

Pas de Deux

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Pas de Deux

by [kunfessions](#)

Summary

Under Central's totalitarian regime, people with Gifts - supernatural abilities - are hunted down and experimented on.

“Fate is inevitable, Chanyeol.” The serene look on Kyungsoo’s face was inscrutable. “Just because you can See it doesn’t mean you can avoid it. Sometimes all you can do is be ready when it comes knocking.”

Notes

Edit: Finally finished just in time for EXO-L anniversary. Took me 9 months to finally edit and polish the fic to completion. Special thanks to Nani, Weilin, and Niki for the help they lent in beta reading this fic. Thanks as well to [harajukucrepes](#) for unwittingly making me want to finish editing this fic as I was so close to just letting this go without looking through it again.

I don't own nor am I associated with any of the people in the fic.

Prompt BAE274 from BAE2020. Please mind the tags. Different split indicator '~~~' indicates start and end of NSFW content.

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

Fires, screaming. Everything Chanyeol loved - in ruins.

He could feel flames licking at his skin and he is left weak but unharmed. All around him, people are fleeing from the chaos and Chanyeol tries his best to help them get to safety before *they* arrive.

He feels something jerk him around, someone asking for help. Chanyeol doesn't hesitate.

He manages to free the other person but, without even a word of gratitude in his direction, they escape the premises. A shot rips itself through the air and Chanyeol feels his left shoulder burst with pain, his head reeling at the situation.

Something hard hits his back and his knees hit the dirt under him. Chanyeol scrambles to brace himself on his uninjured arm and makes his mind to start crawling to safety, anxiety rising like bile to his throat at the footsteps following just beside him.

His hand is ground to the earth by a heavy boot falling on it, effectively stopping any of his efforts at self-preservation and Chanyeol has no choice but to look up at his attacker, completely out of his wits with pain and panic.

There is a gun directed point-blank at him and behind it, a face. The soft moue of discontent completely disjointed from the scenario, like he was displeased he was even dealing with Chanyeol like this.

“It will all be over soon. Don't resist.”

The next shot rings in his ears and everything turns to black.

Chanyeol wakes up with a start, his hair plastered to his forehead and his body drenched in sweat.

It was always the same thing, he thinks, his throat parched and his mind racing, always the same scenario, the same voice. Always everything he loved in flames and his utter helplessness.

“Bad dream?” Owlsh eyes look over to him inquisitively, the voice coming from a rugged armchair in the corner of the room. There was barely enough light for him to make out Kyungsoo’s form, sitting with a mug of tea in each hand. Chanyeol rolls his eyes at the foresight. Of course.

“Stop rolling your eyes and get it, Park.” A stern tone the other seldom uses, and even then, only to order him around – performing mundane tasks. Chanyeol follows him anyway, grateful for something to do with his hands.

He seats himself across the other, gauges his reaction. He knows the conversation that awaits him. He’s experienced it many times.

“Did you See anything interesting?”

“No, we’ve talked about this. It isn’t that kind of dream.” Chanyeol grits out, lying through his teeth. He would willing lay his life for the other but he still considers his dreams his own. It was one of the few things he could keep from best friend.

“It’s never *that* kind of dream with you, Chanyeol.” Chanyeol can almost hear the amusement in the other’s tone, could almost see Kyungsoo’s smile in his mind’s eye but he ignores it. Something in his answer piques Kyungsoo’s interest and he sits up straighter, hands folding around his mug. “What did you dream about then?”

A smile makes its way onto his face. This was something familiar, dreaming for the both of them.

“I dreamed my hair turned into cheese,” Chanyeol starts, hearing Kyungsoo at the edge of his seat, sipping his tea. A snort. With the encouragement, Chanyeol continues.

“I was doing my rounds and suddenly you were there. You started running towards me.”

“Mhm. Did I catch up to you?”

“Yes, you tackled me down and started eating my cheese hair.” Chanyeol licks his lips, already on a roll. “That’s when I woke up.”

“Ew, Chanyeol. That’s disgusting. I would never eat your cheese hair.” Kyungsoo says in outrage, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Hey, apparently you would.” Chanyeol points out, finishing the last of his tea. He couldn’t help but tease the other. “So whenever my hair turns into cheese, I’ll have to be on the lookout for you. In case it’s *that* kind of dream.”

“Good thing we were warned then.”

Kyungsoo's lips are quirked up in a smile and Chanyeol instantly feels more at ease. He knows Kyungsoo didn’t have to do this, has more important things that required his attention, but the quiet comfort he provides Chanyeol whenever he could was always welcome. Especially during times like this – when it's too early and too quiet for Chanyeol to be alone with his own thoughts.

“What time is it anyway? I can hear the birds.” Chanyeol gets up, stretching before peering through the drawn curtains, watching the sky brighten.

“Just before daybreak. Jongin is going to start knocking on your door in about 15 seconds.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t break it down this time.” Chanyeol tuts, he turns towards Kyungsoo disapprovingly. “You should really start telling your guards where you’re going, Kyungsoo.”

The smaller man shrugs, his shawl huddled around himself for warmth. There’s a mischievous glint in his eye.

“I don’t have to do anything.” Kyungsoo says, uncharacteristically, crossing his legs as if he’s mocking Chanyeol. “Besides, I have to keep them on their toes.”

The banging starts on his door and Chanyeol clutches at his chest in surprise. There was enough light now for Kyungsoo to see the glare the taller man gives him but he merely smiles wider. That was hardly 15 seconds.

“Chanyeol? Are you there? He’s missing again! Please!”

Chanyeol wrenches open the door and Jongin looks surprised for only a moment before peering around him to see Kyungsoo behind Chanyeol.

“Your Highness, we were so worried. Are you alright? Are you hurt?” Jongin stalks into the room, kneeling a few paces from Kyungsoo sitting on his armchair. The latter at least has some decency to stand up once Jongin makes his way inside, wide eyes getting a glazed over look as he stares at the newcomer, mug still in his hand.

“Well, good morning to you too, Jongin.” Chanyeol remarks. The guard throws him a dirty look and ignores him in favor of checking up on Kyungsoo.

“He’s pulled this stunt so many times. Aren’t you used to it? You have got to stop panicking.” Chanyeol whines, closing the door behind him and walking towards the two, scratching his head.

Jongin rounds towards him, standing up quick as a whip and grabs Chanyeol by his lapel. The urgency surprises Chanyeol and he scrambles to deescalate the situation. His eyes turn to Kyungsoo for help but the other man is still standing by his chair, frozen.

“Don’t tell me what to do when you know nothing.” Jongin growls.

There’s heat in his tone and Chanyeol belatedly notices the other’s state of dress. Jongin was heavily dressed for travel, a chill emanating from his body, evidently having been outside for at least a few hours. His olive skin had a blush on it, possibly from exhaustion.

There’s a gasp from Kyungsoo’s corner of the room and the breaking of ceramic as he lets go of his mug absently. His eyes still blank, Kyungsoo shakes, one of his hands reaching out as if to help someone in front of him.

The two of them then watch as Kyungsoo raises both of his hands to his ears in panic and Chanyeol knows it’s futile. Kyungsoo will never be able to block the noises because he wasn’t *there*. He was just Watching. Kyungsoo lets out a pained noise before crumbling down to the wooden floor on his knees, gasping for breath, and Jongin finally lets Chanyeol go.

“Your Highness, what did you See?” Jongin is the first to reach Kyungsoo, kneeling again to peer into the latter’s eyes.

The glassiness lifts and Kyungsoo’s eyes slowly clear out. They meet Jongin’s before looking at Chanyeol. On his face is an expression the soldier has seen before and dreaded every time.

“We need to help them, Chanyeol.”

“You can’t possibly think we should allow him to live after *they* torched most of the Eastern base?” Junmyeon argues indignantly, and the rest of the voices on the table start back up

again. It was giving Chanyeol a headache, sitting there and listening to them all argue. It seemed a bit petty in light of the grief they have yet to acknowledge but it wasn't his position to comment. So instead he directs his attention to the cause of all this current chaos.

The poor dude lying in a corner of the room with a sack on his head was bound to wake up soon. And when he does, he'll probably shit himself, listening to all these people trying to decide his fate.

“He’s just a grunt, Junmyeon, we can’t hold him accountable for the things his higher-ups have ordered. We can’t stoop down to their level.” Minseok, Junmyeon’s second in command appealed, it was a rare break in rank for him.

“We’ve lost people – family – to their attack on the Eastern front, Minseok. We lost the Crown Prince.” A tense pause punctuates Junmyeon’s sentence.

Most of the attendees turn towards the head of the table where Kyungsoo sat. Since his brother died, the prince had yet to talk, yet to eat. After the ill-fated operation that killed his only living family, no one has had the luck of convincing the new Crown Prince to at least get some rest.

Suddenly, it's as if a cloud lifts and, aware of the weight of the gaze of all those around him, Kyungsoo raises his head. His wide eyes land on Junmyeon sitting at the opposite end of the table.

“Commander, you knew my brother better than I did.” At the acknowledgement, Junmyeon lowers his head. “If you think him to be a man who’d take his anger out on this young soldier, a scout by the looks of him, you have my approval to execute him. I don't believe our collective anguish will be alleviated nor even diminished by taking his life.”

Chanyeol feels the sudden hike of tension in the room from where he's standing in the sidelines.

No one speaks, not even as their quarry begins to stir awake. Kyungsoo speaks out again, voice gaining momentum after disuse.

“The Eastern and Northern camps will merge but we will leave an auxiliary unit out there to keep an eye on Central’s operations from the North.” Chanyeol feels goosebumps forming on his skin as he watches Kyungsoo command the attention of the people in the room.

He remains their only hope. Chanyeol’s thoughts go back to last morning’s events, the silly things he made up for Kyungsoo’s amusement.

All of them seemed so far away.

When he closes his eyes, the flames are licking at his skin again. He could almost taste the smoke on his tongue.

Amidst his contemplation, he meets Kyungsoo’s eyes, the same faraway expression still on his face. He looks as if he’s watching their future unfurl before him and Chanyeol can only imagine what it has in store.

Adjusting to the new camp was more difficult than anyone expected. Even Jongin seemed more uptight than usual and the younger guard seemed thoroughly adamant about never letting Kyungsoo out of his sight. His friend doesn’t seem to mind though, perhaps aware of the necessary precautions his new title requires. Chanyeol finds with increasing chagrin that they seem to lose more of their old selves with each day in the Eastern camp. They were more organized than the North, yes, but also more strict. The hierarchy in rank more evident with how the camp operates and suddenly Kyungsoo has found himself pushed into the head of the chain, just above Junmyeon.

All of these changes to adapt to and Chanyeol feels like he's suffocating. With the move, he's found that his old job assignment had been made redundant and so he's been ordered to write increasingly boring and unnecessary daily reports and logs. Busy work which he'd taken to doing in Kyungsoo's office.

“This Junmyeon character seems like such a hardass,” Chanyeol whines, “Can’t we just go back to the Northern camp by ourselves?”

Kyungsoo smiles wanly, “I thought meeting him again will jog your memory, Yeol. He was there, right at the start.”

The soldier stops writing his report, his pen blotting the paper with ink. Suddenly, he remembers.

The day of the coup, an older child leading the Kyungsoo and him towards safety and telling them to have courage despite tears running down his own cheeks.

“That’s him?” The shocked look on his face makes Kyungsoo smile wider. “What happened?”

“Same thing that's happened to all of us. Are you seriously asking that, Chanyeol?” It was Kyungsoo’s turn to eye him indignantly. Well, he supposes it was kind of a stupid question.

Just like Chanyeol to Kyungsoo, Kim Junmyeon was the former Crown Prince’s dear friend. The thought of the two of them changing circumstances makes a chill run down his spine.

If Kyungsoo had been the one to perish in the line of protecting their people, would Chanyeol be sitting here or waging his own personal war with Central?

As if reading his train of thought, Kyungsoo takes his hand in his and grips it tightly. It makes Chanyeol choke up a bit, maybe he should be nicer to Junmyeon. They were all victims of circumstance after all.

Jongin clears his throat as if to remind the two of his presence and Kyungsoo hurriedly lets go of Chanyeol as the guard announces a new arrival. “Your Highness, Kim Minseok is here.”

“Please let him in, Jongin.”

Chanyeol is reminded that his best friend now has more responsibilities and that some of those are above his pay grade. He doesn't need to be here. He makes to get up and leave but the prince pulls him back and sends him a pointed look when he lands on his seat ungracefully. Chanyeol only has a moment to school his expression before the door opens.

Junmyeon's second in command walks in with a timid smile on his face but Chanyeol doesn't miss the calculating look Kim Minseok sends Kyungsoo and him.

“I hope I am not disturbing your rest, Crown Prince.”

“Please, call me Kyungsoo. I'm not accustomed to the title.” Even after Kyungsoo has motioned him towards the other available seat in the room, Minseok chooses to stand.

“I wouldn't presume.” A curt, cat like smile. “Besides, Crown Prince. You have a lot of time to get accustomed to it.”

The smile Kyungsoo gives him back doesn't reach his eyes. They don't miss Minseok's subtle disobedience by refusing to take a seat. Chanyeol had heard murmurs about some of the more conservative people in the Eastern camp harboring some apprehension at the succession. Easy enough to pick up for Chanyeol, perhaps they thought it would be easier to have Junmyeon ascend to the seat?

Kyungsoo squares his shoulders and stares Kim Minseok down even as he picks up his cup of tea from the low center table.

“Since it looks like you're here for business, I wouldn't waste your time with additional platitudes.” Authority suddenly clear in his voice, even Chanyeol holds himself straighter in his seat. This was clearly a test. For Kyungsoo, for the forces from the Northern camp.

“The scout will remain in the charge of the Northerns, Park Chanyeol here would be tasked with overseeing the prisoner.” Kim Minseok’s catlike eyes widen. It’s obvious in his poise that whatever test he had in his brain, Kyungsoo has passed it. Maybe because of the fact that he hadn’t even stated his intentions and Kyungsoo had already guessed it.

Chanyeol only wishes his friend had informed him beforehand of the assignment so he could at least nod in approval convincingly but it didn’t look like it mattered given the second in command’s reaction.

Shoulders relaxing, Minseok thanks Kyungsoo with a smile, wishing him a good night’s rest and asking for leave.

Belatedly, Chanyeol realizes that the hour was indeed late and if he was to perform a good job, he needed to also get some rest soon. Similarly, he bids his best friend a good night and Jongin starts ushering him out of the quarters impatiently.

Before he could exit the room, Chanyeol can’t help but ask the one thing bothering him about the conversation. His hand slams against the door before Jongin could completely close it behind him.

“Did you See him asking you about the prisoner?”

Kyungsoo’s owlsh eyes crinkle around the edges in a conspiratorial smile.

“Nah, Oh Sehun dropped by earlier. He eavesdropped the Easterns discussing what to do with the scout. Having the Sight doesn’t solve everything.”

The statement gives Chanyeol pause and Jongin finally succeeds in pushing him out of the room, grumbling about letting the Crown Prince get some sleep.

Kyungsoo’s right, the Sight doesn’t solve everything but sometimes Chanyeol wishes it did.

They didn't always live in such a war-torn world.

Kyungsoo and Chanyeol grew up as childhood friends in the Garden Palace, seat of the Do Royal Family. In the past, the Family was more involved in affairs of the state, protecting the country with their power of the Sight and acting as diplomats in the region, maintaining peace and order.

The nation enjoyed peace and prosperity under the watchful Eye of the Dos but even with their practice of benevolent authority, rival states were still wary of the Dos, keen to gather a similar advantage.

Given the preternatural skill of clairvoyance the bloodline had and the heightening state of anxiety against such skills in an increasingly modern world, Kyungsoo's grandfather decided to cede some authority to the government to establish a constitutional monarchy. The Dos were still afforded the same amount of prestige and regard but the country would now be under a fledgling democracy.

The hope the new era brought lasted as long as the time it took for greed to plant a seed in the successor's younger brother. Kyungsoo's uncle, Do Hyunsoo. The traitor sold out the family in a coup to take over the government a few years after his brother, Kyungsoo's father, ascended the throne.

Bitter since childhood and seething that the family Gift skipped him yet blessed his King brother's lineage. Hyunsoo made a pact with a rival country to test and study citizens of the country with Gifts in an attempt to build an army that could finally bring down the Dos' domain.

He sold out his own family, led the enemies into the heart of the city, all for power.

The Garden Palace was stormed and the Dos' benevolent rule ended with almost comical efficiency. Hyunsoo dealt the first blow by killing his brother in cold blood in the throne

room; the monarchy betrayed by those within their own ranks.

For days, the old capital burned.

The smell of burning oil and gunpowder seared the air. The heirs barely escaped with their lives as their ancestral home smoldered along with the rest of their family and even then, only with the sacrifice of their father's retinue.

Now Chanyeol is reminded of Junmyeon, whose stony face he had difficulty matching to the teen who pulled him and Kyungsoo from under the little prince's bed and told them to run. Tears and soot ran down Junmyeon's face and when Kyungsoo asked after his parents, Junmyeon had merely shaken his head and held the both of them close as they ran to safety.

The two of them would later learn that Junmyeon had left his parents, members of the King's royal guard, behind. That he had had to push through his personal grief, to find Kyungsoo and bring him to safety. Just as his parents had instructed him.

Chanyeol was just a straggler. He knew it then, but the grip with which Kyungsoo held his hand as the never-ending tears fell from their eyes, as if in fear that Chanyeol would also be taken away from him, kept him moving forward.

Junmyeon could have left him behind but there was a sadness in his eyes as he looked towards the both of them holding hands that Chanyeol couldn't even begin to wonder about.

They came across dozens of people cut down and brutalized by the traitors. They couldn't trust just anyone, Junmyeon said. The enemy struck from within.

Government officials, those who had been similarly jealous and afraid of people with Gifts, had joined Hyunsoo in an attempt to purge and use these Gifts for their gain.

