problem."

"Great," Yongguk said flatly.

"Your immunity was based on getting us Kim Taesong. Now, far as *I'm* concerned, you delivered. Some of the higher-ups don't see it that way. We don't even have a body on the guy, and now with the explosion, we've got a huge PR disaster on our hands."

This got Himchan's attention. "They're blaming us?" he said. The detective rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

"They're blaming me, too, if that helps."

"So what does this mean?" Yongguk said. His face had gone stony, and Himchan could sense the end of the cousins' truce nearing.

Sleepy met his gaze squarely.

"I need to bring you in," he said.

"No," Himchan said. Yongguk just looked at him, resigned. "*No*," Himchan said, sharper. "You know the deal. I'll go." It was an unspoken arrangement that stretched back to the beginning. Yongguk was the leader. In all things it was his job to protect his people--in all things, except this. This was Himchan's job. There was no group without Yongguk.

"Not happening," Yongguk told him through gritted teeth. (And now, come to think of it, Himchan seemed to remember his best friend staring at him stonily every time he brought up this arrangement. They'd been lucky enough not to have to fight it out before. It seemed their luck well had finally run dry.)

"The department's in chaos at the moment," Sleepy spoke up. "But that won't last long. Once they get their shit together, they'll probably just arrest all of you. You want to have any say in what happens next, you have to give me *someone*; I don't give a shit who."

The friends continued to glare at each other. Yongguk blinked first.

"Hyung, just give us a minute."

Sleepy shrugged, retreating down the hall to the vending machine.

"It can't be you," Himchan said immediately. "You know that."

"It cant be *you*," Yongguk countered. "You've got--responsibilities now." He glanced towards Jongup's room.

"He doesn't want me here."

"He loves you and you love him and if you walk away from that now you'll never forgive yourself."

Himchan didn't try to deny it. He already felt like a coward, sitting here. He should be with Jongup; let him yell at him if he needed to, Himchan deserved it. What kind of man was he to leave him alone with his grief?

"So what do we do," he said finally. "I know I complain a lot about Daehyun, but--"

Yongguk snorted and ducked his head. He stared at his feet for a long time before sitting up and waving to Sleepy. Himchan gave him a questioning look.

"It'll be okay," Yongguk told him. "You'll be okay."

Himchan's stomach dropped. "Bbang--"

"What are we doing?" Sleepy said, reaching them. Yongguk held Himchan's gaze a beat more, then stood up.

"Let's go," he said.

"*Bbang*." Himchan stood too, every instinct screaming for him to throw himself between his best friend and the detective.

"You think I'm letting one of you take the fall for this?" Yongguk hissed, his expression fierce. "Fuck that."

Sleepy looked less pleased than Himchan would have expected to finally be taking his cousin into custody.

"We'll be in touch," he told Himchan, who could do nothing but watch his best friend be led away, and to wonder how much there could possibly be left to lose.

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"Is this it?"

Jongup jumped as Junhong spoke; they'd driven in silence from the hospital. He blinked and looked around, taking in the familiar stretch of his neighborhood, the forbidding rectangle of his apartment building.

"Yeah. Thanks for the ride." He opened his door and Junhong opened his.

"Don't be dumb, I'm walking you up," he said. Jongup didn't argue. They trudged up the stairs--someone had finally cleared away the condom. It felt like years since he'd been home. By the time they reached his floor, his head was pounding and his stomach threatened revolt.

He didn't bother hiding his discomfort from Junhong, who was more observant than he looked and would see it anyway. Thankfully he didn't comment, simply followed Jongup down the hall and waited patiently while he fumbled with his keys.

The studio smelled musty, but not as bad as Jongup had expected. He frowned as his eyes fell on the table.

"Something wrong?" Junhong said. He deposited Jongup's backpack on one of the chairs.

"I just--thought I left some dishes out when I left," he said, recalling his hasty, post-pancake departure with Himchan after Kim's phone call. He looked around, noticing a plate and frying pan gleaming in the dish rack.

On a hunch, he opened the refrigerator. Fruit, meat and eggs lay fresh and neat on the shelves. He checked the cabinet. Ramyun, bags of rice.

"Himchan didn't want you to have to worry about grocery shopping," Junhong said from behind him. Jongup let the fridge door shut but he didn't turn back to the other.

"He didn't have to do that," he said.

"Take it up with him." Junhong's voice had gone flat and Jongup winced. He knew the maknae didn't understand his unwillingness to see Himchan; hell, Jongup's brain was plenty jumbled over it.

He missed Himchan the way he'd miss one of his limbs if he found himself suddenly without it.

But he'd had plenty of time to think, in between sessions of assuring various doctors that yes, he still knew his name and yes, he could still count backwards from fifty. And while he was afraid he--or his terrible, no good very bad luck--would somehow get Himchan killed, he was even more frightened that Himchan's job would do it instead. Or maybe he'd get carted off to prison. One way or another, Himchan would leave him, just like everyone. Why wait around for it to happen?

"Well, thanks for the ride," he said, turning back to Junhong. The taller boy narrowed his eyes at him.

"You know you could come back to the ga--"

"Thanks for the ride," Jongup repeated firmly. Junhong's shoulders sank.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Any time."

He left Jongup to put away the few things he'd taken to the garage. The studio felt too big. It was so *quiet*. Jongup had gotten used to the constant noise of the garage, Daehyun's way of bursting in without knocking, Himchan rarely out of Jongup's sight.

His phone rang and he dug it out of the backpack. He stared at the name and then, unable to help himself, answered.

"Hi."

There was a sigh on the other end. "*Hey*," Himchan said. "*You get home okay?*"

Jongup sank onto his mattress. "Junhong drove me," he said. "Thanks for the groceries. You know you didn't have to do that."

Himchan just made a dismissive noise.

"Listen, I'm just calling because--his funeral starts tomorrow."

Sleepy had taken the reins in arranging everything, with help from Jonghwan's coworkers from his precinct. They would be arriving in town over the three days of the funeral. All Jongup had to do was show up, sit next to his brother, greet the guests.

It was going to be torture.

"Yes," he said neutrally.

"Do you want me to come?" Himchan asked. The hesitation in his voice hurt Jongup to hear.

"Yes," he said, before he could stop himself. "Please. Just--at the end, maybe?"

"I can drive you home," Himchan said immediately, and Jongup nodded to himself. He might actually make it through the day if he knew he'd see Himchan at the end of it.

Only to say goodbye, he reminded himself sternly. *He deserves that.*

"Okay," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

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The funeral was predictably horrible. As Jonghwan's closest family, Jongup stood beside the casket all day, greeting people as they came in. The responses to Jongup were mainly quizzical; it seemed most of his coworkers had no idea he had a brother.

He supposed this was better than the alternative.

Every so often, Sleepy or Gookju would offer him food, or soju, but the idea of eating turned his stomach.

Jonghwan was really gone. The day felt like a funeral for Jongup's entire family at once, for any real hope in the future.

He was maybe the slightest bit depressed.

It was a relief when Junhong, Daehyun and Jae arrived. They looked very neat and somehow younger than usual in their suits. They bowed to the casket before greeting Jongup with a series of hugs and fist bumps that made him settle back into his body for the first time all day.

"How're you holding up?" Daehyun asked. "D'you need food or anything?"