Thousands of those with gifts like the Dos, most of which with bloodlines reaching back centuries were similarly targeted and either killed or imprisoned. Of course, save Hyunsoo.

The leader of the new order.

When they reached a place safe and far enough from their pursuers, when the trail of people sacrificing their lives for them had ended, they stood back and watched the flames devour the remaining traces of their home. The embers were bright enough to blot out the night sky. But even as Kyungsoo sobbed softly beside him, Chanyeol found he had no more tears left to cry. His mind was now plagued by questions.

The one loudest in his consciousness, the one that was to haunt him for many sleepless nights was ‘Why me?’.

He was a nobody. A child adopted by the late queen out of a sense of piety. If the royal family was indeed Gifted with the Sight why were they unable to survive the coup? Why did his dearest friend have to suffer such loss and have such a responsibility thrust into him at such a young age?

If the former King indeed had the Sight, why did he not kill Hyunsoo — if he was going to be such a threat to the family, to their people? Imagine the lives that could have been spared, people that would still be with them.

Chanyeol is wracked with guilt; he doesn’t even remember the faces of Junmyeon’s parents when they had given their lives so Chanyeol could be saved.

He’d said as much to Kyungsoo a few years later, when his nightmares felt just as vivid as reality and the only way to keep them at bay was to finally acknowledge them after ignoring them for so long.

“Fate is inevitable, Chanyeol.” The serene look on Kyungsoo’s face was inscrutable. “Just because you can See it doesn’t mean you can avoid it. Sometimes all you can do is be ready when it comes knocking.”

The sun had started to rise then, and it seems to Chanyeol, in hindsight, how often they found themselves in the same scenario. Sitting together just before the break of dawn. Starting days with discussions about the beginning of the end. An odd sense of déjà vu.

“What matters are the choices you make.” Kyungsoo adds, his eyes reflecting the light filtering from Chanyeol’s old window in the Northern camp. “My father chose to let his brother Hyunsoo live. Now we must deal with the consequences.”

His friend had sounded so old then. So old and so tired.

“Is that my last meal?”

If Chanyeol had not been paying attention, it would have been easy to miss the diminutive frame huddled against the corner of the small room. There wasn’t much furniture inside except for a table, a chair and a bed. Without a window, it would be easy to miss the passage of time.

The captured scout looked very awake — in fact he doesn't look like he'd slept — raising his head to appraise Chanyeol. Upon seeing the haggard look on the other’s face, the soldier couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

Did no one tell him he wasn’t going to be executed? Were the Easterns really such assholes?

Chanyeol rolls his eyes and figures he has the advantage given his stature. He gruffly approaches and sets the food gingerly on the table, waiting for the scout to get up from his corner.

“It would be your last meal if you don’t eat.” Chanyeol grunts, pushing the tray further towards the prisoner. “You look like death. Eat.”

The scout starts to take a step towards him before hesitating.

“How do I make sure you didn’t poison the food?”

Chanyeol squawks, offended. “Do I look like the type who gets off on watching people die?”

The other man doesn’t look a bit convinced.

“I don’t know what you get off to but I’m not eating that.”

Chanyeol believes himself to be a patient, even carefree guy, but there was something about the scout that ticked him off. He stalks towards the other and crouches until they are at eye-level.

“You’re still here because of the benevolence of my friend.” He grits his teeth and it seems like he finally has the other’s undivided attention. “He assigned me with the task of looking after you.”

The scout was now trying to blend into the walls given the soldier’s imposing frame now only a few feet away from him. His eyes dart towards the door, just for a second. The soldier doesn’t miss it.

“Now, he just said I should keep you alive. Didn’t exactly mention what kind of state.” Chanyeol stands up, raising his arms above his head to let the other catch a glimpse of his side holster under the guise of stretching.

Mumbling emanates from the corner and the scout has his head turned down.

“What was that?”

“I... I said I’ll eat. No need for threats.”

A steely determination could be found in his tone which surprises Chanyeol and it makes him feel kind of bad, bullying the other. He doesn't want to think about the possibility of the Easterns rubbing off on him and so he ambles back to lean against the door and let the guy breathe a little.

The scout takes a bite of the food and pauses as if waiting for himself to drop dead on the floor. After a few moments, satisfied the food isn't foul-tasting, the guy continues eating and for a while, only the soft clinking of his utensils can be heard in the room.

“Thank you for the food.”

Chanyeol grunts in acknowledgment, maintaining an impassive expression on his face as the other boy neatly stacks the soiled plates on his tray. At least he isn't a slob, he notes.

For the second time that day, Chanyeol approaches the scout and, as he expected, the other boy flinches again. It takes all of Chanyeol's resolve not to adjust the sound of his steps any more than he would do normally for fear of coming across as soft. He feels sorry for the other but not sorry enough that he's going to show weakness towards the enemy.

A small voice in his head chides him for calling the scrawny kid an *enemy*. He probably didn't weigh more than a 130 lbs soaking wet. Chanyeol could pick him up and throw him at the slightest hint of danger.

“What's your name?”

His voice sounds quieter than he intended to and the scout looks a little relieved that Chanyeol's finished being his intimidating self. He fidgets in his chair and doesn't meet the soldier's eyes when he answers.

“My name is Byun Baekhyun.”

“Baekhyun, huh? What were you doing so close to our camp? Were you spying?”

Eyes wide, Baekhyun shakes his head emphatically. “We didn’t know it was a rebel— that it was a camp from your side.” He’s blushing at the faux pas. He’s still *technically* correct though and Chanyeol hums to let him know he’s listening.

“I was newly inducted to the unit. They said it was a show of courage to scout deep into the dense forest.” The soldier watches the other’s face intently, not even knowing what he was looking for. “When I saw the flames, I thought we were the ones being attacked but there aren’t supposed to be any units or villages in the area. When I inched closer, the shooting had already broken out.” His eyes are wide and imploring

“There were combatants on each side but still, it was jarring to see my fellows shooting at unarmed people.” Baekhyun's face contorts in an expression of disgust. Chanyeol is surprised by the fervency of the scout’s reaction. “I was going to run back to my unit to report the behavior but I got caught by your side’s reinforcements.”

After Baekhyun's retelling, a silence passes between them and Chanyeol tumbles words in his brain trying to find the right things to say. There isn't much he can empathize with the young scout with the grief still so fresh on his own mind.

“Sorry for the disillusionment. You can go back to sleep. I’ll be back at dinner.” The soldier reaches out for the tray of plates. Meal time’s over.

Baekhyun looks taken aback by his reaction. In his haste to stand up, his chair tips over, making a loud clatter against the floor.

“Wait- Was this an interrogation?” Panic bubbles from his voice and Chanyeol can’t help but feel pity towards this poor scout. They were all just victims of circumstance, after all. “Are you going to kill me after all?”

“Try not to worry yourself to death.” Chanyeol sighs, all authority gone from his voice. Listening to another account about the cruel treatment experienced by their companions has drained him considerably even despite the disgust the other party evidently feels toward it.

“Unlike your ilk, we actually treat enemies humanely.”

They stare at each other for a while, a precarious balance of trust hanging between them. With a nod from the scout, Chanyeol feels as if Baekhyun chooses at that moment to take him for his word.

He doesn't feel the need to tell Baekhyun about what was to be his fate had Kyungsoo not intervened.

“You're a prisoner, yes. At least in a looser sense of the word.” Chanyeol covers his eyes against the bright glare of the winter sun. “We're not gonna let you go just because you're not a threat but we also don't expect you to sit around being useless all day.”

“I told you I'm not useless,” Baekhyun hisses, he keeps scratching the cuff around his ankle that's tying him to Chanyeol's own leg. The most rudimentary of restraints. It isn't like he can outrun the soldier. “I'm a scout and I was quite good at what I did.”

"You were so good you got caught," Chanyeol retorts. It has the intended effect of making him wilt and Baekhyun hastens to correct his statement. “At least that's what they told me in basic.”

Chanyeol yawns at the correction and doesn't bother to cover his mouth in favor of inspecting some tracks on the ground. It's been a couple of weeks since the start of his assignment and Chanyeol was eager to get out of the musty rooms where Minseok expected he'll be monitoring Baekhyun. Today, they finally got the approval to roam the forest somewhat freely. It was a nice day and it would be a waste to spend it inside.

“Honestly, I didn't expect you all to be living so backwards here.”

The soldier stretches his back, the brisk air sharp in his lungs as he inhales. He didn't expect Baekhyun to understand their ways off the bat but something in Chanyeol makes him want to

explain on behalf of all of them. Like he wants Baekhyun in on the details. He'd spent his hours monitoring and accompanying Baekhyun in his room reading books from the Eastern camp's library. After a few days, he'd found himself bringing a few of them for Baekhyun as well and the other was surprised at how dated some of the editions were.

“Just because we’re living off of and among the land doesn’t mean we’re backwards. I know Central is modern compared to the camps and all but there’s a reason as to why we’re all here.”

“And what is that reason?” Baekhyun’s eyes are wide, inquisitive. For a second there, Chanyeol thought he was just talking to someone from the camp and he's surprised at how comfortable he got talking to the other man, almost a stranger.

He throws a bundle of twigs towards the other man and Baekhyun fumbles it, nearly slipping on the wet moss.

“Nice try pipsqueak but we’re not at that part of the lesson yet. Carry that pile of twigs.” Chanyeol sees the telltale tracks of a wild animal’s fur against a tree. “Try to keep up okay? We’re eating boar for dinner.”

“Boar, huh?” Baekhyun asks cheekily, just barely able to hold his laughter.

Chanyeol rolls his eyes so far back Kyungsoo would be impressed and think he really was finally Seeing. He surrenders the bag of foraged goods he has to the mess hall cooks and motions for Baekhyun to do the same thing with the wood. The old lady in charge of the hall hands them each a bowl with a kind smile.

“I bet you thought you’d be the one to catch it.” There’s a glint in Baekhyun’s eye. “Nice try, pipsqueak.” He settles his bowl down on one of the mess hall tables and starts eating.

Well, Chanyeol was still right. They were still eating boar for dinner. It's just that one of the rangers stole the kill right under his nose. He'll get Sehun back for it one day.

"People are watching you," Baekhyun says suddenly and the soldier realizes he can't ignore the attention any longer. Some of the Easterners have been biting at his ankles ever since Kyungsoo assumed the position of his brother. Most of them were kind, like the staff in the kitchens, but the others could be downright rude. He has no doubt they'll be using him keeping an eye on Baekhyun and twist it into something that Kyungsoo would be faulted for.

"They're not watching me." Chanyeol deflects, "they're watching you because you're pale as hell and don't know how to tie a bundle of firewood."

The mock offense on Baekhyun's face shouldn't be this funny to him but it is.

"Excuse me? I can be the best firewood gatherer in the camp, no, this wilderness in no time. Just you wait." He buffs up his chest and starts eating his rations with vigor.

Chanyeol doesn't miss the implication that Baekhyun is content to be just right here with them instead of back under Central with, presumably, any family or friends he may have. He doesn't realize he's been staring at the other until Baekhyun lifts his head from his bowl self-consciously.

"What, you don't believe me?"

"No- I mean, of course you will," Chanyeol sniggers directly at Baekhyun's face. "You'll be the best wood collector in these parts."

Baekhyun narrows his eyes at the soldier at the double entendre.

"I'll let you have that, but only because I don't want the mess haul aunties angry at me for being rude to the food by throwing it in your face."

Chanyeol grins toothily and considers it a win anyway.

The next time he sees Kyungsoo, the other looks less ill at ease with his new title and more comfortable filling the seat previously occupied by his elder brother. Chanyeol finds him on a rare downtime in one of the repurposed buildings that serves as an office, frowning on data packs in front of him. Jongin is still there to scowl at Chanyeol when he enters the Crown Prince's quarters but at least he doesn't angle his hand towards his taser anymore when Chanyeol comes close. It's an improvement.

At least his best friend seems glad for the distraction, his face immediately lighting up when he sees Chanyeol but he seemingly backtracks a little, schooling his face into a more neutral expression as an afterthought.

"I'm glad you dropped by. I thought it was another one of the officials trying to deliver more data packs. I think I could use a break." He pushes his chair away from his desk and calls for Jongin to lock the door and sends him a look, making it obvious he means a break for the other as well. The guard looks conflicted for a second but relents, latching the door and moving to a seat in the corner.

"Thank you, Jongin." Kyungsoo adds, only receiving a taciturn nod, before he himself sits on one of the less dirty couches in the room.

It doesn't seem like a secret how out of place they are in the new headquarters but it hadn't slipped their notice how Kyungsoo's older brother seemed to have been prepared. Almost like he knew his own death was coming. It's Kyungsoo who opens the topic first when they get comfortable, telling Chanyeol how his brother had left instructions specifically for him in places where no one would be looking. Kyungsoo thinks this is one of the roots of Junmyeon's concerns about the succession, having been left out of the loop by the late Crown Prince.

Even before he's asked by his friend, Chanyeol already has a theory why. Junmyeon seemed the kind of person who'd try everything in his power to prevent the late Crown Prince's death

from happening. Chanyeol finds he'd do the same thing and he tells this to Kyungsoo.

The realization weighs heavily on Kyungsoo and, as if sensing his friend's concern growing at his reaction, the prince changes the subject and turns the conversation back to Chanyeol instead.

"How's the scout?"

Chanyeol opens his mouth to answer but finds that he doesn't know how to describe the scout himself. He stalls by busying himself with preparing more tea instead and Kyungsoo patiently waits, head leaned against the backrest of the sofa. His complexion has improved but the gray circles under his eyes are as pronounced as ever.

The soldier settles on making the conversation as light as possible.

"He's a weird one." Chanyeol even chuckles for effect. He isn't lying. It's likely that a lot of things have changed since they fled Central but that doesn't mean Chanyeol would stop mocking Baekhyun for being too soft for life in the wilderness.

"Weird how?"

There's the hint of a smile in Kyungsoo's tone. Of course, they weren't automatic outdoorsmen when they escaped and they have their own share of funny encounters. Some of which Kyungsoo is probably remembering now.

"Don't know what he's thinking about half of the time." Chanyeol finally puts the new pot into a tray and takes it back to the makeshift lounge. He leaves Jongin's share on the counter and the usually impassive guard sends him a nod of acknowledgement. Huh.

"He says he dislikes Central's methods but when I bait him and criticize Central he launches into a tirade of why Central is good."

He plants himself next to Kyungsoo, handing him a fresh cup. For a second, Chanyeol thinks Kyungsoo is asleep until the prince takes his cup and hums for him to continue.

"Oh Sehun also approached me the other day and asked me why Byun had no smell."

On the edge of his vision, he sees Jongin raise his head, evidently listening to the conversation. Usually, he would just ignore everything not relevant to his job, as respect to Kyungsoo. The prince pauses in the middle of raising his cup to his lips to hike an eyebrow at Chanyeol inquisitively, eyes still closed. It was getting a bit eerie to Chanyeol, honestly.

"What do you mean no smell?"

"Exactly that. He can't *smell* Byun but he can smell him." He elaborates with air quotes, telling a story of how Sehun, ranger for the camp, had stopped Baekhyun and Chanyeol on a patrol once to get into the scout's personal space and *sniff* him. "Says he smells of wool and pine but that he can't *smell* him."

Kyungsoo finally opens his eyes to smirk at Chanyeol. "*Does* he smell of wool and pine?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" If the monarch he swore his life on to serve was being an ass to him, can Chanyeol act with snark in return? Chanyeol isn't sure. "Did you put me to this task as a prank, Kyungsoo? Am I just wasting my time here?"

Kyungsoo laughs at that. "Frankly, you could do with some of your time being wasted Chanyeol, now that we're in a new headquarters and I'm too busy to look after you."

"Look after— Jongin, if I put him in a headlock—"

"I'll shoot you."

The glare Jongin sends him is murderous but at least he doesn't immediately reach toward his weapon. Maybe he really is growing on Kim Jongin.

Kyungsoo finishes his tea and smacks the soldier on the shoulder. "The Easterns are just looking for an excuse to off him, Chanyeol. I put you to the task because you're one of my best. Maybe Sehun is just sick?"

"Oh Sehun doesn't need to be sick to act weird." Chanyeol pouts childishly. "I did tell him to go to Jongdae for a checkup though."

The smile on Kyungsoo's face turns a bit guarded and he regards his friend more seriously. "Chanyeol, you're aware we're not exactly popular with the Eastern camp, no?"

The soldier scoffs and Kyungsoo smiles as if he already predicted the reaction. He probably has.

"It's not like any of us had a choice in the matter, Kyungsoo. Especially after the things that have happened. You of all people know that."

Kyungsoo's eyes get glassy, his 'tell' and Chanyeol feels as if his friend goes far away for a second. It's a tense moment but it's gone in the next. Chanyeol half-expects Kyungsoo to tell him about the vision but the latter only shakes his head.

"You're right. Curious thing, choice."

Kyungsoo reaches out to hold Chanyeol's hand in his, his palms are warm and the gesture comforting. He smiles up at Chanyeol once again.

"What do you think of Byun?"

Chanyeol doesn't know where this conversation is going but it's not too uncharacteristic of his friend to be a bit airheaded when tired.

"I just told you."

"No, I meant what do you think of him personally."

Personally, Chanyeol thinks another person could have been assigned to be Byun Baekhyun's minder but he doesn't air his grievances now especially after his friend has told him of the gravity of the situation. However, he finds he doesn't actually have an answer. He feels oddly vulnerable at the fact.

"I don't know. I'm not sure."

As if he expected as much, Kyungsoo smiles. His friend stands up and Chanyeol takes it as a cue that his audience is over, wishing for a bit more time to hang out but, sadly, they both have duties to return to. Jongin stands up and unlocks the door for him, taking his position once more.

"Please take care around him, Chanyeol." Kyungsoo grabs his arm, the gesture weirdly alarming. His friend's face continues to be impassive as he continues. "We couldn't find any data pertaining to a Byun Baekhyun from our assets in Central. He doesn't exist in their rolls."

Chanyeol wakes up in a cold sweat, skin full of phantom pin pricks carried over from his nightmare.

He dreamt of a place back in Central. In a sterile room surrounded by people in lab coats. Under their scrutiny, he was prodded and pulled and pushed, subjected to pain with none of the people around him feeling a drop of empathy for his suffering. There were others like

him, similarly being tested. It was like an unending test of endurance, his body screaming for respite.

Drenched in sweat, his body still felt the impression of scalpels on his torso and hands reaching into him, manipulating his body into something less... him.

Was it the Sight? Was being subjected to that kind of thing in his future?

He doesn't know but he thinks Byun Baekhyun may have something to do with it.

“Do they really work?”

They're in one of Chanyeol's favorite clearings. It doesn't compare to the ones near the Northern camp but it comes close. There is a dying fire by their feet and even though they're outside, the soldier feels it's just like home. Wherever home could be for someone as displaced as him.

They've been out for almost the whole day and Chanyeol hadn't even noticed the time. Their bags of supplies were only half full but that was to be expected given winter was really settling in.

“Do what work?”

“The Gifts. Do people here really have that kind of power? Do you have people who shoot lasers out of their eyes?”

Chanyeol snorts in the middle of taking a gulp from his canteen of his water and promptly starts coughing. Baekhyun is gracious enough to slap him on the back to help but the inquisitive look on his face looks endearing. He looks like a confused puppy.

When he's not in danger of choking to death anymore, Chanyeol tries his best to not seem condescending as he explains what Gifts are to Baekhyun.

All of it seemed new to the guy, but he sounded eager enough to learn more about their way of life.

They were almost the same age but when Baekhyun talks about the Gifts and the rule of the previous monarch, it feels distant to Chanyeol. Did a few decades really do that much to change how their own countrymen view people that were, until somewhat recently, a part of their population?

Maybe it's the propaganda Hyunsoo's regime is touting. Chanyeol explains what he knows, but tells Baekhyun how there are many different types of Gifts. It didn't mean that they were better than regular people, in fact some regular people even exercise prejudice against Gifted people. Chanyeol thinks that those Gifted deserve to have normal lives. He's never felt different towards those with Gifts, having lived around them all his life and it pains him to know that their once peacefully coexisting people have been thrown into such chaos. All because people in power were consumed with jealousy and greed.

He tells Baekhyun as much and a shadow seems to pass over Baekhyun's features. It's gone the next moment and Chanyeol doesn't worry himself too much about it.

"People have gone to war for far pettier things, Chanyeol." Baekhyun suddenly looks wiser than his years and the soldier can't even bring himself to tease him about it. "Humanity is capable of such evil things but I'm happy at least some of you here are decent."

Chanyeol's heart lifts at that, something about the way Baekhyun says the words makes him proud.

"I mean, I'm disappointed there aren't any laser eyes but I'll take what I can get."

“That’s fair, I guess,” Chanyeol relents, trying to keep a straight face. He spills the rest of his water on the embers of the fire to put it out. “I’ll let Kyungsoo know of your feedback, maybe we can find someone with laser eyes somewhere.”

Baekhyun’s eyes sparkle when he starts laughing, his whole face brightens up with the action of it and the taller man can’t help but laugh as well. Soon they’re in hysterics, Baekhyun wheezing at Chanyeol’s facial expression and clutching his stomach. They can’t stop laughing. Chanyeol doesn’t want them to stop laughing. His ribs hurt from the effort of it but he doesn’t mind.

In that shared moment, Chanyeol feels something warm in his core, something like pieces of a puzzle falling into place and that something is replaced by a kind of longing when he has to take Baekhyun back to his quarters again.

“Why do you look so guilty?”

Jongin opens the door to Chanyeol, who hadn't expected the guard to actually talk to him.

He remembers the short note Kyungsoo had made Minseok deliver to him a few nights prior.

“The Council is going to decide on Byun’s fate. You’re to make a report on his behavior and whether he will remain here under close monitoring or if it would be better to send him off with the next convoy to the Southern camp.”

Chanyeol had requested an audience from Kyungsoo immediately after, tense energy radiating off of him in waves. Even Sehun who had taken to hanging around him for company when he was not working made himself scarce.

He gave instructions for one of his men to look after Baekhyun and suddenly realized how flustered, how tense he’s making himself over something he’s done before. What was so different about this situation that was making him so antsy?

“Nice to see you, Chanyeol.” Kyungsoo’s deep voice greets him and he calms down by a notch. There’s just something about his friend’s presence that helps ground him.

There is a modest spread of food on the coffee table and the scene almost looks warm if it weren’t for the wilted yellow marigolds in the vase at the center. Chanyeol quirks an eyebrow at the oddity. The Easterns made it a point to express their appreciation for Kyungsoo by regularly sending flowers, which grew in abundance in the area. Even with the onset of winter, the gardeners kept a small area within the farms for flowers, trying to keep some semblance of beauty in the dreary landscape.

He finds a new bouquet, snowdrops this time, by the sink. Still wrapped in paper. Kyungsoo asks him to wait for a moment, reading through some reports. The prince again asks Jongin to lock the door against new visitors and the guard goes to sit in his corner to have his break. This routine gives Chanyeol a sense of security, he wipes his sweaty hands on his trousers and gets to work putting Kyungsoo's quarters in order to keep himself busy. It’s only once he takes the vase from the table to discard the flowers that he notices the food is cold. He shakes his head to himself and proceeds to arrange the snowdrops in the vase.

“At the risk of sounding like your mother, bless her heart, I hate to see that you haven’t been eating.” Chanyeol picks at the food, trying to find something that doesn’t need to be heated to eat. He fixes the three of them some sandwiches and passes one to Kyungsoo. “Eat.”

“Well, you definitely remind me of her.” The prince smiles, calling Jongin over to sit with them. Before the guard could decline, he pulls rank and Jongin has no choice but to sit with them around the coffee table.

They nibble on their food for some time, just enjoying each other’s company. However, they only have so many sandwiches and the time comes for Chanyeol to address his concern.

“Kyungsoo, would you ever consider going on the convoy to the Southern camp? It’s safer for you there and the cold would bother you less.” He catches himself fidgeting and stops himself although the gesture doesn’t go unmissed by his best friend.

A wry smile appears on his Kyungsoo's face and Chanyeol thinks that he may have revealed his cards too early. Whatever. It's not like he can hide anything from Kyungsoo anyway.

“Are you asking me or are you trying to convince me?” The cold tea must not taste any good but the prince's face remains impassive even as Chanyeol scoffs at the implication.

“I can't order you to do anything, Kyungsoo.” He starts picking at his cuticles again, already raw from his nerves since receiving the note. “But I'm just worried.”

Kyungsoo's eyebrows furrow and he pulls Chanyeol around to look at him, searching for his eyes. It takes a while before the taller man can look at his friend directly.

“I'll stand by your decision — whatever it will be, Chanyeol — but my people need me here. It's not like I can take everyone to the South.” He takes Chanyeol's hand and the touch feels a bit colder than he remembers. “Especially after my brother's passing, I don't want them to live in fear by leaving them unless I absolutely have to.”

The answer isn't anything Chanyeol didn't expect. He knows Kyungsoo has a deep sense of responsibility. He's just scared Baek—

“I don't think there's a gray area available for you here, Chanyeol. I'm sorry.” With a final squeeze, Kyungsoo lets go of Chanyeol's hand to polish off his tea. “Besides, don't you want me keeping an eye on you?”

Chanyeol doesn't have the heart to protest the little joke. He's preoccupied by his thoughts. He wants to trust Baekhyun, that warm feeling in his core getting a mind of its own and telling Chanyeol to have him stay in the East instead of throwing him away to somewhere he's sure to feel out of place. It tells him to keep Baekhyun somewhere Chanyeol can see him, somewhere he can protect him.

And yet he can't even act like it doesn't bother him, too, the way he sought to remove Kyungsoo from the potential danger, should Baekhyun present a threat.

If he's already making contingencies to make sure his choice to let Baekhyun stay would not harm anyone, especially Kyungsoo, does he really trust Baekhyun?

His mind is made.

He wasn't going to let any one of the Eastern leaders dissuade him from his decision. It would be the best course of action. The Eastern camp has more forces than the Southern camp and unless they really thought such a low ranking scout like Baekhyun was a real threat, they shouldn't even waste any time discussing the matter.

An older commander, leader to one of the villages around the camp, had objected to Chanyeol's report of letting Baekhyun stay. Citing the fact that it was obvious Baekhyun was a spy. There are no records that exist about him in Central's rolls or, at the very least, their contact was not privy enough to the information.

At the statement, some of the other leaders had shared doubtful glances towards Chanyeol, muttering amongst each other.

"If he's really going to betray us, why hasn't he acted already? What is the point of waiting? Wouldn't it have been more advantageous for Central to strike while we were still reeling from our losses, right around the time we found him?"

The leaders stop their mumbling and Chanyeol sweeps his eyes around the table, catching Junmyeon's gaze. The leader of their armed forces remains quiet, just as he had been since the start of the meeting. With a bitter taste on his tongue, he remembers how the other had been willing to execute the scout, as penance for the death of the former Crowned Prince. He can't expect any help from the Easterns.

"What's the advantage of keeping him here versus sending him with the convoy?" Minseok pipes up, looking genuinely curious as to how Chanyeol would answer the question. He seems at least willing to consider the options.

“Our Southern camp is more defensible but taking him there would be exposing the other camp to his knowledge.” Chanyeol explains in a level voice. “Should he really be a spy, it would be more ruinous if he not only gains knowledge of the location of this base but our other stronghold.”

Minseok nods at his words and the others around them seem infinitely more attuned to the idea now that a figure like Minseok looks as if he’s onboard with the plan.

Junmyeon stands up and Chanyeol hates the fact that he flinched at the action. To compensate, he instead runs a hand through his hair, hoping no one noticed. His nerves must show because the commander’s eyes are soft when he finally regards Chanyeol.

“Thank you for your report, Mr. Park. We will be convening privately for a few minutes for the final decision. You are welcome to wait in the hallway for the result.”

His lungs hurt breathing in the chilly air, but he still runs all the way to Baekhyun’s room to share the news.

The door hits the wall with a loud bang and Baekhyun startles, dropping the book he was reading.

Chanyeol crumples to the floor now that he’s arrived, desperately trying to catch his breath and Baekhyun is left to fuss and worry about why he came in such a manner.

“Chanyeol?” Baekhyun urges, poking a foot at the soldier’s leg. “Should I call Dr. Jongdae?”

The soldier goes on his knees suddenly and swallows a huge lungful of breath, a hand splayed to his chest. Baekhyun reels back again.

“It-It’s final. They’ve decided. You get to stay.”

Smile as bright as the sun, Chanyeol beams at Baekhyun who remains frozen on the spot. Contrary to how he expected, Baekhyun looks even more intimidated at the prospect and the soldier’s grin dims considerably.

“What’s wrong? Did you not want to stay here?” A lump decidedly forms itself in Chanyeol’s throat at the same time his stomach drops to the floor. Had he totally misread the situation?

Baekhyun puts his book on the table and squats to be eye level with Chanyeol.

“Chanyeol, don’t say that.” The scout smiles but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “I like it here, I’m happy to be here. I just—”

Baekhyun takes a deep breath, words not coming to him as easily.

“I just don’t think I’m worthy enough for you to drive a wedge into your community?”

“Is that a question or a statement?” Chanyeol chuckles nervously, trying to lighten the mood as Baekhyun’s eyes turn dark.

“I just think you have bigger things to do, better things to put your attention on instead of me. A... a scout. Of all people.”

Standing up, he offers Chanyeol a hand and suddenly the difference between their forms from when Baekhyun arrived at the camp to now is stark to the soldier. Baekhyun looks more like them. He’s sure if he held the other’s hand, he’ll find calluses that weren’t there before, borne from his time with the rebels.

“It’s my job. And even if it wasn’t, I think I’d still choose to help you out, Baekhyun.” Chanyeol sighs. Why was Baekhyun being so difficult all of a sudden? “Can’t it be my

choice whether I'd like to help a friend out?"

The soft 'oof' that he lets out is lost in the sudden embrace Baekhyun wraps him in. The scout presses his head into Chanyeol's chest and to say the soldier is confused would be an understatement.

He rests his hand on Baekhyun's head, trying to comfort the other even though he doesn't know what he's comforting him for.

In that small room, in those few short moments, Chanyeol finally feels the panic of the past few days subside. Baekhyun would stay with them here, a new part of his found family and Chanyeol will stop at nothing to make sure he's safe.

Chanyeol never thought he'd see the Capitol like this. The bastion of their country, pillar of their society's values and principles. Bathed in smoke and the reeking of death.

In the ongoing panic, screams rend the air. The only thing that kept him going was the thought that his friends were somewhere in the fray, doing their best to uphold their rights and making sure the oppressive regime is finally dismantled.

Bodies against bodies, Chanyeol struggled to make his way out of the scrabble and suffocation surrounding him. If they failed... there would be nothing to go back to. No friends, no family. The most probable and kindest ending awaiting them in that context would be a quick death. They needed to make Hyunsoo pay for his actions and take back what was rightfully theirs.

But the traitor proved slippery, like the snake he is. Chanyeol loses sight of him one moment and the next he has Kyungsoo in his hold, pistol to his friend's temple.

"Finally, I can end this chase." Hyunsoo sneers and the warring factions pause long enough to realize the predicament he's in. Long enough to watch him fall into pieces.

“It’s just so funny it has to be you. Always the spare. Always failing.” The traitor tightens his hold against Kyungsoo, digs the barrel of his gun harshly to the side of his head. The prince is left with no room to struggle, blood flowing down his face from an earlier injury.

He’ll either die of choking or gunshot. Chanyeol takes his chances.

He rushes towards Hyunsoo and like the yellow bellied traitor he is, he panics, turns his gun towards Chanyeol and empties his whole clip into his body. He registers the gunshots but he feels neither shock nor pain.

The last thing he sees is their companions descending on Hyunsoo, pulling Kyungsoo away, even as he tries to push towards Chanyeol.

He closes his eyes, cold and alone.

Chanyeol wakes up to a darkness so thick he can taste it in his throat. His face is wet with tears and he feels an unending loneliness.

The realization finally sinks in, something that he’s been desperately trying not to acknowledge.

Kyungsoo is right. Chanyeol has the Sight. He had just watched his own death.

An odd sense of peace descends on him. Maybe this is what Kyungsoo told him, how Fate cannot be avoided until it knocks on your door. Maybe this is why Kyungsoo's brother wanted to keep the matter of his impending death a secret even to his closest friend Junmyeon.

Chanyeol sits up in bed, wiping at his eyes.

At least he was warned. That's what Kyungsoo always says. Many people don't get to have an idea when they'll go. At least he'll die protecting his best friend. He's glad.

He's glad, but why won't his tears stop? He feels like he could drown in them, and he must already be because he can't breathe. Chanyeol could still feel the bullets punching through his body in quick succession. Could still remember the numb and cold seeping through his bones as he watched his friends finally put an end to someone who had terrorized their lives for years.

Had his life led up to this? Saved from one death just to perish at another?

He feels a bit silly in the face of his own mortality. Everyone dies. That was a fact.

All he can do is face it without regrets.

“Chanyeol, it's 4 in the morning. What in the blazes are you doing at my door?”

The soldier strong-arms his way into the room with the tray of food in his hands, making a beeline for the table and pulling Kyungsoo inside when he's too slow on the uptake.

“In case it isn't already obvious, I made you breakfast.” The smile Chanyeol gives his friend is a little tight on the edges but it is not any less genuine. “I thought you were getting a bit too haggard and busy so I opted to bring you some food and make sure you eat.”

There's a quizzical look on Kyungsoo's face and Chanyeol honestly wishes the other could be less suspicious of him for once, for heaven's sake.

After a few more seconds of scrutiny, Kyungsoo lets it go, sitting beside Chanyeol and leaning his sleepy head against the soldier's shoulder as the latter fixes him a cup of tea to go with his meal.

They eat in silence - Chanyeol joining in at his friend's insistence and nibbling on a biscuit.

"Stop your mouth sounds, it's disgusting."

Chanyeol exaggerates his chewing more, and the prince snakes his hand under Chanyeol's arm to pinch under his rib. Ultimately, the taller man has to squirm to get away from the attack.

Peace settles between them, at least until Kyungsoo breaks the silence again.

"Had any fun dreams recently?" Dread thickens Chanyeol's blood for a second, thinking there was no way.

Of course, there was no way. They have done this before, on similarly dreary mornings. Chanyeol wakes up with a start and they'd have a talk, but it's the first time he's come to Kyungsoo and not the other way around. He feels like he's comforting his friend for the grief that has yet to happen.

He desperately tries to think of something, anything to amuse his friend and alleviate his worries regarding the presence of Central looming above their heads. Regarding the difficult relations between his own people, regarding the fact that if all goes well, it would only mean more lives he's responsible for.

And if everything indeed goes well, Chanyeol won't be there with him.

Chanyeol finds it difficult, the horrifying ordeal of being aware of his own mortality staying at the forefront of his mind. He attempts to give Kyungsoo a smile but when he looks at his best friend's tired face, still leaning against his shoulder, it gets lodged in the base of his throat and he has to swallow it down before he can answer.

"No, sorry." The words feel heavy on his tongue. He ruffles Kyungsoo's hair in compensation. "No fun dreams."

It becomes more difficult with each day to look Baekhyun in the eye.

With his friends it was easier, they had each other. But Baekhyun was different. The rebels didn't trust him yet and Central would likely execute him as a deserter should he return. Chanyeol is bothered by what he would face when he's gone, even if they win their cause.