"Nah, thanks. Sleepy's been offering every twenty minutes or so."

"Sleepy?" Daehyun's expression darkened and he turned to the room at large, searching for the detective. His shoulders tensed as he saw him, and he made as if to go to him. Jae hauled him back.

"Not here."

"What's going on?" Jongup said, staring. The last he'd seen, the detective still had an uneasy truce with the group.

"If he'd fought his bosses harder, Yongguk hyung wouldn't be--"

"Not *now*," Jae snapped a little louder. "Where are we right now?"

Daehyun remembered himself and relaxed his shoulders, though his fists stayed clenched at his sides.

"You're right. Sorry, Jongup," he muttered. Jongup shrugged. He was missing something, obviously, but he couldn't bring himself to care much.

"There's food," he offered, motioning to the back. His relief at seeing his friends had already faded, and now he just felt weary. They clapped him on the back and headed off--except Jae, who looked at him for a beat.

"You know he's basically climbing the walls until he can come," he said. Longing ignited in Jongup's chest.

"He's still coming later, right?" he said. Jae nodded.

"He'd have been here the whole time if you'd let him," he said, and Jongup wasn't imagining the censure in his tone. He couldn't meet his eyes. Jae let it go.

The hours went by in a numbed-out blur. Emotions passed over Jongup like cloud bursts and were gone: crushing guilt that he'd brought this on his brother. Fury at the people in the room who had known him, who could tell stories from the years of his life Jongup had missed and now would never know. Sorrow so bone-deep he felt ill with it.

Most people had left by the time Himchan finally arrived. He wore a suit like he'd been born in it, but Jongup couldn't take his eyes off his face, which was tight with fatigue. He bowed to the casket, lingering a second, before turning to Jongup.

He didn't slow down as he reached him, but rather took Jongup's hand and pulled him behind him and straight through a side door, which led to an alley outside. Jongup took a gulp of fresh air--his first real breath all day--before letting Himchan pull him into an embrace. He closed his eyes and breathed in the crook of his neck, felt Himchan rubbing his back gently. He relaxed for the first time.

"You looked like you needed a break," Himchan said. Jongup just nodded. He couldn't seem to let Himchan go, now that he was here, and he found himself apologizing into his neck again and again.

Himchan relaxed his hold on him and pulled back to look at him.

"Why are *you* sorry?"

"I don't think it was your fault," Jongup said. "That's not why--that's not what I meant." He realized his hands were clutching the lapels of Himchan's suit, crushing the fabric. He loosened his grip, but then Himchan's hands were just as solid at his hips, keeping him in place. His dark eyes searched Jongup's, reminding him of the first time they met.

"Then come home with me," he said finally, pleading. Jongup leaned into that voice, forgetting himself, almost giving in. He gave a start and pulled away.

"What's going on with Yongguk?" he asked, recalling Daehyun's unfinished sentence. Himchan grimaced.

"We don't have to talk about that right now."

"Just tell me," Jongup insisted, his heart sinking. If the leader had been hurt in the explosion somehow, surely Junhong would have told him, right?

Himchan sighed. "He's--taking the heat from the cops for what went down with Kim."

"*What?*"

"They needed someone to blame for the explosion, and for the guy at the garage and at that abandoned lot."

"But he wasn't even *at* the gar--"

"Doesn't matter," Himchan said. "That's the thing with scapegoats; doesn't matter if it was really their fault or not."

Jongup had a moment of ugly relief that he alone wasn't responsible for Himchan's clear unhappiness. He pushed it away.

"So what's happening?"

"He took a plea bargain. 5-7 years, so with good behavior...maybe three."

Jongup stared. Prison. Yongguk. He couldn't believe it--and yet of course it only confirmed what he'd been fearing all week.

"I'm sorry," he said. This would be almost as bad for Himchan as losing Jonghwan was for Jongup, if less permanent. He didn't want to ask his next question, but he had to. "You're in charge now?"

"For the moment." Himchan was still giving him that intense stare and Jongup swallowed hard. "Tell me why you won't come back."

It was so tempting to forget it; to go back and start a new life with Himchan and his friends, come what may.

Except he knew how that path would end.

"Everyone I ever care about gets taken away," he said dully. "You will, too." As the new leader of the gang, Himchan would be the top target of both police and the group's enemies. He'd be damned if he just stood by and waited to see who could get to him first.

"Jongup--" Himchan took a step closer but Jongup took a step back to compensate. Himchan smelled good enough to make his head swim and he needed all his strength.

"No. I love you, but--I can't do this."

Himchan stared at him for a long time. "I'm not asking you to do anything but come home," he said quietly. Jongup just shook his head. He made himself look at him, so he was watching when Himchan's heart finally broke.

Chapter End Notes

womp, womp

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You know you don't have to come as often as you do." Yongguk's voice was slightly distorted through the ancient phone's speaker but his gaze was direct through the smudged glass. Himchan ignored both, checking down the list he'd brought.

"We swapped out the corner boys the cops already know and sent a few of the good ones to Incheon. The crew's coming together out there and the product's good. Junhong's been taking point; he's got the best rapport with the new guys, maybe because they're closest in age--" Himchan rattled off the information easily enough, but most of his attention was focused on trying to ignore where they were sitting.

The prison smelled like sweat and metal, and seeing his best friend here was just one more unbearable thing in the long line of unbearable things Himchan had been forced to bear lately.

"Good; that's all good," Yongguk said when he finished. Himchan waved this away.

"What about you? Is that guard still giving you shit?" he asked with a scowl.

"No," Yongguk said. "He was transferred abruptly after I told you about him."

"Funny old world, isn't it?"

"Right." He rolled his eyes. "What'd you do, go to Sleepy?"

"It was the least he could do," Himchan said. Yongguk sighed.

"You don't have to call in favors for me, all right? Not over piddling shit like that. Woo's gone. We've actually got a few of ours in here--you remember Hyunsik?"

Himchan's eyebrows reached for his hairline. "Shit. Haven't heard that name in--what, four years?"

Hyunsik had been with them early--or maybe not quite *with* them, but at least adjacent. They never would have gotten all their territory without him.

"Yeah, it's been a minute," Yongguk agreed. "We've been talking and he's about to get out, could use some work. I think he'll be good; he's mellowed since we saw him last."

Himchan smiled a little, recalling the younger man's frenetic energy. "Send him our way, we'll hook him up."

Yongguk nodded. He scanned Himchan. "Enough business," he said abruptly. "How are you?"

"I'm thinking we should promote Hoony, he's been a real help lately."

"How are *you*, pabo."

Himchan sighed and slouched as much as the unforgiving metal chair would allow.

"I'm great."

"Daehyunnie said Jongup hasn't been by."

"Yeah, well, he wouldn't be," Himchan said, giving a harsh laugh. "That's done."

Yongguk scowled. "What the fuck happened?"

"I already tol--he doesn't want to be with me. There's not much I can do about that," Himchan said, shrugging, even though nothing had ever felt less shrug-worthy in his life. His best friend was glaring at him.

"Himchan--" he said, and stopped, and went quiet in that specific Yongguk-is-thinking way he had. Himchan waited. "I seem to remember you chucking an ashtray at my head when I found you five years ago," he said finally. "I seem to remember you telling me to get out--repeatedly--and leave you the fuck alone. You told me you hated me."