On a rare day when his tasks did not involve staying around the camp, Baekhyun finds him standing in the middle of the clearing. Frost clings onto his clothes and he can't feel the tips of his fingers but the place has grown with Chanyeol. He appreciates how quiet it can be, far from the hustle and bustle of the camp. A place where he can let his thoughts fall and disappear one by one into the blank snow.

He doesn't acknowledge Baekhyun until he's stepped right next to him.

"Shouldn't you be in the mess hall? I distinctly remember you being pulled by Sehun towards there for your dailies." His breath fogs up in front of his face and he hikes his scarf higher.

Baekhyun's expression falls at the less than enthusiastic greeting and Chanyeol hastily amends his demeanor. He reaches out to pull the other's jacket more snugly around him, pulls his knit cap down to cover his ears that were already pink at the tips. Baekhyun freezes, confused at the change but if he had anything to say, he keeps it to himself for now and allows Chanyeol to fuss over him.

“It’s too cold here, you should have stayed in the warmth.”

Mollified, Baekhyun brightens up a bit, a blush settling high on his cheeks. “Sehun’s actually the one who told me where to find you, he said the snow smells weird and to come back home earlier.”

“What does that even mean?” Chanyeol grumbles but picks up his supplies anyway, making sure to muddle the snow to avoid being traced back to their base. He tries for a smile and starts on the trail back. “How are your new tasks?”

Baekhyun perks up at the question and excitedly tells him about his new assignment at the camp. In addition to staying, he’s now expected to earn his keep and was now more able to walk around freely and unaccompanied, save for areas with necessary security clearance.

He relates to Chanyeol how the aunties and uncles in the mess hall kitchens are already sharing their recipes with him and highlights the fact that one of the aunties had given him some stew for him and Chanyeol to share.

Listening to Baekhyun being so candid about his day and cheerful about finally being more accepted in their community sends something warm through Chanyeol. Maybe he’d do well. Maybe this means they’ll all be okay even without him. He’s glad.

He should be glad.

“Chanyeol? What’s wrong?” He hadn’t realized he’s stopped in the middle of the path until Baekhyun’s already a few paces in front of him. The soldier schools his face into a more neutral expression before facing his friend. He even manages a tight smile

“Nothing. What did you say about that stew?”

He's halfway through setting the table for dinner in Baekhyun's quarters when Chanyeol feels such a potent pang of something cold straight in his gut.

He watches Baekhyun standing by the window, organizing his room for his visitor even though he's been there countless times. The act is just so domestic, simple yet thoughtful, and it fills Chanyeol with a kind of yearning and affection he didn't know he had the capacity to feel towards another person.

Chanyeol is suddenly very aware that the other man is beautiful. The arch of his neck accentuated by the line of his jaw looked so fluid. If Chanyeol turned his head just the right way, he could see the cute curve of Baekhyun's ears just under his dark hair. The awareness comes as if it's something he remembers. Like he's always known it in the back of his head but has only given himself the chance to acknowledge it now.

Feeling the weight of his gaze, Baekhyun turns towards him, a puzzled smile on his face. It highlights the mole by the side of his mouth and Chanyeol can't believe it took him this long. To notice, to realize the weight of his attraction, his longing. Like this he could see the hint of Baekhyun's collarbone peeking from under his coarse shirt.

The sight of it makes Chanyeol want to *touch*, to feel it underneath the palm of his hand.

Before he could stop himself, he's abandoned the task at hand and covered the few steps towards Baekhyun. This close, he does indeed smell of the woods. Like evergreen trees and fresh snow. Like the clearing they had just left. Chanyeol's semblance of home.

Chanyeol's body covers Baekhyun easily, trapping him against the dresser. Baekhyun's eyes betray his surprise at the sudden action but he makes no move to pull away.

"Chanyeol," the smaller man whispers, hand fisting around the soldier's arm. His breath fans hot against Chanyeol's skin. Chanyeol feels like he's about to take a plunge, something he can't take back after this. Still, with a lucidity he doesn't know the source of, he regards Baekhyun and cradles the side of his face. He doesn't miss how the other leans into the touch.

“Tell me if you want none of this and I’ll never mention it again,” he says, his deep voice sounding alien to his own ears. Chanyeol opens his mouth again, about to back away and emphasize how he doesn't want to pressure Baekhyun into anything, but the other man merely pulls him down by the lapels and presses their lips together.

Chanyeol is too stunned to react, dazed by the kiss. The implication that Baekhyun could also want this, anything, from him.

“Sometimes you’re so slow I’m convinced you’re going backwards.”

There’s a smirk on his face and Chanyeol moves in to wipe it away.

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Baekhyun is so warm, so pliant in his hands.

Chanyeol doesn’t remember how they got onto the other’s bed without injury, and frankly he couldn’t care less. Not when he has Baekhyun on his lap, all soft sighs and moans against Chanyeol’s mouth.

He has his hands around the other’s waist, holding him, as Baekhyun presses closer. The contact makes Chanyeol moan open mouthed against the skin of Baekhyun’s neck and soon the other is grinding his hips against his with purpose.

Chanyeol's fingers travel under the hem of Baekhyun’s shirt to brush against the smooth plain of his abdomen, reaching higher and higher, past the soft bumps of his ribs to ghost against Baekhyun’s nipples. The latter makes an impatient sound and pauses in his motions to remove his own shirt. Chanyeol can’t complain when the action reveals more of Baekhyun’s skin he could explore. He latches his mouth on an inviting collarbone, large hand splayed against Baekhyun's back to keep him in place, so he can more comfortably leave marks against the soft flesh. Chanyeol doesn’t dare bruise him, no, maybe for another time.

The thought of it makes arousal pool in his stomach and Chanyeol shifts their positions, lifts Baekhyun and lays him gently against the pillows. The sight of Baekhyun splayed on the bed, looking halfway wrecked, only makes Chanyeol more eager to please. He leaves a trail of kisses across the other's chest as he busies his hands with removing Baekhyun's trousers. Chanyeol locks eyes with Baekhyun when he closes his mouth on one of his nipples and the smaller man throws his head back with a hiss, fingers threading in Chanyeol's hair and pulling. The pleasure-pain of it sends a jolt of electricity down Chanyeol's spine.

"It's not fair," Baekhyun groans breathlessly, his free arm rising to cover his face when Chanyeol's calloused hand closes around his cock. He keeps it agonizingly gentle, the drag of it making Baekhyun's flush crawl down to his chest.

"What is?" Chanyeol hums contemplatively as he peppers kisses from Baekhyun's mouth down to his jaw, he starts pumping his hand earnestly. He splays a hand along the side of Baekhyun's hip when he bucks his hips and the smaller man lets out a choked cry, unable to rut up with Chanyeol limiting his movement.

"*Fuck*," Baekhyun whines high in his throat when Chanyeol swipes his thumb on the head on an upstroke. It looks like it takes him all of his concentration to get out the rest of his words. He has to grab Chanyeol's wrist to gather enough sense to reply. "Don't pretend like you don't know. I can't believe you got me naked and yet you're still fully clothed after all of this. Who are you and what did you do to the goofy Chanyeol?"

The biting remark makes Chanyeol laugh and his heart thrum. Of course Baekhyun makes a joke even in the heat of things. To satisfy the other man, he quickly divests himself of clothing. He doesn't miss the eyes that rake his body hungrily as he takes off each article.

When Chanyeol returns to lay beside him, Baekhyun wastes no time in slotting their mouths together again and running his hands over Chanyeol's body.

Chanyeol could close his eyes and map out the path Baekhyun's slender hands take. The warmth of them travel from Chanyeol's shoulder to his chest, across the span of his abs, lower and just short of where he wants them to be. The smirk on Baekhyun's lips lets him know it's just as the other man intended and Chanyeol again closes his hand around the other man's cock. Just in case he gets any braver.

“Not so clever now, huh?” He says as he moves to hover over Baekhyun again, hand snaking under the latter’s nape and tangling his fingers in his hair so he can deepen their kiss. Baekhyun barely has enough lucidity in him to wrap his slender fingers around Chanyeol’s own cock and his frame shakes at the relief he feels in the action.

They start to move their hands in rhythm with each other. Their quiet noises fill the small room, their moans lost in the kiss. It gets too overwhelming for Baekhyun and he breaks it, throwing his head back into his pillows. His hand stutters its pace and Chanyeol takes over, wrapping his hand over both of their erections and the friction of it has Chanyeol dropping his head at the crook of Baekhyun's shoulder. He braces himself there, running his palm over the heads of their cocks.

The slide down is almost slick. Chanyeol’s close, and if Baekhyun’s breathless groans are any indicator, he was almost at his limit as well. Chanyeol opens his eyes to check on Baekhyun and his arousal crests, his orgasm taking him by surprise when he sees the blissed out expression on the other’s face.

Baekhyun scrambles to take a hold of him, grasping for purchase as he cums hard right after Chanyeol, seed spilling and adding to the mess Chanyeol had made on their chests. His body shakes with aftershocks as Chanyeol slows his hand, spent and feeling boneless. He takes care to shift his weight and not fall on Baekhyun, both of their chests rising and falling in a staccato beat.



When he returns with cloths to wipe themselves clean, Chanyeol finds Baekhyun almost half asleep and he helps to clean the smaller man himself. Baekhyun whines at being jostled and after Chanyeol returns to bed, he immediately puts his arms around him, as if to welcome him back. It makes Chanyeol's heart grow in his chest. He feels like it could suffocate him, pressing against his lungs and making him breathless with emotion.

They spend some time like that, talking in low voices and when Baekhyun stops in the middle of a sentence, Chanyeol presses a quick peck to his lips and to his temple. He pulls Baekhyun closer towards his side and pulls the blanket around the both of them.

“I’m happy you’re here, Baekhyun.” Chanyeol whispers, pushing a stray hair behind Baekhyun’s ear. The smaller man opens his eyes again, more lucid than sleepy. There’s something unreadable behind his expression.

“Me too, Chanyeol.” Baekhyun wraps himself around Chanyeol and tucks himself closer under his neck. He’s so close Chanyeol can feel him breathing right against his collarbone and he kisses the crown of his head. He thinks Baekhyun whispers something against his skin but before Chanyeol could put more thought into it, a fitful, dreamless sleep pulls him under.

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Baekhyun and Chanyeol return back to their normal routines and Chanyeol constantly looks forward to the time of day when they could spend a few hours just by themselves.

On his end, he thinks he treated Baekhyun well, but shortly after their night together, Chanyeol finds the other being more guarded around him.

Suddenly Baekhyun had less time for Chanyeol, kept getting pulled away for extra shifts in the mess hall, doing favors for people Chanyeol had no idea Baekhyun even interacted with, much less knew the name of. He was confused and honestly hurt at the sudden cooling treatment. He had no way of asking Baekhyun himself as the other man kept dodging his attempts at questioning him and Chanyeol's heart sank at the thought of the Baekhyun avoiding him for any reason.

Chanyeol has a dearth of people to ask for advice regarding his problems of the heart and so he goes to the person he thinks would judge him the least.

“Sehun, am I a bad lay?”

The ranger doesn’t even blink and just continues staring into the woods, his face angled a bit towards the sky like he’s waiting for raindrops to fall on his skin.

“I haven’t slept with you so I wouldn’t know,” he answers in a deadpan voice before continuing to walk along the trail. They were foraging for some herbs to supplement Jongdae’s dwindling stash of medical supplies. “Is this your way of asking me to have sex with you? Because it’s a hard pass.”

Sehun turns to look at Chanyeol who’s suddenly stopped in the middle of the path, stammering at the other’s question. The ranger walks back to pat the soldier’s arm in an attempt to placate him. “No offense.”

Only his ‘no offense’ offends him and Chanyeol throws the basket he’s carrying hard against Sehun.

It’s empty as of yet compared to the ranger’s. They’d have to go further than their normal haunts to find more resources sheltered deep in the forest, protected from the winter cold. He began getting assigned to work with Sehun when Baekhyun started avoiding him and Chanyeol finds the ranger isn’t as bad as his initial impression, except when he’s being like this.

“I’m asking you because you’re the person who’ll give the most objective response. Now, answer the question.” Chanyeol whines as he picks up his basket and pats the dirt off of it.

“I think you’re not *that* bad of a lay but you’re also, like, ancient so your creaking bones may not be up to the challenge,” his friend squats, carefully dusting the snow from a clump of edible mushrooms Chanyeol missed. He’d throttle him but the soldier was just in awe at how Sehun just kept stumbling across the things. He wouldn’t know the first thing to look for but then again being a ranger took a lot of training and skill. After cutting the mushroom out of the ground, Sehun straightens up and regards Chanyeol with the most serious look the latter’s ever seen on his face.

“If you’re asking because Baekhyun has been avoiding you after your tryst in the night then I don’t think that’s the reason. That stew really didn’t deserve to be ignored in favor of anything, you know?” He scrunches his nose, suddenly distracted.

Chanyeol chokes on his own spit and Sehun only looks mildly bothered. How the hell did Sehun even know what happened between them when Chanyeol hadn’t even told Kyungsoo?

Did Baekhyun tell him? He's glad Sehun at least has the decency to feign worry while he's suffocating half to death.

He recovers quickly enough, a biting comment ready at the tip of his tongue until he hears the sirens.

Sirens that indicate the enemy is coming.

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Fires, screaming. Everything Chanyeol loves in ruins.

He could feel the flames licking at his skin and he is left weak. All around him people are fleeing from the chaos and Chanyeol tries his best to help them get to safety before *they* arrive. His eyes roam around the burning camp but find no signs of the person he is looking for.

The alarm was sounded, right? Meaning everyone could have left safely. Maybe *he* was already safe. Chanyeol would just check one last time to see—

A shot rips itself through the air and Chanyeol's heart leaps into the vicinity of his throat. They are coming. He must act fast.

But then, as he turns around the burning wreckage of one of the cabins, his world stops.

He spots Jongin trying to crawl away from someone holding a gun towards his head. Chanyeol hears his blood pumping in his ears, ready to run and help his companion. *He* can wait, right? Jongin needed his help more now...

"It will all be over soon. Don't resist."



A familiar voice. A familiar hand starting to pull the trigger.

“Jongin, NO!”

Alarmed, Baekhyun turns around and finally faces Chanyeol. His gun now left impotent by his side in his shock at being caught.

“Chanyeol, I—”

His world, which had seemed to stop, was now crashing all at once. He feels as if the fire was also consuming him, but he wasn't burning down.

Chanyeol takes advantage of Baekhyun's moment of hesitation to pull Jongin up to his feet and start running among the ruins of their camp, anxious to get to safety and evade the danger — get away from Baekhyun — before the rest of Central's forces arrive.

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They stumble from exposed tree roots, nearly tripping on their faces as they weave through trees in the thick forest. Chanyeol supports most of Jongin's weight until they're sure they're far enough from the camp to stop.

Here, the tree cover was so thick snow was only sparsely covering the forest floor and even then it was untouched. There is only silence around the two of them save for Chanyeol's harsh breathing and Jongin's aborted groans of pain. The soldier busies himself by trying to apply first aid and checking on Jongin's injuries.

The situation was bizarre to him. Jongin would never leave Kyungsoo's side so why was he still at camp even after the signal to evacuate had been sounded? Distracted, Chanyeol accidentally swipes at Jongin's wound too harshly and the guard hisses. They keep at this charade until Chanyeol has wrapped the wound up and can't take it anymore.

“Where’s Kyungsoo?” The guard looked guilty at least.

“I left him with Junmyeon.”

“Why didn’t you leave with them, Jongin? This is so unlike you.” Chanyeol can't keep the tinge of accusation from his tone and in the limited light he sees the guard avert his eyes.

“Because his Highness... because he was beside himself looking for you.” Jongin’s expression darkens, like he would rather be shot again than continue what he is saying. “I’d rather die than watch him grieve if you did.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Kim Jongin?”

“His Highness... Kyungsoo. He loves you.”

“Of course, he does. I’m his best friend.”

Jongin looks at him weird, like he doesn’t believe Chanyeol and it takes all of him to not punch his injured shoulder at how daft the guard was being.

“Are you insane? After all these years are you really that blind?” Chanyeol runs a hand through his hair in frustration. He can't believe they're having this conversation at this time. "I should have left you to die back there, you’re making the whole camp dumber on average.”

“I feel like I should be upset at what you’re saying but I’m in pain right now and my brain can’t handle all of these things at the same time.” Jongin whines, so uncharacteristic of him that Chanyeol is suddenly worried this is a different person from the stoic guard who’s usually by Kyungsoo’s side. The blank stare does it for him though.

“Oh my god, Kyungsoo would kill me for saying this but he likes you Jongin, you handsome idiot. I’d never leave Kyungsoo with just about anyone for the same exact reason that you’re the only person I’d trust to keep him safe, save for Junmyeon.”

Once he’s started talking, he realizes he can’t stop. Chanyeol doesn't know where this energy is coming from.

“And you leave Kyungsoo for me? All these years, were you jealous of me? I can’t fucking stand you man, seriously. God.”

Chanyeol takes a deep breath after his outburst and lets the guard digest the information, basking in his own little bubble of realization. It takes him a while and Chanyeol thinks he'd fallen asleep from exhaustion until he speaks up again. Jongin's voice sounds soft around the edges.

“Your... Your priso- your friend, Byun Baekhyun. He betrayed us.”

Jongin had come back for him when he and Sehun did not evacuate with the rest of the camp, trying to make sure he was safe for Kyungsoo. All while Chanyeol was worrying about the wrong person entirely.

They had come so close to losing him. Losing him to Baekhyun. Because Chanyeol had vouched for the scout.

“I know,” he finally admits.

He expects an ‘I told you so’. Something crushing that would at least vindicate the level of guilt Chanyeol feels at the moment but he doesn’t get any. Jongin was too upstanding for that.

He makes out the figure of the guard leaning against the trunk of the tree under the moonlight. This was the most time they’ve spent alone, even though they’ve known each

other for years. In his earlier admission of his cluelessness about Kyungsoo's feelings, Jongin sounded so unsure of himself. So young.