Himchan winced. His memories of those weeks were hazy, but he was fairly certain he'd said even worse than that. They'd never talked about it, and he didn't think he'd ever be ready to.

"I know," he said, ashamed. "I still don't know why you stayed when I was such a shit to you."

"I stayed," Yongguk said patiently, "because you're my brother. And because I had to hope that you didn't mean everything you said when you were in that much pain."

Himchan went still as this idea washed over him. "I didn't," he confirmed quietly. "Of course I didn't. It's not the same, though. Jongup--"

"Loves you and has lost everyone else he ever has. It's gotta feel inevitable to him at this point. There's probably just one way of proving him wrong." He leveled Himchan with a glare that he barely saw. He could feel his heart racing as the hope he'd spent the past few weeks quashing flowed back in. First, though--he met Yongguk's eyes.

"You know you saved my life, right?" he said. His friend looked suddenly bashful.

"I just helped you get off the drugs--"

"Same thing. You got me off the drugs and gave me somewhere to go."

"Yeah," Yongguk agreed. "But I never meant for you to feel like you had to stay *forever*. Channie, you know if there was ever--anything else you wanted to do...I'd want you to do it."

Jongup's face flashed in Himchan's mind, but then, Jongup's face had been flashing in Himchan's mind for weeks now. He pushed it away.

"I love you for that, Bbang, but you're in prison. If you think I'm gonna cut and run now, you don't know me very well," he said, insulted at the idea. But Yongguk shook his head.

"It's not running. Everything's shaking up anyway, so--hell, this might be a good cover; if Sleepy and the cops get wind that you're out, they might think the whole operation's gone bust."

Himchan gave him a doubtful look and Yongguk nodded. "Okay that's probably a stretch, but--Jae and Daehyunnie can run things, they know everything already. Junnie's doing so well with Incheon, let him take over recruitment. Promote Hoony, figure out what you need from Hyunsik. It'll be fine. I didn't save your ass so you could waste it on this shit when your heart's not in it anymore."

Himchan searched his gaze, looking for signs of uncertainty. Yongguk stared back calmly. Himchan's heart was really racing now. He pushed his chair back and his friend gave a satisfied nod.

"I'll be back same time next week," Himchan said.

"You don't have to."

"I'll be back same time next week."

Yongguk shook his head, but he was smiling slightly. "Then you'd better have good news for me when you do."

Himchan just managed not to run.

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"You know there are studies about what too much sugar does to the human body."

Jongup gave Sleepy a bored look and added another packet of sugar to his coffee. "Oh, really?"

The detective nodded. "I mean, I haven't read any of them, but I'm pretty sure it's something bad."

Jongup let out a reluctant laugh at this. "I'll take my chances."

"I'll take my chances, *hyung*," Sleepy corrected, kicking him. Jongup pulled a face. The cop had been trying to get him to call him *hyung* for weeks, ever since his survivor's guilt made him start showing up at his door with food and offers of help.

Your hyung saved my ass, he'd admitted when Jongup asked just what the hell he thought he was doing. *You were the most important thing to him, so--you need anything you just ask, all right?*

Jongup had no intention of asking, but the cop seemed to have no intention of waiting on him, either. He just showed up.

Jongup supposed it wasn't all bad. Sleepy didn't try to make him talk about anything personal. Mostly he just wanted to...hang out. They'd found a bar near Jongup's apartment with a roomful of pool tables and it turned out he was actually pretty good. He was developing a taste for beer. They'd order way too much food and Sleepy would commandeer the jukebox selections for hours at a time. It had been years since Jongup had listened to music--too many reminders of his father's single passion. Sleepy took those associations away, turning surprisingly animated as he shared his favorites.

It was the closest thing to normal Jongup had ever known, and when the detective texted him that morning to ask him to breakfast, for the first time he didn't hesitate to agree.

Of course, now that he was here, he was thinking about...things. He and Sleepy met at a diner a few blocks from his apartment. The smell of the place was so familiar that Jongup almost went to the kitchen to see if any dishes needed washing before he remembered he wasn't here to work.

Sleepy sat across from him, gamely trying to make conversation, but Jongup found himself struggling to respond. All he wanted was for the cop to be Himchan. Teasing him about how much sugar he put in his coffee was Himchan's *thing*.

He missed him badly, and not just now. It didn't seem to matter what he was doing; at all times he was aware of his absence. He'd lost track of how many times he'd stared at his name in his phone, thumb centimeters away from the call button. He kept reminding himself how it would feel to stand beside another casket with Himchan inside, or to return to prison to see him on the other side of the bars.

Tomorrow would be better, he assured himself daily.

Tomorrow seemed a long time coming.

"You been sleeping much?" Sleepy asked. Jongup tensed a bit and just shrugged. "You listen to that mixtape I sent you?"

He brightened at the subject change. "A lot. It's cool."

Sleepy nodded a few times expectantly, then rolled his eyes. "You know I think you might have a career in music reviews, Moon. People will line up to hear your scintillating take."

Jongup threw a sugar packet at him.

When they left the diner, the day had turned gray and windy.

"Want me to drop you at your place?" Sleepy offered.

"Nah." It was only three blocks. "Thanks, hyung."

The word felt strange in his mouth but the older man brightened.

"All right, then. I'll see you later."

They parted ways and Jongup made his way home.

*

"How'd he *seem*, though?" Jae pressed. Himchan had taken longer than expected getting home from the prison, and now that he was back, he was...weird. Distracted. Tapping away at the laptop with that hyper-focused look he got sometimes. Jae waved a hand in front of his eyes.

"Hyung," he pressed. Himchan blinked and reared back from his hand.

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"Trying to get you to tell me about *Yongguk hyung in prison*," Jae said loudly.

Himchan sighed and leaned back in his seat, giving the younger man his attention for the first time.

"He's fine, Jae, honestly. I think...part of him's been preparing for this for years, you know?"

Jae did know. It wasn't something they talked about, but they all knew prison was one of the better outcomes they could hope for in their line of work. And Yongguk was nothing if not a realist.

"Fair enough," he conceded. "But so--"

"I'm emailing you all the scheduling stuff," Himchan interrupted. "For the garage and the money drops and the usual re-ups. I just added some spots for you to add in dates for the Incheon trips."

"Why?"

"It's a lot to keep track of. Believe me, you don't want to trust all this shit to your memory."

"No, I mean--why are you sending it to me? You've always taken care of that stuff."

Himchan smirked at him. "Afraid you can't handle it?" he teased, and went back to typing. Jae stared at him.

"You're leaving," he realized quietly. Himchan's hands faltered on the keyboard. "Aren't you."

He gave Himchan a chance to refuse, to tell him about all the new shit he'd be taking on and so had to pass this over to Jae. He didn't. Jae had to swallow past a lump in his throat. It wasn't often he wanted this badly to be wrong.

"Yongguk's--sending us a new guy. Well, an old guy, kind of. You remember Hyunsik? I think you met him a few times--he's in with Bbang now but he's getting out soon and looking to join up."

"Answer the question, hyung."

Himchan sighed and rested his chin in his hand, scrunching his face at Jae.

"I need to try," he said. "With Jongup."