He feels the guard grip his hand, an unspoken gesture of gratitude amidst the oppressive fact that they had once again lost so much in just a night.

They seemed to have to bear such things so often in such a short time. Still, they needed to keep moving. Find their way to the others before dawn breaks. Sehun would be looking for him, at least. Chanyeol hopes the ranger is safe. He prays everyone is safe. This is on him.

“Chanyeol, I—I’m sorry... I know he’s important to you, Byun Baekhyun.”

“He’s dead to me.”

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Chanyeol initially suggests being exiled as punishment, cut off from all of them and the look of horror on Kyungsoo’s face at his statement was plain for everyone to notice.

The Easterners were raring for his head, eager to punish him for making them all believe Baekhyun was anything but a wolf in sheep’s clothing. They put forward a jury to determine whether he was fraternizing with the enemy in a capacity more than what he and Baekhyun had overtly shown. They implied he was also a traitor.

Until Jongin intervened, to the surprise of everyone.

He testified to the fact that it had been Chanyeol who saved him from Baekhyun and helped him evade being caught by Central’s forces. Sehun stood witness next, relating how he was with Chanyeol at the time they heard the sirens and that the soldier had run straight to camp instead of escaping. Why indeed would a traitor come back to the place where he would be caught once he himself has sprung the trap?

Kyungsoo, advised by Minseok to abstain given his friendship with Chanyeol, watched with thinly veiled apprehension as the proceedings resulted in a hung jury. No one expected a verdict to be given until Junmyeon stood up.

By virtue of his authority, Junmyeon mandates that since no one was actually lost or terribly hurt in the attack and given the testimonies from Jongin and Sehun, they would be exercising leniency in Chanyeol's punishment.

Said leniency was him joining the rangers and the rescission of his security clearances, meaning he doesn't report to and can't meet with Kyungsoo anymore. The stricken expression on his best friend's face broke Chanyeol's heart but at least he knows Kyungsoo would still be safe.

As for his new assignment in the similarly new camp, the Southern rangers took him in without any fanfare. They didn't care what Chanyeol did or didn't do as long as he delivered his quota of foraged and hunted goods and kept the surrounding wilderness free from threats.

He finds himself partnered with Sehun most of the time. For some reason, the Southern rangers had taken a liking to him and allowed him to do pretty much whatever he wanted. Even so, their duo still came on the top of the charts when it came to their collections and soon, despite their cold treatment of him after the trial, the Southerners became even more appreciative of Chanyeol than the Easterners ever were.

The aunties sent Sehun and him additional rations on their expeditions and he made sure to bring back treats for the children to enjoy. Chanyeol found himself enjoying his time outside the walls of the Southern camp as a ranger more than he did his previous work as a soldier.

After weeks of this, Chanyeol learned to suppress his memories of the Eastern camp and what it had brought him. Sometimes he'd catch a glimpse of the area when he surveys their surroundings, tries to remember his favorite clearing when he comes across such places in the Southern forests but all they left was a bitter taste in his mouth.

On one of their expeditions, Sehun and him forayed further than their usual, almost coming close to the edge of radius deemed safe by their strategists and closer to the remnants of the Eastern camp than ever.

He was about to say something about what happened that day to Sehun when he realized Sehun was nowhere to be found.

Given his time spent absorbing everything he can about ranging, Chanyeol wasn't worried about getting lost. He could find his way back easily enough, but he doesn't want to return without Sehun in case the other had been hurt. The sky was quickly turning dark and they'd have to camp out; there was no way Chanyeol would be leaving Sehun behind in this situation.

He opts to go back to the last spot they were together, a small clearing with a brook running along the edge of it and stops dead in his tracks, his training immediately kicking in when he sees a strange man. Chanyeol draws his pistol at record speed.

The man doesn't even blink. His wide eyes and arresting smile directed at Chanyeol make the former soldier doubt himself for a moment as he gauges just how dangerous this new arrival could be.

"We've been looking everywhere for you, Chanyeol. For fuck's sake." Sehun dislodges himself from some vegetation at the other end of the clearing.

"We??? Who the fuck is 'we'???" Chanyeol exclaims. Like this, so far from their camp, no one would hear them. Their people would only suspect they were lost after their rations were up. "Don't tell me..."

Sehun motions for him to stow away his weapon and slings a hand around the stranger's shoulders, looking like they were already the best of buddies. It's mind-boggling to Chanyeol. The guy's appearance screamed Central, from his regulation haircut to the tips of his boots. Sehun was a weird guy, sure. But a traitor?

Chanyeol catches himself and thinks he's not exactly in the position to judge who's a traitor or not given his track record but this was still unusual, even for him.

“I have a good nose, Chanyeol. I know he’s a good guy.” Sehun says, sitting down with the new arrival and offering his own rations for the day without as much as an invitation for Chanyeol to sit down next to them. “He’s one of us, even though he stinks of Central so badly.”

Well... If he hasn’t shanked Sehun then it should be good enough for him right? The guy was tall but there were still two of them so by odds, they were safe. Chanyeol holsters his weapon and approaches the impromptu picnic in front of him. Guess they were making camp here for the night then. Once he's sat down, the stranger turns toward him excitedly.

“My name is Yukhei. I’ve been sent to look for you.” He pauses, takes the jug Sehun offered him and gulps down some water. He wipes his mouth before continuing. "I followed your tracks from your previous camp to here for days. I’m glad I finally caught up with you.”

Chanyeol watches Sehun as he cuts bread nonchalantly next to Yukhei. Why does this admission not send red flags to Sehun as much as Chanyeol? Were they going to just casually eat and camp with this guy without worrying about their throats being slit in their sleep?

He makes eye contact with Sehun and his spine straightens as a wave of ease hits him. Chanyeol catches the traces of eucalyptus in the air and his shoulders lose their tension immediately. There must be some trees around them providing the calming relief.

Despite his misgivings, Chanyeol realizes he owes Sehun as much and he decides to trust his judgement. He settles down in his seat better and turns to Yukhei again.

“Why have you been following us?” Chanyeol inquires, voice level and Yukhei never loses the enthusiastic smile on his face as he regards him with interest.

“My benefactor wants to help you in your cause.”

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Minseok and Junmyeon must be out of their minds but then again, Chanyeol was no longer privy to any information they might have.

The two of them decide to trust Sehun and Yukhei's statements and agree to send a small force - chaperones - to assist Yukhei's faction in sabotaging Central's supply lines. A show of faith to ensure that they weren't just all talk, silently waiting to strike when the rebels were at their weakest.

His ranger friend had volunteered to the operation since he was the one who brought it up and Chanyeol had joined as well if only to make sure he doesn't put himself in jeopardy by going at it alone.

If he was being honest with himself, he doesn't entirely buy Yukhei's explanation but they've gotten this far on it alone.

Yukhei gave a statement to the Council, with Kyungsoo in attendance, that he was part of Central's experimentation scheme in producing forces with Gifts that they could use to usurp power in the region.

He relayed how Hyunsoo was getting increasingly paranoid of the fact that, since he had used their enemies' influence to claim his position, he's scared they might do it to him too. Thus, he had ordered his lackeys to take anyone with a remote hint of a Gift to Central. To either be experimented on or used as cannon fodder against their rival armies.

Yukhei and his faction were part of those who had been included in an ill fated foray behind enemy lines and their whole platoon of people were killed in action, save for a handful.

They thought they were left for dead, as what rumors in the army have led them to expect, given the ends people with Gifts met in the same kind of operations. However, their benefactor, someone Yukhei would not give the name of — even under duress, he proudly declared — rescued them. This benefactor had rescued other similarly Gifted people under cover of anonymity and set up sanctuaries for them across the region.



The new arrival states that his benefactor was just waiting for the right moment to strike, disenchanted by the way Central has been treating their own countrymen.

With such an opening ripe for the picking and with a potential ally so eager to prove themselves worthy of the cause, only someone stupid would deny the help. Thus, Junmyeon provided the go-ahead necessary for the operation.

It takes them into one of the capital's train hubs. Situated in a wide valley in the middle of a mountainous area, the capital relied on its bloodline of transports for commerce and resources it can't readily get from areas immediately around it.

Yukhei had left the Southern camp days in advance and gave very specific instructions where and how to find him on the agreed date and time. The transport hub loomed in front of them, marring the edge of the forest with its brutalist architecture and concrete span.

Chanyeol, Sehun, and Jongin lie in wait in the outskirts of the little town that led to the facility. The noise from the steam railways that ran through the town had left the buildings scarcely populated and it's unnerving to Chanyeol to see the empty windows, looking at him like dark eyes in the edge of his vision.

The sooner they can deal with this the better he'll feel about the whole thing.

Jongin had joined despite Chanyeol's reservations about the operation. Anxious to make sure someone was looking after Kyungsoo, but after arguing with the guard he relented. Junmyeon would be there to protect him and Kyungsoo himself had ordered the guard to go. Jongin always follows orders.

"Save for that one time." Chanyeol corrects.

"Yeah," the other admits, picking at the scuffs in his borrowed boots.

Just because Chanyeol relented to Jongin's presence doesn't mean he's already comfortable about it and so he pesters the guard, telling him he should at least hang back in a safe place especially as he's yet to be cleared for his injury. To no avail. Chanyeol changes the subject finally, after yet another fruitless attempt.

"How is he?"

"He's miserable, you know, seeing as you can't talk anymore. Shut up," Jongin interjects when Chanyeol raises an eyebrow at his slightly morose tone. The guard flicks him on the shoulder before continuing. "Don't tell anyone else I told you since you're not allowed to know but when Sehun told the council about Yukhei, the prince said something about things being put to motion sooner than he expected."

"Should we be worried?"

"He sent me."

"Yeah, well. That doesn't exactly answer my question, doesn't it?"

If Sehun's teasing of Jongin were to be believed, Jongin and Kyungsoo have been growing closer since the Eastern camp was attacked. Would Kyungsoo risk Jongin's life sending him here or is it a reassurance to Chanyeol that everything would be okay?

They're interrupted by one of Yukhei's friends, who introduces himself as Sicheng. Chanyeol hopes the squawk he let out had not been heard by anyone else but all three of them had been similarly surprised.

They did not hear Sicheng approach at all and he watched Sehun sniff the air curiously and fiddle with his nose a bit.

Sicheng briefs them on the plan and the three of them catch on easily enough.

The faction would blow things up. Then, Chanyeol, Sehun, and Jongin would go in to help loot and validate that their faction had been good on their word. Once they have given their acknowledgements on their roles in the plot, Sicheng leaves and Sehun sidles up to Chanyeol, looking ill at ease about something.

“He doesn’t smell *bad*. He smells like Yukhei, like dynamite charges and smoke, but he also smells like Baekhyun.”

“I thought I asked you to not speak of that person again. Does that mean he’s here?” Chanyeol checks their surroundings absentmindedly. Just to be sure.

Sehun catches the gesture and a slight tinge of panic enters his expression. “I mean, he doesn’t smell like anything.”

“Sehun, you’re going to have to use your words. I’m not as smart as you think I am even though I call Jongin an idiot all the time.”

Sehun sighs and drops the subject, like he’s tired of explaining, and Jongin just looks at the two of them curiously. Sehun shakes his head at the guard and Chanyeol grits his teeth, electing to ignore them. He checks his weapon again, more thoroughly this time.

“I hope he’s here though. We need to discuss some things.” He says, a grim expression on his face as he holsters his pistol.

Jongin looks alarmed at the prospect. “I hope not. The prince didn’t say anything about him being here.”

“Do you seriously still call him anything but Kyungsoo?”

The blush on Jongin's cheeks makes the bruise Chanyeol is sure to get on his shoulder after being punched worth it. It also helps him forget the person whose name Sehun had spoken. At least for the moment.

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The explosions rattle Chanyeol's bones and there is no preparing him for the destruction he is about to witness in the transport hub. Another one of Yukhei's faction - Yongqin - greets them at the gates when they rush in.

They don't miss the guards knocked out inside their postbox. Yongqin stares at the three of them when they see the bodies, as if daring them to make a comment but the three of them merely nod and ask him to lead the way.

Chanyeol didn't really expect to come through the front gates and just traipse across the transport hub but the faction seems to really have done a thorough work of it. His gaze gravitates towards the bodies laying against the walls. Some are injured, blood evident in their clothes. He waits for any sign of li—

"They're alive, you know? Even though they've brutalized our kind, we don't stoop down to their level," Yongqin quips, his back turned towards Chanyeol. He corrects himself after a bit, finally sending a catlike smile towards the taller man. "Well, most of us, at least."

"I-I didn't say anything," Chanyeol replies lamely. He hadn't meant to offend.

"Yeah, but you were thinking about it. You're good, though. Don't worry." At this, Yongqin turns back to the road and Chanyeol wonders how he knew, he had been trailing behind their party and the other wouldn't have a way to see where he was looking.

Yongqin wordlessly leads them into an alleyway when more shooting starts, barely missing them when they duck their heads. Chanyeol and Jongin return fire and make quick work of the other forces while Sehun helps Yongqin move a huge crate to use as cover. They move swiftly across the hub to rendezvous with the rest of the faction.

They find Yukhei and Sicheng leaning against cover with another man beside them. The slightly shorter man determinedly shooting at the remaining guards with an aura of being thoroughly above the situation, like he could be doing something better with his time. Chanyeol is not only a little bit intimidated.

“Kun-ge, take it easy. Jeez.” Yukhei whistles lowly, giving Sehun a quick nod of acknowledgement when they come closer before getting back into the thick of things.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Kun smiles, dimples showing under the rose-colored sunglasses perched on his nose as he shoots back at the remaining defenders with frightening accuracy.

Wearing sunglasses in the middle of the night, on an operation like this. It... it certainly was a fashion choice, Chanyeol thinks to himself and beside him Yongqin just starts laughing out of nowhere.

“What’s so funny?” Kun notices and brushes dust off Yongqin's shoulder, his gaze soft and fond. Yongqin looks at Chanyeol in response and the ranger finds himself frozen under his scrutiny.

“Hello, I’m afraid we haven’t upheld our end of the bargain yet. These Central rats are proving hard to get off our backs.” Kun says by way of greeting towards Chanyeol. Jongin and Sehun have similarly taken positions with Sicheng behind cover and have started to pick away at the remaining guards.

“I admit, it’s nice to see people with initiative join us for once,” he smiles at them approvingly but there is something about his expression that clues Chanyeol in on the fact that he wouldn't want Kun as his enemy.

“Fuck!” Yukhei gasps, he drops his rifle with a clatter and Kun is immediately on him, looking for signs of injury. Thankfully there are none, the enemy’s bullet had merely disarmed Yukhei.

A lot of things happen at the same time.

Kun stares down the guard that had shot his friend; one moment the guard is readying his gun to fire back at the rebels, head ducked under cover and the next, the same guard is standing up, walking away from the metal crates that had blocked him from fire.

Yukhei yells for Kun to stop as the latter raises his arm to shoot the guard.

Sicheng moves a beat faster than Kun and shoots the guard in the knee, causing the guard to crumple right as Kun's bullet whizzes past his head in what was sure to be a headshot had he not hit the ground faster.

Yongqin whips his head towards Chanyeol in shock as if the latter had seen something he shouldn't have.

With the impact of a runaway train, the reality of Yukhei's words during the council meeting finally hits Chanyeol.

These were people with Gifts. Capital 'G'.

However, instead of Kyungsoo's benign power of clairvoyance, these people were deadly, people made into weapons by a person's greed and envy. They were in a league of their own.

In the wake of the moment, everyone seems to reel from what happened, reluctant to address the elephant in the room.

Jongin looks at Chanyeol apprehensively and gives him a nod. Through the gesture, Chanyeol knows his friend has come to the same conclusion as him. The guard approaches the knocked out enemies and Yukhei follows him while Sehun stays put like he couldn't be less bored about what was happening. Sicheng right next to him seems to do the same but he gives off the stance of a person who's ready to act in a moment's notice. Like he's constantly sizing the situation up. Given the time Chanyeol's spent with his ranger friend, he figures Sehun stayed behind. Just in case.

“Are you not going to say anything? Don’t you have questions?” Yongqin prompts, and for a second Chanyeol isn’t sure who the younger man is talking to until he meets his gaze.

It all boils down on what Chanyeol thinks of the situation. Should they trust the faction or keep their cards close to their chest?

The former soldier finds there is little else to say. They didn't have any allies. They were all facing the same shit, Gift or no Gift. The only option is to work together.

“I’m sorry you had to experience everything you did,” Chanyeol murmurs. The words flow out of him like a dam breaking. “I’m sorry you were subject to such cruelty. I only hope we can help you get justice for what happened to you.”

Kun turns towards him, expression unreadable as he acknowledges what Chanyeol said and the latter feels self-conscious for some reason. Being in Kun's presence so far felt like always being under scrutiny but as soon as he steps in front of Chanyeol he smiles. The rose-colored lenses of his glasses glint in the harsh electric lighting of the transport hub and though Chanyeol's bigger in stature compared to him and he's in a completely different faction, he still finds himself arrested by the other's authority. Chanyeol wonders if this is part of Kun's gift.

“We’re not any less vulnerable than you under this regime. We bleed the same as you do.” Their eyes meet and Chanyeol feels like he could finally breathe. "Ultimately, we all die but you best believe we're not going down without a fight.”

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The faction takes up temporary residence in the Southern camp, helping the rebels plan out subsequent operations against Central.

Chanyeol's mind always gravitates to what Kun said. Yes, he was aware of his mortality. He can't fight death, it was inevitable. But he could at least work with it and make sure the rest of his life was used in making sure that the people he leaves would have better lives.

Camp gets busier with the arrival of their new allies, many of them coming in and out of the camp during all times of the day. Some of them are disguised, masked and wearing heavy clothing that was inappropriate in the South, even at the eve of Spring. Yongqin explains to him how some of their members are still active in Central unlike them who are - technically - ghosts. It was essential that their identities remained hidden, so as to not jeopardize their safety and their mission as a whole.