"You can't just bring him in?" Jae said. Even as he suggested it, he knew the answer. He'd tried calling Jongup. Junhong had tried. The younger man wanted nothing to do with them. After what had happened to his brother, Jae couldn't really blame him.

And he'd watched Himchan try to move on. He'd kept himself busy at all hours, working constantly. That wasn't exactly unusual, but he'd always enjoyed it more. Jae didn't think he'd heard him laugh once in weeks, and he doubted that was all down to Yongguk's absence.

"I'm not asking him to get involved in something that could get him hurt again, or sent back to prison. And it's not fair to ask him to get involved with *someone* who could, either," Himchan said.

Jae nodded quickly and bit his lip. It was stupid to get upset. Himchan was a--a *coworker*, that was all. People changed careers all the time.

He tried to ignore the fact this this was bullshit. Himchan had gotten him out of jail, and had been there for everything after, Jae's one constant in his chaotic new life. He and Yongguk were the two halves of the heart of the group; how exactly were they supposed to survive without either of them?

"Hey." Himchan frowned and stood up, put an arm around Jae, a rare affectionate gesture. "I'm not gonna disappear, all right? He'll probably shoot me down anyway. But even if he doesn't, I'd still see you guys all the time. You're my brothers, okay?"

The stupid lump in his throat only got bigger, and Jae just nodded quickly. It took him a second to be able to answer.

"Jongup's crazy about you, he'll take you back. We'll be over at your place all the time making you cook for us, I hope you know."

Himchan smiled. "You'd better."

*

Harry and Ron were making, in Jongup's opinion, a Very Bad Decision. Following spiders around forbidden forests, *honestly*.

He flinched embarrassingly as there was a knock at the door. He just stared wide-eyed for a beat as he was wrenched out the magical world of Harry Potter. Reality reasserted himself as there was a second knock.

He sighed and put his book on the bed, scrambling to his feet. His heartbeat didn't slow.

He expected to find Sleepy on the other side of the door, though they'd parted only hours before.

It wasn't Sleepy.

"Hi," Himchan said. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder and a slightly nervous look on his face. "Are you busy?"

His voice made Jongup shiver. "I was just reading." He moved back to let him in before he even thought about it. Himchan gave him a hesitant smile as he stepped inside. Jongup had to weave his arms tightly across his chest to keep from reaching for him.

Himchan put his backpack down and put his hands in his pockets. "How are you?"

"Fine," Jongup said automatically. Himchan just looked at him skeptically. "What are you doing here?" Jongup asked. His whole staying-away-from-Himchan thing had been much easier when Himchan stayed away from him back. Now it was taking all his strength not to pull him into his arms and never let go.

"I missed you," Himchan said. "And I've been worried about you. And I've been thinking about what you said at the funeral and I've decided it's crap. Respectfully."

"Really," Jongup said, nonplussed. Himchan started to nod, then halfway through changed his mind and shrugged.

"Well, Bbang helped me see it was crap. Or that I was being stupid, anyway," he amended. "I'm very annoyed with you, actually. When I was drugged, you told me you weren't going to disappear when things got rough. You got to be there, you got to *help me* when I really needed you. It's bullshit you're not letting me do the same for you right now."

Jongup tried to follow this, tried not to be just completely overwhelmed by the other man's voice and presence. Seeing him here was making it very hard to remember why breaking up had seemed like a good idea in the first place. Jongup was positive he'd had a reason.

When he didn't answer, Himchan went on. "You may have had a point about some of it, though," he conceded. "Maybe it's not fair to ask you to be with me when my life's got so many guns and so much illegal shit in it."

Oh, right. Now Jongup remembered.

"So what?" he said.

"Soooooooo...I'm quitting."

He stared at Himchan, who just looked back at him calmly. He must have misheard.

"You're what?"

"Quitting the gang," Himchan repeated. "I already transferred my files over to Jae, plus we've been bringing in some new people from--you know what, you don't need to hear about that."

Long story short, they'll be fine without me. So I'm done." He smiled at Jongup's dumbfounded expression. "Your move."

The younger man was reeling. "How can you just--quit? That's your life. They're your family."

"They always will be." Himchan's smile faded. "Nothing'll ever change that."

"Himchan, this changes everything," Jongup corrected. Himchan's eyes narrowed.

"Does it?" he asked pointedly.

Your move, he'd said. Now he was staring Jongup down and waiting for him to do something.

Do something, Jongup.

He couldn't move. Everything in him was screaming at him to go to Himchan, yet at the same time, everything was *also* screaming that this was stupid, this was a trick, Himchan still had enemies who could come after him any time, there was no safety for him in Seoul, and therefore none for Jongup.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there in silent panic, but then suddenly Himchan was there and he was linking his arms lightly around Jongup's waist and he smelled good and Jongup could see the tiny mole next to his eye and he'd *missed* that mole and--the various shouting voices in his mind ground to a halt.

"Hi," Himchan said again, and smiled, and fuck if Jongup hadn't forgotten how that smile hit him like a punch to the gut every time--if a punch to the gut felt really, really nice.

"Let's try this again. I say, *Hey, Jonguppie, I quit the gang*. Now you say...?" And he waited expectantly. Jongup opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. Himchan sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was very gentle. "I get it, okay? You've lost so much already, of course you think it's better to fucking box yourself away from the world rather than go through it again. I don't blame you for that. But if you aren't gonna be with me, it's not gonna be because you're scared. I intend to live a very boring life from now on."

Jongup found himself leaning into Himchan without meaning to. He closed his eyes in the hopes it would be easier to think without looking at the other man's gorgeous face. Himchan let him be for a long beat before nudging his nose with his own. Jongup's eyes flew open. They were very, very close.

"This can still be simple," Himchan said quietly. "Just you and me in a room, remember?" He moved back, his expression turning apprehensive. "Unless you don't want to."

Want, right. Jongup had gotten so good over the years at ignoring what he wanted because it was too often impossible. He'd wanted his mother to stay. He'd wanted his father to stop drinking, to be the kinder version of himself he showed so rarely. He'd wanted Jongin to stay,

had wanted someone to rescue him from prison, had wanted to be able to sleep safely with both eyes closed at the group home.

He wanted his brother back.

He reached cautiously into his well of want and found one more thing. It was standing right in front of him.

He broke. It took only a half a step to press himself against Himchan, to breathe into his shoulder. *Come home*, Himchan had asked at the funeral. Jongup knew the second he felt his arms wrap around him that he just had.

"I'm sorry," he said, muffled against him.

"Me too," Himchan said. He pressed his lips against his temple. "I'm so sorry, Jonguppie."

Jongup held him tighter, then remembered himself and jerked away.

"I forgot--your ribs--"

Himchan caught his flailing hands and squeezed.

"I'm okay. Not a hundred percent yet, but getting there. Haven't taken any painkillers in almost a week." He looked so shyly proud of this that Jongup leaned in and kissed him. Himchan kissed him back lightly, sweetly, his fingertips just barely touching Jongup's jaw. It was nothing hot and heavy, yet Jongup found himself breathless when they parted. Himchan traced his forehead, the new scar that was still pink and healing.

"What about you?" he said. Jongup understood he meant more than just his head.

"Better than I was five minutes ago," he said honestly, and Himchan smiled, drawing him in to kiss him again. Jongup found himself walking him backwards towards the mattress.