Yongqin emphasizes that these people work as spies within the government, hiding behind the mask of being supportive to Hyunsoo's ideals but are actually working on dismantling the regime from the inside. No one knew who they were. Well, no one except Yongqin. The smile he gives Sehun and Chanyeol could not be any more catlike at that moment.

The youngest suddenly turns to Sehun, turning his head to the side as if surprised by something Sehun had said.

This had taken a lot of getting used to on Chanyeol's end, Yongqin's Gift is the ability to read a person's thoughts and he'd carry conversations with their thoughts sometimes. They don't even need to verbalize anything. The younger man had taken to hanging out with Sehun and him when he's in camp, only liaising with the Southerners, and completely avoiding the Easterners. Chanyeol's realizes it'll take some time erasing the prejudice still ingrained in the non-Gifted but with the arrival of the faction, it seems like Hyunsoo's propaganda against the Gifted had reached even the rebel's camps. He can only imagine what kind of thoughts Yongqin's been forced to hear.

It doesn't mean he appreciated these kind of moments though, when Sehun and Yongqin hold complete conversations and Chanyeol is only privy to half of it. Sehun wasn't exactly the best conversationalist even on his best days and the two seem to have established a game where they see how long Chanyeol can stand what they're doing before giving up.

This time he lasts all of 5 minutes, but only because he was bored and Yukhei is running late. He tries to convince himself it's not because Yongqin's eyes widen at something Sehun must have thought. Chanyeol thinks with a Gift like Yongqin's it must take a lot to get him caught off guard.



“What is it?” Chanyeol finally bites, Yongqin looked like he'd heard something scandalous, the tips of his ears turning pink.

“Nothing,” Yongqin recovers easily enough, grinning at Chanyeol with too much teeth. “Sehun just started thinking about lewd thoughts for a second.”

“If you can’t handle them, then maybe stay out of my head,” Sehun cuts back but the bite of his statement is diminished by the small smile on his face. Yongqin scoffs, ready with a retort and the argument is averted by Yukhei finally catching up to them with their supplies.

They set off on their new operation, taking down a communications tower used by Central to rout out rebel sanctuaries. The three of them fall in step and start chatting animatedly with each other, Yukhei’s voice booming in the forest so loud the birds start flying away from their nests. The former soldier having to walk double time to catch up to them.

Chanyeol wonders why he seems to attract weirdos for friends and almost falls flat on his face when Yongqin trips him.

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The tower operation puts them under the charge of one such masked operative, face entirely covered, and now Chanyeol realizes exactly why Yongqin was on the mission with them.

The operative does not talk, only making conversation with Yongqin acting as a translator. He supposes it’s an effective way to keep identities a secret, but if you’re working towards the same goal, wouldn’t it at least be okay to talk to your companions?

Apparently not, as Yukhei quickly figures out.

The gregarious member of their troop extends a hand for a shake but the masked guy doesn’t take it and Yukhei turns and high fives Yongqin instead, never one to be fazed. Sehun raises

his hand for a high five too and Yukhei brightens up, their hands making a satisfying smack. Chanyeol shakes his head with a fond smile at their antics and listens to Yongqin's rundown of their tasks.

They needed to infiltrate and take down the guards in the comms post and then dismantle the tower. However, this time called for more secrecy and they couldn't just blow the thing up like they did the transport hub. By blowing it up, Central would be made aware of the interference sooner and those precious hours of delay was time they couldn't afford to waste.

They agree to send two people up, just in case there's any trouble. The rest will deal with ground forces should they become an annoyance.

Chanyeol immediately volunteers to help out in climbing the tower himself but Yongqin translates for the masked guy and says that the other would ascend first, given that he's the only one of them who knew what to actually do with the controls. The ranger just shrugs, not seeing any problem with the arrangement. Sehun gives him a weird look at his enthusiasm and Chanyeol attributes it to the fact that he *finally* has something to do.

Yongqin acts as their lookout, directing them to the areas where he could hear the guards' thoughts and it's comically easy for Yukhei and Sehun to come in and knock them out. Yongqin hisses that the guards were expecting backup, a patrol, and they had to hurry. In no time, Chanyeol and the masked stranger are at the base of the tower getting ready for the climb.

Standing next to the guy, Chanyeol is surprised at how lithe he seemed for someone with a stature like his. He kinda feels foolish for assuming that those masked operatives would be older men with desk jobs in the government.

They start scaling the tower. It's slow going, the wind grabbing at their clothes. They had not had the time to prepare harnesses for the climb. At the midpoint, a bullet whizzes just past Chanyeol's ear.

Shit. Fuck. The patrol.

“Incoming at 7 o’ clock,” Chanyeol yells and he hears Yukhei bellow out a ‘Roger!’ in his deep voice.

Chanyeol reaches out and pats the guy's shin to get his attention. “Hey, can you hear me? We need to go faster.”

Another burst of shots and Chanyeol almost loses his grip on the railing in his surprise. It sounded so near. He could hear the bullets ricochet off the metal beams near his head and the scuffle meters under them. Chanyeol feels something warm drip on his face and he swipes the back of his hand to check what it is. Crimson stares right back at him.

The guy was bleeding. They needed to hurry. If the guy fell, they’d both plummet 30 meters down to their deaths.

“Hey, are you okay? I'm coming up.” Chanyeol yells and the man nearly slips on his next rung, clearly a bit dazed. The ranger didn’t really have a lot of options. He yells to the guy to stay as flat to the ladder as possible and climbs up. The only way to make sure the guy doesn’t fall to his death (and hit Chanyeol on the way down for some friendly kill) is if he uses his own body to cage the guy. In any case, they needed to get the guy up there for him to be able to scramble the signal.

Chanyeol grits his teeth. He's a confident enough climber and the ladder is just wide enough for the two of them to step on the same rung. He could pull forward but he wasn’t entirely confident the guy wouldn’t fall to his death on his own. He’d ask for permission but seeing as it was a life or death situation and Yongqin was currently occupied, he takes action by himself.

The guy only nods at him and continues climbing, albeit at a slower pace. There’s a flesh wound at his upper arm, a graze if anything, and another by his waist. It doesn't look serious enough that they needed to abort the mission but it makes Chanyeol pale in worry.

They reach the top of the tower soon enough with no further incidents. Yukhei affirms the perimeter secured and the guy is finally able to do the necessary adjustments to the tower, making it hard enough to detect. Central’s lackeys would have to similarly climb the tower to fix it and by then, they’d have sharpshooters on standby. Chanyeol almost feels sorry for the poor fuckers.

On their way down, Chanyeol goes first. Just to make sure he could assist, in case something goes wrong. A small voice in his head tells him he's being weird, that it's unnecessary, and he shuts it up by thinking that he's not exactly in normal company. Maybe it's his friends' weird finally rubbing off on him.

Once on level ground, Chanyeol is surprised at the masked guy offering his gloved hand, wound tied off with a bandage from Sehun's pack and a big bandage plastered to his side care of Yongqin.

"It's to thank you," Yongqin supplies, head cocked curiously at the masked guy. "He says he was about to fall when you intervened."

The ranger takes it gingerly for the briefest of moments, afraid to jostle the guy's injury by squeezing too much and he's surprised by the comforting grip that surrounds his hand. Before he can react, the masked guy lets go first, saying he needs to go back to Central immediately through Yongqin's voice.

Chanyeol gets a feeling that wasn't the last they were going to see of him.

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"Chanyeol, focus."

Kun whispers as he stands in attention next to Chanyeol in the Council room.

He can't help it, he's just happy to be reinstated, even if only to be part of the strategy meetings. At least he can finally see his best friend in the same room as him.

Chanyeol was invited to the meeting as a debrief as the faction members wanted to thank him for helping save the life of one of their own. Kyungsoo had given him a quick nod and a small smile when he saluted him. The feeling felt foreign, he's never had to salute his *best*

*friend out of all people* before and Jongin catches the goofy grin on Chanyeol's face as he follows Kyungsoo in, even stepping on Chanyeol's foot for good measure.

Killjoy.

Now they were listening to the aftermath of what happened on the radio tower operation, the masked guy once again speaking with Yongqin's voice as he relates how the attack on the Southeast radio mast had caused confusion within Central's ranks.

Sehun had gotten the brilliant idea of manipulating the tower to make it seem like the rebels had suddenly established dozens of sanctuaries in places around and near the capital and Hyunsoo, in his paranoia, had ordered his forces to rout out each of the places in the shortest time possible, leaving his military exhausted and spread out as thin.

For his contribution, and through Kun's urging - without using his Gift, Chanyeol emphasizes - Chanyeol was now invited to the strategy meetings in which the tower guy had apparently been a regular of.

Whatever. The most important discovery was that Sehun had been a part of the meetings before him, he tells Kun as much as they lean against the back wall of the meeting room while Sehun hangs with Yukhei and Sicheng at the other end of the room.

"He actually has a reason to be here, Chanyeol. Pay attention." Kun interrupts his mumbled rant but doesn't elaborate. Before Chanyeol could grumble more he feels a chill down his spine and gets the numb feeling he's come to attribute with Kun's Gift. He feels his back go rigid. It's gone the next second and he turns around to the other man in indignation. The faction members tended to tease him with their Gifts and it seemed like Kun wasn't excluded from that narrative.

At Kun's winsome smile, his rose glasses low on his nose bridge, Chanyeol finally shuts up and pays attention to the briefing.

Yongqin explains that the masked guy and his sources have discovered the location of a small experimentation site, just outside the zone where the border of the Western and Eastern

camps meet. It was unlisted and there was sure to be heavy security. Under that kind of heavy secrecy, it was a given that it would be one of the sites where some of the worse kinds of experiments were done.

The masked guy states that it wasn't originally a primary target for the faction but given the possibility of more victims being put under such treatment, their benefactor had decided to put a higher priority on taking it down and rescuing those under the experiments. Yongqin manages to keep his voice even as he spoke however, beside him, Chanyeol could feel the anger radiating off of Kun in waves. It was going to be *that* kind of operation then.

Before Junmyeon had even finished asking the room for volunteers, Kun had already raised his hand and Chanyeol finds himself raising his as well. He meets Kyungsoo's eyes and they bore into him, imploring him to rethink his decision. The ranger holds his stare and nods in form of reassurance, not missing how Kyungsoo's knuckles are white with how tight he is clenching his fist.

The masked guy also volunteers, along with Yukhei, Sicheng, and Yongqin. Sehun also joins and, to everyone's surprise, so does Junmyeon.

Minseok tries to convince him to reconsider but the higher ranking officer is already determined. Junmyeon eyes the line of the faction, eyes not stopping until it reaches Chanyeol standing next to Kun. He looks younger, less... stuffy. Chanyeol thinks he even sees the ghost of a smile on his face and Junmyeon sounds enthusiastic when he raises his voice against the murmuring that's started since he volunteered.

"It's time for our side to show our faith."

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The facility would look like just about any other hospital if it weren't for the fact that it was in the middle of nowhere. The concrete road up to it start from the wilderness and the perimeter gate looks like it was being eaten away by time. The grounds were huge, imposing, but it also let them approach under cover of the overgrowth that had started to claim it back into the wild.

The closer they got, the more uneasy Yongqin seemed to be and with good reason. When they come within range, he'll be the first to hear the thoughts of everyone inside. The despair, hurt, and pain all those people experienced, amplified to his brain in an instant. Chanyeol had tried to ask him to stay back, that he didn't need all those thoughts amplified to his brain real time, but Yongqin would hear none of it.

"He'd survived it before. Firsthand", Kun interrupted, placing a hand on Chanyeol's shoulder when the latter tried to argue back. "He'll do fine."

As Kun walked away, pulling Yongqin with him, Chanyeol's eyes met Junmyeon's. It felt like he'd been watching the whole scenario unfold. He waits for the officer to say something but all he gets is a curt nod before Sehun gives the all clear to move forward.

They deliberated acting immediately once they reached the vicinity of the facility but ultimately Junmyeon had convinced them all to wait until they were afforded the cover of darkness. They'd need all the advantages they could get.

The faction members had agreed of course, but it didn't mean they could sit still all the long hours those people imprisoned still needed to endure before being rescued. They needed to succeed in the operation, Junmyeon had told them as much by declaring it was time for them to show those without the Gift stand by their side.

The restless energy in their camp was palpable and none of them seem willing to acknowledge it. Given the wait, Yukhei urges whoever could manage it to sleep and take advantage of the time. Sicheng and him volunteer to keep watch. Their eyes are so earnest, they look half ready to jump into the facility by themselves. Chanyeol just wants to make sure to do right by them and he can only do so by keeping his head on for what comes next.

He pulls his pack close to Sehun, the latter already halfway to sleep, and lets him lean his head on his shoulder. Despite his nerves, Chanyeol lets sleep chip away at him, giving in to fatigue.

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The hallways were full of the smell of misery, pain, but also something new. Hope. It was a scent that Chanyeol could tell did not grace these rooms often.

He explores the hallways carefully, looking for possible stragglers that were yet to be rescued and he nearly stumbles when the building's foundation shakes violently. It sounded like Central's goons would rather demolish the building and kill everyone inside than do it themselves. Figures.

Chanyeol speeds up his search and finally finds the right room he was looking for. He sees the girl hiding underneath the gurney and gently coaxes her out, telling her that her friends were already waiting for her. He urges her to feel calm and relaxed and she follows him quickly enough.

They walk out to the hallway, hand in hand, and now he is confident they've rescued everyone. He tells as much to the child when another explosion shakes the building. Dust fall from the ceiling, light bulbs crackle and pop and Chanyeol struggles to stay on his feet.

He can smell the heat, the metal in the concrete walls bending into the hallway they're in and just before they give, Chanyeol pushes the child away further into the corridor. The girl screams as a deafening groan causes the weight of the ceiling and all the floors above him to fall onto his body.

It takes a few moments for him to orient his senses. The girl is crying, and Chanyeol coos at her even as he struggles to move under the deadweight. He can't feel his legs and he's getting weak fast. Blood stings his eyes from a cut on his head and he struggles to gather enough air to call out to her. She looks up from where she has her face covered by her hands, surprised at the sound of his voice.

With the last of his breath, Chanyeol feels himself smile at the girl to come closer, to tell her everything is going to be okay as long as she finds help.

The child seems to agree. She makes Chanyeol promise to wait for her, wiping at her face with her sleeve and running down the unimpeded part of the hallway. With a final sniff, Chanyeol comforts himself with the fact that at least the child will be okay.



Before his eyes close, his crushed lungs struggling to inflate under the weight of rubble against him, Chanyeol hears something clear, can smell something familiar. A name, spoken by a familiar voice, and the peculiar scent of the Eastern woods.

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He wakes up with a start to Sehun shaking him, the questioning eyebrow the younger man sends him ignored when Junmyeon gives them a hasty reminder to get ready.

It was now or never.

With the help of Junmyeon's strategizing, they manage to rescue most of the prisoners easily enough. Sicheng infiltrating the facility with little effort and letting them in easily enough. The trio of the masked guy, Kun, and Junmyeon take down the guards with terrifying efficiency and the remaining four of them help in herding the people back to safety.

The facility had been staffed less than they expected and so, they were wont to fight dirty. As if they'd been told to keep the facility or die trying.

Yongqin had already warned them of where he'd heard most of the voices and Chanyeol, with Sehun trailing close behind, helped disable the electric system that powered the bars of the jail cells. It was only a matter of hitting a mechanical switch to let all the people out.

They flood into the hallways, confused, looking around for the guards that have kept them in line for who knows how long and finding none of them. With the unfamiliar faces of Yukhei and Sicheng staring at them, they seem to realize something out of the ordinary was up. Panic bubbles under the surface for a brief moment but once Chanyeol and Sehun start explaining what was happening, they calm down enough and the majority starts following Sicheng down the emergency exit. Chanyeol was about to follow down when he hears frantic footsteps behind him.

"The guards have placed explosive charges in the building, I heard it in their thoughts." Yongqin grabs Sehun and Chanyeol by the backs of their shirts. "We need to clear out the top floors quickly before they get the auxiliary power back and ignite the charges."

The exhilarated smile on Yukhei's face falls as he listens intently and a tense pause comes between them all. Chanyeol realizes belatedly that the three are waiting for him to give orders, for some reason. He ignores the nerves boiling at the pit of his stomach and peers into each of their faces in turn.

“Yongqin, can you clear out the top floors with Yukhei? We’ll take over herding the people out to safety so you can check them faster. Do you hear anyone left in the bottom floors? Sehun and I can circle back to check.”

“Yes. Yeah, I can check..,” Yongqin says distractedly, as if he’s trying to listen to something far away. “I don’t think there’s anyone left on the 1st floor but look towards the 2nd floor... I’m sure Kun would have looked through the halls when he passed with Junmyeon, though.”

Yongqin is still trying to concentrate hard but Yukhei starts pulling him towards the nearest staircase. Chanyeol calls after them to ‘look after each other’s backs’ and hopes they’d stay safe.

He instructs the people left to follow him and Sehun and they obey with no issue. They all look nervous, like the rescue was some kind of trick and any time now, the other shoe would drop and guards will force them back into their electrified jail cells. Back into their suffering. Chanyeol shakes his head, there will be time to process this later. He has to focus on helping them right now.

They come out to the bracing night air, where Kun and Junmyeon are already waiting with some other prisoners they rescued and finally, it’s as if the bubble breaks and they all start running to their friends, collapsing to the ground in each other’s arms as they realize they’re finally free.

The look of pride and relief in Junmyeon’s face is temporarily marred by worry when Sehun goes to tell him that they need to get back. Once Chanyeol explains why - that there were still people left in the building - he nods his head in assent. “Stay safe.”

Suddenly Chanyeol is a kid again, with a teenage Junmyeon looking after him with a watchful eye. His affection for the man soars and Chanyeol is surprised at how glad he is

Junmyeon came with them on the operation.

With a wave at Junmyeon, Chanyeol lets himself be pulled by Sehun back inside the hospital. They run across Yongqin and Yukhei leading a group of teenage prisoners and the grim expressions on his friends' faces are all Chanyeol needs to suddenly think aloud of how they were doing so well in helping these people. That he was proud of them for doing this.

Yongqin looks startled until he locks eyes with Chanyeol and the smile he gets is enough to give him the push he needs to look for the remaining straggler.

Chanyeol stops in his tracks when Sehun pulls him into a spacious hall and instead of leading the taller man towards the staircase to the 2nd floor, the younger ducks into another corridor instead.

When Chanyeol doesn't follow, Sehun merely lets go of his hand and walks on his own. The lights start flickering back on and they really have no time left for sightseeing.

Chanyeol debates going up to the 2nd floor alone but something in his gut tells him to follow Sehun instead, to trust his friend's weird instincts.

"Sehun, where the hell are you going?" Chanyeol calls out, weaving through the corridors after the younger ranger. "We can't waste any time. It isn't safe, the lights are back on."

Sehun ignores him in favor of banging the doors in the 1st floor hallway open. He breezes through the rooms and his actions only add to Chanyeol's growing confusion.

"There's no one on the 2nd floor." Sehun finally answers him. "It's faint but she's here somewhere."

"She? Who- How are you sure?"

Explosions shake the building's foundations violently. They need to hurry, a sense of recognition vaguely registering in him. He has half a mind to pull Sehun back, leave whatever it is that has him acting this way behind.

Before he can catch him, Sehun kicks the final door open, the door jamb having crumpled after the explosions, and he motions inside the room.

Chanyeol could already feel the rumble of the building caving in on itself. The sense of recognition he had rising to his throat and almost choking him, the anxiety pressing at his lungs. He knows this, he's seen it before.

He wastes no time in pulling the kid unceremoniously out from underneath the gurney she is hiding, carrying him on his shoulder and dragging Sehun with his free arm back down the corridor. He turns, yelling at Sehun to run, the latter so shocked at his strange behavior he follows Chanyeol wordlessly.

With a great heave, the ceiling collapses and caves in on the spot they had been standing a few seconds ago. Chanyeol's heart is knocking against his chest double-time at the close call.

He finally remembers it, the entirety of his dream but it wasn't the end. There was a voice. A person with a familiar smell, a familiar voice, who came after the commotion.

As Chanyeol starts walking back the way they came from, Sehun and the girl in tow, he finally hears the frantic footsteps.

He thought it would have been Junmyeon, worried about their safety, but who comes rushing around the corner. None other than the masked man himself, body heaving from exertion.

Chanyeol doesn't know how he didn't realize it sooner.

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The bracing night air does nothing to clear his head, rather it only brings clarity to the thoughts haunting Chanyeol's mind.

"It's you, I know it's you." Chanyeol grits his teeth, finally letting the little girl down and Yukhei, face downcast, escorts her towards the rest of the people they rescued.

He turns around to confront the man in the mask, stopping himself short of actually attacking him. Chanyeol keeps a few feet between them because he doesn't trust himself. Not sure what he'll do to *him* after all this time.

Yongqin runs towards the commotion upon seeing the three of them exit the hospital but Chanyeol puts out a hand to stop him.

"Answer me, Byun Baekhyun. Stop hiding behind that stupid mask and talk to me yourself."

Yongqin freezes, head turning between Chanyeol and the masked man.

"Chanyeol, this isn't the ti-" Sehun puts a hand on his shoulder which he shoves away before rounding towards the younger man, getting in his face and gripping his lapels.

"How long have you known it was him?"

Sehun, to his credit, doesn't shy away from Chanyeol's anger, from memory he gives Chanyeol exactly the confirmation he wants. "I've known he was working with the faction since I smelled Sicheng at the hub. I realized it was him at the tower. I tried to tell you but you didn't listen."

Chanyeol narrows his eyes at him and for a split second he thinks about punching Sehun. No. *Not in front of the people you just rescued.*

The fact that they had an already distressed audience sobers him up and he lets go of Sehun's shirt. The younger man takes it as an opportunity to grip Chanyeol's arm in an attempt to ground him. When he speaks again, Sehun's voice is affected, pleading with Chanyeol to understand.

"You told me never to speak about him again, so I didn't."

Chanyeol's mind is still spinning at how stupid he's been. All this time Sehun himself had been Gifted too. There was time to digest that information but it wasn't now. He turns toward the other man who pulls away his cowl.

The reveal doesn't confirm anything Chanyeol doesn't already know. He can feel hot tears on his face, a contrast to the chilly air. All the feelings and thoughts he repressed after Baekhyun's betrayal finally catch up to him and he can't even raise his voice. Not against the lump in his throat. He's so tired of the charades.

"Why did you even return?" Chanyeol chokes out hoarsely. "Did you feel guilty after shitting on everything I ever cared about?"

Baekhyun finally meets his eyes, an impassive expression on his face as he just absorbs whatever insult Chanyeol throws at him.

Chanyeol draws his pistol and everyone except Baekhyun flinches, like he expected it to happen. Chanyeol finds it angers him all the more.

"I trusted you! I trusted you and you betrayed us," Chanyeol's knuckles feel raw with the tight grip he has on his gun. His finger closes in on the trigger.

Was this really everything that has come to be between them?

Chanyeol hears a broken cry, like that of a wounded animal, and it takes him having to focus over the blood rushing through his ears to realize it's him. He throws away the gun in his

hand to the side and finally dissolves into sobs.

He can't do it. He's a pathetic man. He hits himself in an attempt to shake out the suffocating pressure he is feeling in his chest. This at least he can do.

Suddenly he feels heavy, arms falling limp as if made of lead and he sees Kun at the edge of his vision. An intoxicating feeling of calm takes over his body and his knees give.

Sehun catches him when he falls and Chanyeol belatedly realizes what happened.

In the haze of his brain, he watches Baekhyun turn away, the downturn on his mouth all too familiar to Chanyeol. Why won't he defend himself from Chanyeol's accusations?

Why doesn't he say something? Anything?

They stopped him before he could really injure himself but something hurts, he screams at Kun to stop hurting him with his mind, he already can't fight back but Sehun whispers to him that Kun isn't causing him any pain.

If he isn't, then why was Chanyeol hurting so much?

Sehun says something and the younger man sounds different, like a record being played underwater, all muddled and blurry. Junmyeon comes up, just out of the edge of his vision and his face is the last thing Chanyeol remembers before he goes under.

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Chanyeol wakes up in a bed, having no recollection of how he got there.

He'd just had the most peaceful sleep he's had in ages and it takes a bit of time before his mind catches up to him.

"You're awake," a hoarse voice comes from his bedside and Kyungsoo is there, reading a book. "I'm glad you're okay."

"I feel like death," he replies and Kyungsoo smiles at him wanly before handing him a cup of water.

Chanyeol regains his memory in batches, he takes a few sips of the water and nurses the cup once it's empty.

"I take it you remember everything?" Kyungsoo says as he coaxes the cup from Chanyeol's grip. "Kun and Sehun kept nervously waiting outside your door until Jongdae had to chase them out with a stick."

"Did they knock me out?" Without the cup, Chanyeol has nothing to do with his hands, his restless energy having no output. He remembers the awful things he said to his friends and silently wishes for the ground to swallow him.

"Yes, they did. They used both their Gifts at the same time to subdue you because Sehun's alone was not working anymore."

"Anymore?" Chanyeol thinks he can only handle a realization a day from now on. He's been awake not even 15 minutes and he already has a headache.

"Sehun has been worried about you, Chanyeol." Kyungsoo explains, his voice soothing. Chanyeol could never get angry at his best friend. Maybe it's the reason he's the one by his bedside instead of practically anyone else. "He said you'd changed. Even before the attack on the Eastern camp. He said you smelled... bitter."



When Chanyeol neither replies nor meets his eyes, Kyungsoo takes it as his cue to leave. “Baekhyun will be facing the Council tomorrow at noon. You decide whether you want to go or not but as a reinstated member of the Council, you will be given a vote on his verdict.”

The sound of Kyungsoo leaving brings Chanyeol a sense of clarity. He realizes he’s never before snubbed his best friend.

Guess there is a first time for everything.

---

The next morning, Chanyeol pulls himself out of bed to attend the Council meeting. He figures he doesn’t have anything to lose anymore.

He slinks into the room and takes a seat next to Jongdae, who looks glad to see Chanyeol up and about. He doesn’t have the heart to tell the doctor he’d rather be anywhere but here but Minseok calls for order before announcing the day’s agenda.

It’s not like there really was anything else other than Baekhyun’s trial. Jongdae quickly brings him up to speed that Baekhyun had surrendered. He had revealed his identity during the last operation’s debrief to the shock of everyone and willingly subjected himself to the rebels’ court even with great disapproval from his companions.

He looks over to where the faction members are sitting, he’s never seen Kun’s rose colored glasses actually perched properly on his face, perhaps to hide his own distress which Yukhei and Yongqin’s own facial expressions clearly emanate.

When he thinks back to the night of the rescue, Chanyeol can’t feel anything but a void in himself and he keeps replaying the scenes in his mind just to feel something. Anything except the numb. He thinks that Sehun and Kun may have something to do with it but he also feels like he can be wrong.

So he watches the scenes unfold in his mind's eye again, trying to think whether if he hadn't talked to Baekhyun, had not shown him kindness, would he feel any less worse than he does right now?

Chanyeol sees Yongqin roam around the room and their eyes meet briefly. He hates that he sees pity in the younger man's eyes but he hates the fact that he pities himself more.

Minseok calls Baekhyun to the stand to hear the accusations against him and he goes with no issue, faces the crowd before sitting back down. Chanyeol bends down on his seat to avoid his gaze.

"I've been looking all over for you. I thought you were still in the infirmary." Sehun sits down on the empty chair next to Chanyeol and the latter curses his luck, he should have found somewhere else to sit instead.

He is halfway into standing up and leaving when Sehun grips his wrist, pulling Chanyeol back into his seat.

"What's up?" He hears Jongin behind them and Chanyeol rolls his eyes, pointedly avoiding Sehun and Jongin by staring at Kun. "So what's all this commotion?"

*Great, the idiot gang has finally come back together.*

Yongqin snorts out a laugh but passes it off as a cough and clears his throat. Kun turns to him, eyes fond and follows Yongqin's line of gaze to where they were sitting. When he sees Chanyeol, he nods, his lips a tight line.

Chanyeol smiles despite himself. He can't help it. It's not their fault. Kun helped him that night at the hospital and Yongqin too. Whatever happened in the Eastern camp had nothing to do with them and if he begrudges them their help then that was on Chanyeol. Something bothers him though.

“Sehun, did you tell Yongqin about Baekhyun and I?”

“Yes, I did. On our way to the tower.” The guy doesn’t even bat an eyelash.

“Oh, so is that what this is about?” Jongin sounds disappointed, “I thought it was about something less sad and depressing than Chanyeol’s non-existent romantic life.”

Chanyeol turns back in his seat and Jongin leans just far enough so that even Chanyeol’s long arms can’t reach him. Why does he have such shitty friends?

Jongdae smiles at them goodnaturedly and reminds them that a trial was in session. Diverting his attention towards the proceedings, Chanyeol finds he could focus on little else than the back of Baekhyun’s head, his stare boring towards the other man’s dark haired head. He wonders what kind of expression he’s making right now.

Junmyeon calls in a person from the audience, someone they had recently rescued from the facility. Junmyeon introduces him as Wong Kunhang, someone with the unique ability to tell if someone was lying.

The kid looked so self-conscious as he sat next Junmyeon, the latter explaining how Kunhang had agreed to help out in the proceedings as thanks for being rescued from the experimentation facility. To ensure his rights and his Gift wasn’t being abused, the faction members - Kun in particular - were there to observe the proceedings. Once that was in order, Junmyeon calls on Kyungsoo to officiate the start of the proceedings.

They start the character witnesses and it comes to no surprise that some of the faction members like Sicheng and Yukhei testify that they have personally witnessed Baekhyun to help out on operations that served to sabotage Central’s operations.

They also testify to the fact that Baekhyun has personally sent Gifted people under the faction’s protection under his pseudonym, some of the rescued being children who are naturally more vulnerable to being trained or experimented on.

Kunhang listens to them intently and when Junmyeon asks him for his input he supplies that they were indeed telling the truth.

Chanyeol feels eyes upon him and he turns his gaze towards Kyungsoo. What even was the point of this? Why did Kyungsoo tell him to attend this meeting?

Another witness takes the stand and Chanyeol is surprised to see that it's one of the aunties from the mess hall in the Eastern camp.

She takes her time walking to her seat, squeezing Baekhyun's shoulder on the way. The tender gesture earns a disapproving frown from some of the Eastern leaders. Chanyeol doesn't see the point. Kunhang's attendance renders any attempt to lie for Baekhyun's sake moot. Junmyeon had vouched for the kid himself and as much as they disliked Kyungsoo's eccentric decisions, the Easterners never said anything sideways once Junmyeon had given his opinion.

Chanyeol clicks his tongue against his teeth impatiently and he feels Jongin's hand on his shoulder, giving him a squeeze before he goes back to join Kyungsoo.

The auntie testifies about the day of the attack on the Eastern camp. She sheds light on the fact that Baekhyun himself had been the one to sound the alarm to evacuate.

Chanyeol hears a distinct ringing in his ears.

She says that she had seen Baekhyun hanging around the emergency watchtower where the alarm was housed and upon asking what he's up to, Baekhyun had told her to gather her family and get ready to leave. With a sad gaze towards Baekhyun, she reveals the truth that Baekhyun had made her swear not to tell anyone, not even his closest friend.

The old lady stands up and cranes her neck as if looking for someone in the crowd and Chanyeol slides himself ducks his head between his legs to avoid her. He feels like he's going to faint.

Finally, the auntie shares how she thinks Baekhyun must have had no way of stopping the attack, but knew that it was coming.

“Are you okay?” He can feel Jongdae’s hand between his shoulder blades.

“He’s going to be fine,” Sehun answers for his friend. “Don’t worry about him.”

The rushing in his ears only subside enough for Chanyeol to hear Junmyeon ask Kunhang for his insight.

“What she said was not a lie,” comes the answer. “But she’s uncertain about the last part of her testimony.”

Baekhyun sighs audibly, like he’s tired of the matter.

“Does the defendant have anything to say for himself?” Minseok asks, his voice just above the pounding of blood in Chanyeol’s head.

“She’s right.” Finally, Baekhyun speaks up. Chanyeol finds his head clears somewhat and he doesn’t feel like throwing up anymore.

“As some of you have already discovered, I’m a Gifted by the name of Byun Baekhyun. I started operating recently as a double agent for my benefactor’s faction.”

“Recently?” Minseok interjects. The crowd murmurs a bit at the information, no doubt having their preconceived conclusions dashed by Baekhyun’s testimony.

“Yes,” Baekhyun continues. “Before I was sent to spy on the Eastern camp, I was part of one of the experiments in replicating Gifts. Sicheng and I share the same Gift. He was the result of Central successfully replicating my Gift and passing it to someone who isn’t Gifted.”

This revelation incites further discussion among the audience. People probably finally realized it wasn't just the Gifted in danger under the government. People who never cared because it wasn't their necks on the line. Fools.

Chanyeol doesn't notice he's chewing on the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood. Upon confirming the veracity of the statements from Kunhang, Minseok urges Baekhyun to continue.

"My superiors ordered me to pretend as a scout. They put a trace on me for them to be able to find me wherever the rebels took me. They used someone like Yukhei to do it. The only way it can be removed is if I died."

Junmyeon asks Kunhang to verify. Fact.

"They gave me a timeline of when the attack would happen in advance. They said I should make sure the prince would be in the same area as I am to consider my mission a success. They made it clear that if I ran away, died or tried to kill myself, they'd just send a replacement."

Fact.

"I started enjoying life in the camp. I never did have much affection towards my superiors in Central. They treated me as if I was expendable and they told me as much.

Chanyeol suddenly feels Sehun grip his wrist hard and that's when he realizes he'd had a death grip on his own thigh as he listened to Baekhyun talk. He forces himself to finally sit up.

"Fact," Kunhang says. Baekhyun asks for a glass of water and Jongin walks forward to give him one. He downs it as Minseok stands to ask Baekhyun a question.

“Why did you stay? You could have run away and no one would be any wiser. You said you had a Gift of being undetectable and that you render Gifts useless, why didn’t you use it?”

Before he can answer, Yukhei raises his hand asking permission to speak. Junmyeon grants it with a curt nod.

“Gifts like his don’t work against trackers like me,” his voice cracks but he powers through. None in the audience has encountered someone like him, the closest they have is Sehun. They all wait and listen for the explanation.

“Trackers can see the physical area you have been in and lock on to your specific trace.” Yukhei takes time to choose his words. “If a tracker has your trace, it’s going to be almost impossible to evade them. Even if you die, the trace is still going to be there on your corpse.”

A few of the Easterners air their disgust at Yukhei’s words but Junmyeon ignores them and thanks him for his input. Kunhang nods to confirm that Yukhei’s information is the truth.

Junmyeon addresses Baekhyun and asks him to continue answering the question.

“I initially planned to off myself but I found things - people - worth living for in the camp. I would have run away or died if it meant saving them but it only meant someone more cruel, someone worse than I am, could replace me and put these people in jeopardy. I didn’t want the people I’ve grown to love to be hurt. That’s why I decided to stay.”

Fact.

For a split second before he asks his question, Junmyeon meets Chanyeol’s eyes.

“Why did you have to leave then, why didn’t you just stay and fight with the rebels? When did you decide to help us?”

His vision is swimming but Chanyeol can still make out Baekhyun's figure, slouched against his chair. He's biting his thumbnail, a force of habit.