Because it was the most comfortable place to sit in the studio, obviously.

They parted finally and Himchan didn't comment, merely kicked off his shoes before sitting down. He picked up Jongup's discarded book.

"Junhong's obsessed with those movies. Read to me?" He scooted back to make room and Jongup paused for a beat before joining him, just enjoying the sight of him.

"This is the second book," he objected, taking it back. "I'm almost finished, you won't know what's going on." Himchan grinned crookedly.

"So just tell me what I missed."

"There's kind of a lot..."

Himchan's index finger played under the collar of Jongup's t-shirt. "You have somewhere to be?" he asked. Jongup felt him press against his pulse point, saw his attention waver, his eyes

flickering down to his throat.

For his part, Jongup's gaze dropped to Himchan's lips, which had parted slightly.

The hell with Harry Potter.

Jongup dropped the book just as Himchan's hand slipped behind his neck and pulled him down insistently. He didn't resist, sliding his mouth across Himchan's and his body over his. He caught his weight on his arms and pulled back.

"Is this okay? I don't wanna hur--"

"I won't break," Himchan said peevishly. "It's been like a thousand years, just get down here and kiss me alr--"

Jongup cut him off cleanly by sticking his tongue down his throat. In a totally romantic and not-at-all desperate way, of course.

Himchan didn't seem to mind. He kissed Jongup with equal fervor, one hand snaking under his shirt and up his back. They parted when he reached Jongup's shoulders so he could shed the t-shirt, then Himchan pulled him down again, hands running insistently over his back and sides.

This seemed unfair.

Jongup sat up, forcing himself not to grind down on the man beneath him.

"You have too many clothes on. A hoodie? What were you thinking?"

Himchan laughed as he struggled out of the thick fabric. "I was thinking I should get over here before I lost my nerve." He had a black t-shirt on under the hoodie and Jongup tutted at it disapprovingly until Himchan took it off, too.

"Much better," Jongup murmured, sliding his hands down the other man's sides and watching his face for any sign he was in pain. Himchan pinched him lightly through a hole in his jeans.

"I'm okay, I promise."

Good, because Jongup really, really didn't want to stop.

He leaned in to kiss him again, bare chest to bare chest. The feeling made him gasp--or maybe it was when Himchan rolled his hips up against his own.

"Tell me how you like it," Himchan mumbled against his lips.

Jongup hummed back. Words seemed very difficult right now. But he very much liked everything that was happening, and he very much liked where it was going. He settled himself on his elbows so he could look at Himchan's face, which was flushed and easily the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"What do *you* like?" he countered. Himchan smiled. He traced Jongup's lips with his thumb.

"I don't really give a shit as long as I can touch you," he said.

"Well, that's what I was gonna say," Jongup said. Himchan laughed again, and Jongup decided. "I want you to fuck me," he said, with more bravado than he felt. "Okay?"

He wasn't a virgin, but he'd never been with anyone who wanted *him* before and not just some body. He wanted to know what it felt like with someone who did.

"You sure?" Himchan said quietly, brushing the hair back from his eyes. Jongup nodded--then cursed.

"I don't have anything," he realized. He didn't even have *lube*; he always made do with soap in the shower.

"I...may have brought some stuff," Himchan confessed. "It's in my bag."

Jongup dropped his head to the older man's shoulder and bit down lightly. "Thank God," he muttered, scrambling to his feet to retrieve Himchan's backpack. "I'm not even gonna tease you for being overconfident."

He turned back to see Himchan sitting up, watching him. Shirtless. In his bed. For the first time, it hit him what they were about to do.

Fucking *finally*.

"I love you," he blurted out. Himchan raised his eyebrows.

"I love you too," he said simply. "Now come. Here."

Jongup went. He straddled Himchan and palmed him through his jeans, making him curse.

"Why are you still wearing these?"

"Look who's talking."

They separated long enough to strip (and long enough for Jongup to update his "most beautiful thing he'd ever seen"), then Himchan rolled him onto his back and began kissing a path down his chest.

"I like this," he mumbled against him. "It's the least bruised I've ever seen you."

"I'm trying to--ah!--set a record," Jongup managed, gasping as Himchan's tongue flicked over a nipple. The older man peered up at him, smirking.

"A *21 days without an injury* kind of thing?" he said. Jongup could only nod, his voice catching in his throat as Himchan moved determinedly downward. "I'm a fan of this," he murmured. When his tongue slid along Jongup, the younger man's back arched off the bed.

Still he didn't take his eyes off of Himchan, wanting to remember every moment. He couldn't believe he'd almost let this go.

It was too much; he could feel his release hurtling toward him, too fast. He pulled Himchan back up so he could kiss him. He couldn't stop his hips lifting to meet the other man's; they both gasped.

"Wait--hold on--" Himchan said, groping for his backpack and finding the condoms and lube therein. He put them on the pillow and returned to Jongup, kissing him languidly. "I can't believe you called me overconfident," he chided, smiling. "I just believe in the power of positive thinking."

"Consider me a convert," Jongup said, not kidding at all. Himchan was naked in his bed, Himchan loved him, Himchan was *changing his life for him*, how was any of this possible?

Himchan reached down and took both of them in his hand and Jongup stopped breathing, which was fine, this was fine, he was *fi*--

It was several galaxies removed from fine.

It was Himchan's breath mingling with his, Himchan's fingers linking through his, Himchan fucking *inside of him*. It was Himchan looking at him as if he couldn't believe *his* luck, which was all kinds of backwards, but who was Jongup to argue. It was perfect exquisite pleasure, it was stars bursting behind his eyes as they went over the edge together.

After, they lay tangled together, spent. Himchan massaged Jongup's lower back gently. Jongup's fingers combed through his sweat-dampened hair. For the moment, his fears and doubts were blissfully silenced, but he could sense them circling, trying to find their way back in.

"Don't," Himchan whispered. Jongup stilled and the older man shook his head. "Don't freak out on me now. Everything's fine."

He wondered how long it would take to get used to being seen so clearly.

"I just--I don't want your friends to hate me," he said, letting one tiny doubt-ghoul into the house.

"Why would they--?"

"Because I'm taking you away." Even as he fought his guilt, Jongup felt a thrill at the thought of being *chosen*. He didn't care if it was selfish. He'd pushed Himchan away once. Now that he had him, he didn't think he could let him go again. If he could have one stupidly boring life with him, he'd die happy.

"It's my choice," Himchan said bracingly. "Bbang and Jae already know. Junnie's out of town so I'll have to talk to him, and I'll wait to tell Daehyun until I can feed him, but--it'll be okay." He looked slightly like he was trying to convince himself, but his eyebrows were furrowed

stubbornly. "It'll be fine." His eyes lost their distant look and focused on Jongup and his face softened.

"That reminds me, I have something for you," he said, rolling to the edge of the mattress to grab his backpack. Jongup slapped his ass, since it was there and all. Himchan swatted him away, grinning, and sat up to rifle through the contents.

"What were you gonna do if I turned you down?" Jongup asked, eyeing the bag. It looked like half of Himchan's wardrobe had been stuffed inside.

"Beg," Himchan said promptly. "It would've been embarrassing, but--ah, here--" He took out a battered rectangle and held it out to Jongup.

It was his PCSAT workbook.

"I left this at the diner," he said, giving Himchan a questioning look.

"Kyung held onto it."

Jongup winced. "You talked to him?" He'd managed to ignore his guilt at simply disappearing from work without a word, but now it welled up again.

"I hope that's okay," Himchan said. "He was worried about you--I explained...some of what happened. You've still got a job there, if you want it. I've got a car, you wouldn't have to do the whole three bus thing if you didn't want to."

The workbook's cover had attained a thin greasy film from weeks tucked away in the kitchen. Jongup ran his finger down the spine thoughtfully. The version of himself who had actually contemplated taking the entrance exams and going back to school felt very distant after everything that had happened.

"I'll help you study," Himchan offered. "I want you to do whatever you want to do."

He'd said it once before, and for the first time, Jongup thought of the envelope of money the older man had given him. It was currently stuffed in a hole in the mattress. Whatever he wanted? Himchan was already in his bed; it had never occurred to Jongup he might be allowed to want--to *have*--more than one thing.

"I don't know what that is," he admitted. Himchan took the book from him and set it on the floor, drawing Jongup to his chest and laying back.

"I don't either." The older man's voice was growing heavy, sleepy. "D'you think it'd be terrible if we waited to think about it til tomorrow?"

Jongup smiled. He could hear Himchan's heartbeat, steady under his ear.

Tomorrow. He'd made it.

Chapter End Notes

this was supposed to be like five chapters, lol

Just the epilogue to go and we can put this one to bed <3

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was after midnight and the rain was spattering Junhong coldly in the face and to add insult to injury, he'd been shot.

He really hated getting shot.

Thankfully, he still had wits and blood enough left to drive. Thankfully, the back streets of Seoul were all but empty on such a shitty night. Thankfully, he had somewhere to go.

The clinic's lights were still on--dimly, but on--when he pulled in across the street. The front door was locked, but he'd expected as much. He made his stumbling way around the building until he found a side door, and then it was the work of a few minutes to pick the lock.

A few minutes, ugh--he was losing his touch.

It smelled of bleach and antiseptic inside, making Junhong lightheaded, unless that was just the blood loss. He held both hands to his shoulder, trying to staunch the flow of blood. He stumbled in the dark a bit before finding a brightly lit corridor.

The place was silent and he could only guess which way to go. He found himself in front of an open office where a man in blue scrubs sat behind a computer.

Junhong sagged against the doorway.

"You take walk-ins, or do I need an appointment?" His voice was loud in the quiet room and the figure jumped.

"Junhong." Himchan was out of his seat in a moment and had an arm around him. "What happened?"

"Well, doc, I think I've been shot."

His hyung slapped the back of his head lightly. "Not quite what I meant, pabo, c'mon--" He helped Junhong into the wide empty exam room next door and sat him down on one of the tables before rifling through a cabinet for supplies. "Lucky for you I'm working so late," he muttered.

Junhong was looking around appreciatively. "The clinic looks so good, hyung, like a real doctor's office." Himchan cast a swift glare his way. "Which--it is." He coughed. "Sorry I couldn't make the grand opening."

"*Grand* might be overstating it; it's a free clinic, not some fancy hospital."

"Still. It's yours. You did this," Junhong insisted stoutly. "It's really cool."

"Thanks, Junnie," Himchan said, and he could see him flushing slightly, biting back a pleased smile. His hyung was so cute.

Less cute when he set to work on his shoulder.

"You're not gonna tell me what happened?" he asked. Junhong gave another hiss of pain.

"Thought you didn't want to hear about that stuff anymore."

"Just making conversation. Hey, how's the new apartment?"

He brightened. "Good. Real good. Quiet, though."

Himchan laughed through his nose, not taking his eyes off his work. "You get used to that, eventually."

"Yeah, I--" Junhong broke off abruptly as he felt the unmistakable pressure of a gun against the back of his head. He froze. Himchan glanced up, then past him. His expression turned exasperated.

"Do I look like I'm in danger to you?" he asked mildly. The pressure disappeared and Junhong chanced a glance behind him. Jongup looked both sleep-rumpled and annoyed.

"Heyyy hyung," Junhong greeted him. "Long time no see."

"Hey Junnie." Jongup came around the table. "Didn't recognize you with the new haircut. You okay?"

"Just shot again, I'll live."

"What are you doing here?" Himchan asked. Jongup was still scowling, an odd look for him.

"He tripped the new alarm," he said shortly. "I tried calling you, but--"

Himchan winced, which seemed unfair as *he* wasn't the one having stitches threaded through his skin. "I left my phone in my coat. Sorry, Jonguppie."

The younger man just nodded and tucked his gun in his jacket before crossing the room to check the windows were closed.

"I didn't mean to piss him off," Junhong said in a low voice.

"Don't worry, it's not you. He isn't so happy with me right now," Himchan muttered with a sigh.

"Because of your plans?"

Himchan gave him a questioning look.

"Jae told me what you're gonna do with the clinic," Junhong clarified. "I think it's awesome."

"Yeah, well. Did he also tell you Jonguppie's been making him set up a different security system every other week?"

Junhong glanced over at Jongup, whose tension he could feel across the room. It wasn't like him to be so paranoid. Everyone knew Himchan could take care of himself. But Junhong had been spending most of his time in Incheon lately; maybe he'd missed something.

"He might have and I just wasn't listening. What's Jongup hyung afraid of--like if gang members and street kids start showing up here for medical attention you're gonna go all nostalgic and start missing the old days?"

He knew how unlikely this was. It could almost have been insulting how well and how quickly Himchan had adjusted to life outside the gang. He'd returned to school and undergone a court-ordered rehabilitation so that he could get back into medicine.

This clinic had been in the works for over a year, located in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Seoul where doctors were few and far between. When Jae told Junhong that the ultimate plan was for it to be a safe space for anyone looking to avoid the law and seek treatment, he thought it seemed a logical enough next step.

"I think he's more worried about some rival groups shooting up the place," Himchan said dryly.

"Oh." Junhong considered this. "I guess it *could* be dangerous. You're really gonna treat anyone?"

"That's the safest way. It'll be like the Den, you know? Neutral territory. At least that's the hope." Himchan pulled the stitches tight and cut the ends cleanly before frowning up at Junhong. "Do you know how many unidentified bodies roll through this city? Usually shot or stabbed? Usually around your age? It's crazy, and a lot of it'd be avoidable if they weren't too afraid of getting arrested to go to the hospital."

He didn't look behind him but Junhong knew he must be imagining Jongup as he'd been four years earlier, constantly bruised and battered and completely alone. In that light, his motivation made sense.

"And you can do it legally? I mean, the cops won't try to--raid the place, or--?"

"Thanks to Sleepy we should be good. Something about the PD wanting to cut down on all these dead-end murder investigations--apparently the body count makes them look bad."

"That's not the only thing," Junhong grumbled and Himchan snorted.

"But yeah, I'm sticking to the line of the law with this one." He looked at Jongup again, who was pacing restlessly. As they watched, there was a sudden knock at the front door. Jongup pulled his gun out as he went to check. Himchan tensed as the younger man disappeared for a beat, then relaxed as they heard a familiar voice, inappropriately loud for the late hour.

"Jonguppie! I didn't know you'd be here!"

Junhong slouched into a pout, even though this was technically his own fault. This was what he got for keeping his hyungs posted.

Jongup returned a second later, followed closely by Daehyun.

"Reunion," he sang. "Nice scrubs, Channie." Himchan just grunted in greeting and Daehyun turned to Junhong. "And *you*, maknae--we let you move out and look what happens! Shot in less than a month."

"This was unrelated," Junhong said, not that it would do any good. Trying to stop Daehyun fretting over his friends was as useful as trying to convince the sun to stop shining.

"We're almost done," Himchan said before the interrogation could really get underway. Junhong wanted to hug him as he drew Daehyun's attention away.

"Hey, you're still coming Friday, right?" he asked. Himchan spared him a glance.

"Is that a serious question?"

Daehyun ignored his tone. "It's gonna be great!" he said brightly.

"Just don't get carried away," Himchan said. "We're not going for shock and awe here, Daehyunnie."

"Carried away?" he repeated, indignant. "When have I ever gotten carried away?"

It seemed safest for no one to answer.

*

Jongup was silent as he drove them home. He was silent as they rode the elevator up to their floor. He was silent as they brushed their teeth and washed their faces, crowding up against each other in their tiny bathroom.

Himchan just waited. Four years with Moon Jongup had taught him patience he wasn't sure he'd have learned otherwise.

He was pulling on an old pair of gym shorts to sleep in when the younger man finally spoke.

"We need to do something about that side door. Anyone halfway decent at picking a lock just needs five minutes, tops, and they're in."

"You're right," Himchan said. "Seems like your security system rig worked just fine, though."

"It took me too long to get there," Jongup objected. "If it hadn't been Junhong--"

"But it *was* Junhong." Jongup was worrying his jacket in both hands. Himchan tugged it away gently before he could rip the lining. He captured his hand to pull him to bed. "It's fine." His boyfriend didn't look comforted.

"For now," he muttered. "What happens when you put out the word that gang members can come to you for treatment, no questions asked? What happens if someone you faced off against in the old days comes in and they're holding a grudge?"

"We'll have security, Jongup-ah." Himchan ducked his head to meet his gaze. "You don't think I could handle it?"

"I know *you* could. I'm not sure I can."

Jongup's voice was very low but Himchan heard him clearly. He sighed and settled himself on his side, facing him, running two fingers along his furrowed brow.

"I'm not going to take any chances I don't need to. You know why I want to do this. A few months ago you liked the idea, so what's really going on here?"

Jongup lay on his back, frowning at the ceiling. He was quiet for a long time, hands moving compulsively against each other the way they always did when he was upset. Himchan gave him one of his hands to play with instead and Jongup toyed with his fingers.

"Friday..." he sighed finally.

Himchan had had a feeling. "Nothing's going to change, Jongup."

He got a soft snort in return. Jongup still wouldn't look at him so he scooted closer until he was flush against him. "Seriously, what do you think will happen?"

Jongup's eyes slid to him, then away.

"I know I'm being stupid."

"Nah. Now *crazy*--maybe."

Jongup pinched the skin between Himchan's thumb and forefinger and he pulled his hand back with a yelp. "*Jonguuup*..." He rolled over on top of the smaller man where he couldn't avoid him. "Bbang's coming home. We'll go to his welcome thing Friday. It'll be fun."

Fun, or something. He still couldn't believe it was only a few more days. Yongguk had been gone almost four *years*. In some ways the time had flown, filled to the brim as it was with his new life. There had been school again and new jobs and, most recently, opening the clinic.

And of course there had been Jongup. Himchan had promised him a boring life but it had been anything but, or maybe he'd just been too fucking happy to care.

Life with Jongup was pancakes cooked up at midnight, syrup-flavored kisses after.

It was morning sex, right after the first cup of coffee but before Jongup's first class and Himchan's shift, starting the day in the best way possible.

It was teaching Jongup to drive and discovering the hilarious mishmash of curses he'd picked up over the years.

It was countless attempts at shower sex even though it was *always* awkward as someone was *always* left out of the warm water and the floor was dangerously slippery. It was learning that shower blow jobs were really the way to go.

It was sleeping curled around the smaller man, or with Jongup spread out over him. It was waking up to that *smile* and wondering each time how he'd managed to live so long without it.

Jongup looked troubled under him now. Himchan kissed him softly, then nipped at the end of his nose.

"Talk to me," he prodded.

Jongup sighed. "I'm glad he's getting out," he said slowly. "But--once he and the others start talking about business--"

"Oh. I'll get sucked back in, is that it?" Himchan guessed. Jongup gave the best shrug he could manage from his pinned-down position. Himchan pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Let me tell you what'll happen Friday," he said. "We'll go to the party. We'll eat some good food and drink a little too much and catch Bbang up and try to keep him and Sleepy from killing each other--"

Jongup bit his lip against his threatening smile. Encouraged, Himchan went on.

"He and I will wander off and he'll get all maudlin about old times until Junhong comes to the rescue..."

Jongup's smile was widening. His hands crept down Himchan's back to grab his ass firmly.

"And yeah, at some point, they'll all get together and start talking business. At which point you will put me in the car and we will drive home together, where I will slowly...relieve you...of every...piece...of clothing you have on." He punctuated this last point by slipping Jongup's t-shirt up and over his head, then beginning a slow slide down his body.

Jongup was turning pliant beneath him, tensed muscles relaxing, hands tangling in Himchan's hair and tugging.

"You won't feel...left out?" he managed, his voice strained as Himchan's lips reached the waistband of his shorts. Himchan lifted his head to glare at him.

"You think I'll be thinking about my friends while I'm in bed with you?" he demanded.

"I'm just saying--"

"Sure, happens all the time! When you've got three fingers in my ass I always find myself thinking *gee, wonder how Jae's handling the garage schedule without me*. My cock's in your mouth and I'm thinking about how Junhong's doing in Inche--" He started to rise to his knees as he ranted, but Jongup's legs wrapped around his hips suddenly and pulled him back against him.

"Okay, I get the point." He was smiling, which was extra irritating now that Himchan was so annoyed. But he could never stay mad at Jongup for long and the younger man knew it. "I just...I don't want you to regret anything."

Himchan relaxed onto him. "I don't regret one second, you hear me? I never could."

Jongup's smile had faded, but it came back now, mostly in his eyes.

"I *am* being stupid," he said.

"First time for everything," Himchan said graciously. "Now be quiet, there was something I was about to do, what was it..." His hand crept down and Jongup's breath caught.

"I didn't mean to distract you."

"Just give me a second to...try to put my finger on it..."

Jongup snorted and lifted his hips as Himchan pushed his shorts down, and then, very quickly, neither had the breath to spare for talking.

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Yongguk was fairly sure that bringing a baby was cheating.

Sungjae had the biggest smile and the chubbiest legs of any toddler Yongguk had ever seen. Sleepy deposited him in his arms as soon as he climbed out of Daehyun's car.

"Sungjae, meet your idiot cousin Bang," he said, grinning. He looked more relaxed than Yongguk remembered. He looked between the boy, babbling happily in his arms, and the detective.

"You're lucky you take after your mother in the looks department," he told Sungjae seriously. Sleepy let out a bark of laughter and cuffed the back of his head. "Congratulations," Yongguk told him, sincere now. He could see Daehyun relax slightly behind them; clearly he'd been expecting a fight.

Then Junhong was there, and Sleepy was taking his son back so Yongguk could hug his maknae. He glared at the bandage on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Himchan hyung patched me up," Junhong said, all dimples and shining eyes, so touchingly pleased to see him that Yongguk felt himself blush.

Jae and Daehyun were their noisiest and most excitable selves and Hyunsik and Hoony were there, as well as a sea of other faces, most familiar, others bowing and introducing themselves with clear awe. Yongguk tried not to flinch too obviously as they surrounded him. He found himself struggling to hear words and not just *noise* as he was greeted again and again. There were slaps to his back and someone thrust a drink into his hand, which he downed gratefully, but all the while he searched the crowd for the face that was missing.

Jae nudged him.

"He's coming," he said in a low voice. "Probably got caught up at the clinic--ahh, see, there!" He pointed and Yongguk watched a new car pull into the garage lot. Jongup slid out of the passenger seat but Yongguk only had eyes for his best friend. There was no shocking change to adjust to; Himchan had visited him weekly without fail. But it was different without the smudgy glass between them. Himchan's expression was taut somehow, his eyes searching the crowd.

There came a happy shriek as Sungjae toddled their way, making a beeline for Jongup, who picked him up and promptly turned him upside-down, blowing a raspberry onto his belly. Yongguk could hear the toddler's delighted giggles from across the lot, and he was momentarily distracted by the sight of Jongup for the first time in years. The old wary look was gone from his eyes. He laughed as he put the toddler over his shoulder and greeted Sleepy with easy familiarity. Himchan came up behind him and placed a quick kiss on Sungjae's cheek before his eyes finally found Yongguk.

They met each other halfway.

"Welcome home, Bbang," Himchan said, hugging him tightly enough to cut off his air supply, and for the first time, Yongguk felt some of the distant unreality of the afternoon fade.

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Of course, it didn't completely disappear. There were so many people, and they all wanted to tell Yongguk how glad they were to see him, how much he'd been missed. After four years of keeping himself to himself, it was overwhelming. When he caught his shoulders tensing almost to his ears, he excused himself to sit on the trunk of a car off in the corner with a beer and just watched. Some of the crowd had thinned, thankfully, but it was a relief not to talk for a few minutes.

A soft voice from beside him made him flinch.

"Takes some getting used to, doesn't it." Jongup slid up on the trunk, keeping a small distance between them.

"What does?"

"Being back in the world." The younger man met his gaze and it hit Yongguk that he actually understood.

"I forgot," he said, a bit shamefaced. "That you...knew." He shook his head. It had seemed so important, once, Jongup's past. But after four years of watching his best friend's face light up every time he said his name, of hearing all the ways he had been unquestionably good to him and good *for* him, Yongguk had simply forgotten that Moon Jongup had spent the better part of his adolescence in a cell not unlike the one Yongguk had just left.

Jongup nodded as though he could hear these unspoken thoughts.

"I should have visited you," he said abruptly. "I know we weren't super close or whatever, but you're Himchan's best friend. I should've shown up, I'm sorry."

But Yongguk shook his head. If anyone could understand this particular reluctance, it was him. "I wouldn't want to go back, either," he said. "How long did it take you to feel...normal? When you got out?" He felt oddly shy asking, but also a little desperate. He wanted to be done with this strange out-of-place feeling. He wanted to feel *home*.

Jongup took his time answering and Yongguk followed his gaze across the lot to where Himchan was fussing over Junhong's shoulder. The maknae was doing his best to ignore him and Jae was trying to get his attention, talking loudly about something or other and gesturing emphatically while Daehyun sat on the makeshift bar they'd set up and just laughed at them all.

The sight stirred something deep and happy in Yongguk's chest.

"It was different for me," Jongup said finally. "I didn't have any normal I could go back to. I didn't start feeling *safe* until I moved in with Himchan."

Yongguk could relate. How many foster homes had he run away from and straight back to Himchan's messy bedroom?

"He's good like that," he said, and Jongup smiled, still watching the other man from a distance.

"I'm gonna ask him to marry me," he said.

Yongguk let the words sink in. "Oh," he said finally. Jongup gave him an assessing look and Yongguk blinked at him. "Are you asking for my permission?"

Jongup laughed. "I don't need your permission." He paused. "I'd like your, I dunno...blessing...though."

Yongguk didn't hesitate. "You've got it." At Jongup's surprised stare, he shrugged. "Honestly, I thought you might've done it years ago."

"I wanted to wait til I graduate. Plus it wouldn't've been right while you were gone." Jongup gave a lopsided shrug. "Not that we'd need some big ceremony or whatever, just...he'd want you there." Yongguk nodded, more touched by this than he let on.

"Yeah, well. You make him happy, so no complaints from me."

Jongup accepted this with a nod. "D'you ever think about it?" he asked. "Getting out for real?"

Yongguk glanced around the garage lot, his friends, then up at the dark apartment windows above. If he knew his dongsaengs, he'd find his old room exactly as he'd left it. Except hopefully cleaner.

"How could I leave?" he said. "This is my life."

"It was Himchan's, too. You're the one who told him to leave."

"He was already done when I did," Yongguk said. "I'm not."

Something in his tone made Jongup look at him probingly. Yongguk just arched a brow back and waited.

"You mean..."

"I mean."

Something dark flashed across Jongup's face, and for a beat Yongguk could see him as he'd been four years ago.

"Call it my wedding gift to you," he said, and the younger man snorted without much amusement.

"I'll take it. Thank you."

They clasped hands briefly.

"What's all this?" Suddenly Himchan was there, squeezing between them on the car and looking between them. "You two are so serious over here." Yongguk could see from the color high in his cheeks that he'd been drinking, but the question in his eyes was clear enough.

"Just getting maudlin about old times," Jongup said, which seemed to be an inside joke because Himchan elbowed him and laughed.

"Why I oughtta--" he said, but his threatening tone was undercut by the smacking kiss he lay on the younger man's cheek.

"Aishh," Jongup mumbled, flushing and pleased. Yongguk noted the way he leaned into Himchan's touch, the way his eyes went crescent-shaped and soft when he looked at him.

Yongguk could think of worse futures for his best friend. And as the others joined them by the car--only the *essential* others this time, the Junhong Daehyun and Jae pieces of Yongguk's heart--he felt himself slide back into his own life again for the first time. Maybe there was a future worth thinking about for him, too.

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Three Months Later

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The house was like any other on the block. It was immaculate but nondescript, the kind of place your eyes slid past without noticing.

Of course, that was sort of the point.

It wasn't so meticulous inside. When he smashed through the back door, he could smell dust and sweat and stale cooking scents, the air dull and uncirculated for too long.

The house's single occupant made a desperate dash for the front door, but he'd already hit it a few times with the nail gun, the noise muffled by the garbage truck idling down the street. There was no getting out.

Still, Snail tried the handle for too long, disbelieving that it had come to this. Finally he turned back, resigned, looking past the gun barrel aimed at his temple.

"I guess you know I've been looking for you," Yongguk said.

Chapter End Notes

Gotta finish on an up note, right??

I just wanted to say a huge thank you to everyone for reading, for the kudos and comments. This story was really out of my comfort zone and I know it's kind of a mess, but the encouragement helped more than I can say. <3

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