"I needed to kill the tracker so they'd have no way of following me. And then I needed to disappear. After the Council decided to let me stay, I started my preparations."

Before Kunhang can even open his mouth, Chanyeol has left his seat.

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The verdict will be passed that afternoon.

Sehun finds him by a copse of trees they use to hide their secret stash of gear and food.

Chanyeol fully expected him to try and talk him into doing something tedious, like go back to camp and act like everything's okay. Always defying expectations, Sehun plops himself down on the forest floor, right beside Chanyeol.

"What are you doing here?"

Sehun shrugs at the questions and turns the conversation towards Chanyeol instead.

"How are you?"

"Well, yesterday I was told that my close friend whom I've been spending most of time with was controlling me with his Gift the whole time." Chanyeol decides to be straightforward this time, just to see how Sehun would react. He'd expected the other to be self-conscious, anything except a giggling mess beside him.



It takes a few moments for Sehun to get a hold of himself, wiping tears from his eyes at the apparent hilarity of his friend confronting him.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Sehun starts. His eyes regard Chanyeol fondly, like he’s never encountered a more fascinating person before. “I’m an empath, Chanyeol.”

“I can only make you feel something I’ve felt before, and even then, trying to make you feel certain emotions causes those emotions to be amplified in me. It’s kind of like Yongqin’s power in the sense that I can feel what people in range are feeling.” He continues. “It’s why I became a ranger in the first place, less emotions muddying up the environment. It’s not exactly one of the best Gifts.”

Chanyeol supposes that’s fair, he remembers the night at the experimentation facility, the things he felt must have been agonizing to Sehun. Not to mention that there were also a few dozen other people there.

“If you start getting sappy with me, I’m going to kill you and bury your body in a weird pose.” Sehun interjects, already aware of the change in Chanyeol. Maybe nothing has to change between them. He puches Sehun on the knee lightly.

“What about your nose though?”

“Would you believe I have two Gifts?”

“I get it, how does it feel like to be God’s favorite?”

“Pretty good, actually.”

Chanyeol bonks him on the head, standing and offering his hand to Sehun to help pull him up. It’s surreal how light he feels now and he’s a bit suspicious. He’s a bit more ready to face the music.

“Are you- Are you doing your thing right now?”

Sehun grins, like he knows something Chanyeol doesn't - and he probably does, who can tell with that brain of his - before answering.

“This is all you, buddy.”

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Of course Chanyeol gets mocked by Fate on every single possible turn.

The proceedings result in a hung jury and now everyone has their eyes on Chanyeol, waiting for him to give his vote on whether to indict and imprison Baekhyun or let him go.

He tries to avoid everyone else's eyes and focus on Kyungsoo. His best friend looked like he was about to be sick.

“I-I'm voting to-”

Suddenly, Kyungsoo's eyes roll to the back of his head and he stops moving entirely.

Saved by the Sight.

“Your Highness, are you alright?” Minseok frantically asks and Jongdae is already on his feet to assist.

Chanyeol bounds the short space between him and his friend and shoves everyone back.

“He needs space. Back off. He’ll be fine.” The faction members look alarmed. Chanyeol figures it’s because the Sight is unique to the Do bloodline and that they haven’t seen someone with it in action.

Within the bustle of activity, Baekhyun sits mildly amused and Chanyeol feels like he’s having an epiphany. Their eyes meet and it finally hits Chanyeol just as Kyungsoo comes to.

The Sight is unique to the Do bloodline.

Everyone waits as he recovers from the vision he just had, Jongdae fussing around him until Kyungsoo thanks him for his help.

“Your Highness, what did you See?” Junmyeon at least seems familiar with the process, Chanyeol notes.

Kyungsoo stands, addressing the Council and the rest of the people in the room. He braces himself on Jongin, still a bit wobbly from the experience.

“My uncle is preparing to send all of his forces towards the Southern camp,” Kyungsoo swallows, like it was hard for him to deliver the news. “They applied the trace on someone from the experimentation facility without their knowledge.”

A deathly silence descends upon the room.

“When are they coming, Your Highness?”

Everyone whips around to the source of the voice and it’s Baekhyun, listening attentively to Kyungsoo and not minding the eyes on him. No one misses the fact that he addressed Kyungsoo by his title. Acknowledging the monarchy’s existence in any positive manner is forbidden to Central forces under punishment of death and he just did it so casually.

Kyungsoo's owlsh eyes land on him. "In five days. They'll be sparing no one."

He then turns towards Minseok and Junmyeon, the very picture of grace under pressure. "How long would it take for you to evacuate everyone from the Southern camp to the Western camp?"

"That's ridiculous!" One of the elders pipes up before one of the officers could answer and Chanyeol immediately bristles. "We should send the one with the trace away instead. That's what the foreign freak said right? Even the spy said it works!"

Chanyeol glances at the three faction members, now with Sicheng, leaning against the opposite wall, behind Baekhyun. They looked unsurprised by the treatment which makes Chanyeol even angrier, that they're used to such poor reception.

The tool turns around to address the rest of the room and it takes all of Chanyeol's energy not to throttle the man. That, and seeing Sehun snigger just out of sight

"Why don't we just send those with Gifts to deal with Central's forces? They're the ones who brought this problem to us anyway."

Chanyeol whips his head around to find other people starting to agree. He turns towards Kyungsoo and he sees how his friend gets another vision, his veins on his hand visible as he grips Jongin's arm hard to ground himself.

He sees Kyungsoo's eyes turn lucid and alert, grow wide and then flit from Baekhyun to Chanyeol. For those few moments they hold each other's gaze, Chanyeol watches his best friend give him a nod in assent. A reassurance he'd back him up, whatever happens.

"Seriously. You're still not done talking?" Chanyeol exclaims, and the Eastern leader narrows his eyes at him, suddenly ganging up at the former soldier. It would be menacing if the old man wasn't more than a head shorter than him.

“You,” the man’s words are laced with vitriol as he regards Chanyeol. “I remember you. You vouched for that spy and he betrayed us.”

“Well, wasn’t the initial purpose of this meeting to prove he didn’t?” Chanyeol points out and it’s comical how the man’s complexion turns into an ugly shade of puce. He straightens himself into his full height and stares the man down.

“Who died and suddenly allowed you to make the calls for everyone’s safety? Last time I checked, you were pulling your carts in front of injured people, trying to get ahead of them. Suddenly, you care about their goodwill?”

Some voices in the crowd start muttering to themselves at Chanyeol’s words and the old man darts his head towards them in panic.

“I didn’t- I wouldn’t presume-” He rubs his hands together, trying to think of his next move as if he hadn’t just been called out on his bluff. He bows to Kyungsoo as if to mollify the prince and the latter’s face remains stoic. “What I meant was that *His Highness*’ judgment may be clouded by panic. I’m sure we can arrange for a solution that won’t have to result in such a drastic action.”

Chanyeol can’t help it, he picks the guy up with his lapels.

“In case it didn’t register through your thick skull, what the Crown Prince of the country is saying, *asshole* , is that there would be no camp to return to if we don’t succeed in storming the Capital within 5 days.” Chanyeol raises his voice, finally fed up with these meddling people. “Not the South, not the West. *Nothing* .”

He lets go of the man who visibly cowers back before returning to the arms of his fellow Eastern bullies.

“You get to sit on your asses all day while only caring about yourselves, claiming you’re too vulnerable, too weak to contribute but flap your mouths at the slightest inconvenience.” His face feels hot and he’s definitely red from emotion. “You use people with Gifts to further and

protect your interests while similarly stabbing them in the back at the first instant it's convenient to you. Do you know who you sound like? Do Hyunsoo!"

The words roll off of him. He briefly seeks out his friend's faces in the crowd and they at least look like they support him. Sehun has an eyebrow raised at Chanyeol but he has the same enigmatic smile as he did back in the cove of trees. He finds he deliberately avoids Baekhyun's face.

The Eastern leader, the very same one who never ran out of things to complain about and who had made fun of him and tried to grill him back in the Eastern camp when he was still trying to vouch for Baekhyun, that Eastern leader was now staring up at Chanyeol blankly. He still looked offended that someone like Chanyeol had dared to flout his imagined authority.

"You sound like a goddamn fool. I promise you no one cares about your empty threats and we are all tired of your pithy remarks." Chanyeol follows up, his chest heaving. "You're angry about your property being destroyed and, I agree that it's shitty, but there are people dying out there."

Once he turns his back towards the man, the leaders all explode in harsh murmurs and it sounds like a basket full of bees had been let out in the room with all the buzzing. Chanyeol couldn't care less, he walks towards Kyungsoo and asks if he is okay. The answering smile on his best friend's face is diminutive, like he's trying to keep a straight face, but the blush high on his cheeks from stopping himself from laughing is evident.

Junmyeon clears his throat and a deathly, pin-drop silence settles in the room.

"*Park*, a moment in my office please."

Oh shit.

The officer then heads towards Kyungsoo and invites him with Jongin as well, a hand leading towards the door.

The Eastern leader sneers at Chanyeol on his way out and with a last sweep of the faces in the room, he spots Baekhyun worrying his lip as he watches Chanyeol walk away.

On the way to Junmyeon's office, he keeps his head down just in case, trying to look appropriately guilty for his actions. He tries to peer into Kyungsoo's face but his best friend is only looking forward, possibly trying to look dignified because of what Chanyeol just did.

Junmyeon's office is by the end of a cloistered hallway on the opposite end of the building where the camp meetings happen. The buildings in the Southern camp are old but they are better built than those from the Eastern camp. The doors to Junmyeon's office are ornate but scuffed and the officer leads the three of them inside.

Once the heavy door is shut, Junmyeon sighs deeply and his head turns down to the ground.

Chanyeol panics looking at both Kyungsoo and Jongin whose masque-like faces lend no clarity to the situation. Terrified, the former soldier - turned ranger - realizes Junmyeon is shaking.

Is he-Is he crying?

"Did I do something wrong?" Chanyeol pleads, "can somebody just tell me what's happening?"

As sudden as the invitation to his office, Junmyeon dissolves into a fit of laughter, mirth just spilling out of him into the room. Kyungsoo joins him, a chuckle at first until the apples of cheeks are red with laughter. Jongin himself is covering his face in embarrassment as he laughs. It takes them all a long while to get it together.

Chanyeol still hasn't gotten his answer but at least they're enjoying themselves.

Junmyeon whoops to clear the last of his giggles and wipes away the tears from his eyes. He gazes at Chanyeol like he's seeing him with new eyes.

"What you did to that old codger was something I've been wanting to do for a while," Junmyeon says as he asks them all to sit down. "They could be a handful, even to your older brother."

Kyungsoo nods modestly in acknowledgement.

"I asked you to come in here to help clarify something about the advance," Junmyeon continues. "Are you certain of the details, Prince Kyungsoo?"

"I thought I ordered you to just refer to me as Kyungsoo," the prince chides but affirms the officer's statement. "They get here in five days and our odds are not good. They're planning on consolidating their forces by the Spring Festival, we strike any later than then and we're fucked."

Chanyeol is taken aback by Kyungsoo swearing in front of Junmyeon but the other merely seems like he's still digesting the information.

It still doesn't answer his question of why the hell he was in the room with them. Comic relief?

"Sorry, why am I here?"

"We're waiting for a few more people," the smile the officer gives him is mischievous something Chanyeol has never thought Junmyeon could be and certainly not in the context of a pending attack.

As if on cue, there is a knock on the door and Junmyeon bids the new arrival to come in.

Correction.



Arrivals. Plural.

In walks Minseok and Sehun, leading the faction members and finally, Baekhyun.

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All plans are in order.

Chanyeol and Baekhyun are overseeing the entry of the civilians from the Western camp into the South and the usually quiet mornings are now filled with the bustle of people going about their days. The busy atmosphere makes Chanyeol almost forget the fact that they were to be making their way to the capital to take the fight to the enemy.

Hanging around with Baekhyun like this doesn't feel so weird anymore, even without Sehun around. He had thought Sehun's presence had made him less anxious around the smaller man but right now, leaning shoulder to shoulder against the camp gates, it almost makes Chanyeol feel like they're back in the Eastern camp. Except with less snow.

Spring was in full swing and Chanyeol would have loved to go through the forests to just bask in the new season. But they had more pressing concerns.

Baekhyun picks up on his pensive mood.

"I'm sorry, Chanyeol, for what happened." He says, eyes looking up at him and the taller man could feel the sincerity in the other's tone. "I wouldn't have done anything differently though."

He doesn't have much to say. Chanyeol feels like someone had just knocked the air out of him at Baekhyun's admission. But it feels like he owes it to him to give him a response.

“Me too, Baekhyun,” he admits. “Except maybe for the mask stuff. That was weird.”

The smile on his face gets reflected on Baekhyun’s and the smaller man discreetly entwines their fingers together.

“I thought you were really going to shoot me back then.” Baekhyun’s bark of laughter is a welcome sound to Chanyeol’s ears. “Also, I can’t believe you hesitated on voting for my freedom when you know how shitty I felt being cooped up before. The prince’s vision saved you there.”

Chanyeol squawks when Baekhyun lets go of his hand in favor of punching him on the shoulder.

“Maybe I really should’ve poisoned your ungrateful ass. Remember when I saved you from falling to your death?” Chanyeol raises an eyebrow at the other man. “You’re welcome.”

The last of the convoy from the Western camp enters the gate and all that’s left to do is prepare for the mission tomorrow. Chanyeol would rather stay here like this forever, if it meant they never have to confront tomorrow’s uncertainty but, alas, the world has different plans.

He feels Baekhyun take his hand again and that same comforting grip relieves some of the anxiety in Chanyeol. The bubble breaks when reality, or really just Sehun, calls out for them.

“I knew it stank of sap here,” Sehun deadpans, looking pointedly at their linked hands but neither of them let go. “Let’s go, love birds. Junmyeon is looking for you two.”

“It’s time.”

---

Chanyeol is lucky enough that he gets to partner up with Sehun but Baekhyun along with the other faction members are tasked to go and rendezvous with their benefactor's forces in the capital.

When Chanyeol woke up the previous morning, Baekhyun and the others had already left, needing to assist in helping to bring down the facilities his benefactor had identified in the capital. Chanyeol almost asks Sehun to help alleviate some of the anxiety he feels but they need to have their eyes on the prize now.

His officials had all failed to convince Kyungsoo to hide and the man insisted that he is well enough and capable to fight on his own. He would either live or die with his people and that was final.

Chanyeol wishes he could tell him about his dream, about Chanyeol's vision of Kyungsoo, being taken hostage by his uncle.

But Chanyeol knows his friend. He is certain that despite all of the other's statements regarding the inevitability of Fate, Kyungsoo would still try to fix things for Chanyeol and he can't have that. At least he knows for certain Kyungsoo would live through everything.

He only wished for more time with Baekhyun. Like before, he was too cowardly to express his feelings more clearly. And now it was too late.

Yukhei and Sicheng meet up with them in one of the smaller transport hubs - people instead of goods, Yukhei winks at Chanyeol - with passes that would help them sneak into the city as people who have come to take part in the spring festivities.

There were a lot of people coming in from outside the capital with their goods and products, eager for the Spring Festival to start on the next day.

They follow the stream of people and walk further into the capital, Chanyeol's former home.

Ugly, utilitarian architecture has replaced the sprawling gardens and parks Chanyeol had grown to associate with his home and he finds he is glad there will be no love lost between him and whatever is destroyed in the capital.

Kyungsoo's wide eyes similarly take in the additions, no doubt going through the same train of thought as Chanyeol. He notices Chanyeol is looking at him and the prince squeezes his arm as assurance he'll be fine.

"Hey," a voice sounds to his left and there he is, Baekhyun. The one whose face he'd been looking forward to seeing since yesterday. All soft smiles and warm hands. His cowl is now over his head instead of his face.

"Before you can ask, everything went well." Yongqin pipes up behind the two of them. Chanyeol should have figured he'll never have the time of day when it comes to Baekhyun. To his raised eyebrows, the young man holds his hands up in surrender. "Kun just thought you two were looking a bit too comfortable. We still have a lot to do today."

As if Chanyeol needed any reminder.

Sehun falls back in step with the faction members and the next phase of their plans starts.

The rolling streets of the capital direct the crowds to the Grand Capitol Plaza. It was where Hyunsoo would be expected to address the populace as the leader of the country and announce the start of the Spring Festival.

It was also where Kyungsoo had told them his uncle would proclaim martial law - as if he had been governing as anything but. It would give Hyunsoo the last dregs of authority he needed to wipe out and imprison the rest of the Gifted and finally sever his ties from the masters whose power he used to ascend into position.

They have to succeed and do it in one fell swoop else everything would be lost.

As they enter the plaza, the rebels and the faction members take their positions in the crowd, Sehun and Kun would be using their Gifts to make sure no innocents would be hurt but they could only start using their abilities once Hyunsoo was in sight.

If Hyunsoo caught wind of what they were planning too early, he might lock himself up and they'd lose the chance to deal with him once and for all.

Noon strikes and the bells in the Capitol clock chime. The doors of the administrative building open and Hyunsoo steps out along with a line of guards. It looked minimal but Junmyeon had made sure to not underestimate Central's forces.

Good thing the announcement wouldn't coincide with the mobilization of the forces, as Baekhyun's benefactor was able to relay to them. They'd done enough interference to make sure the timetables of personnel deployment did not match.

This information is running across Chanyeol's mind among other things and he takes a deep sense of self-satisfaction at seeing Hyunsoo harried. His hair was white and his skin had a bluish pallor, signs that he's aware his comeuppance was coming after him.

He descends the commanding marble steps to get close enough to address his- no, Kyungsoo's people.

As Do Hyunsoo takes the podium, all hell breaks loose.

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Junmyeon fires the flare and they move as if they were a well oiled machine.

Sehun's eyes take on a different kind of intensity visible even from where Chanyeol is standing, something the older man has seen from him before.

At the other end of the plaza, just outside the radius where Sehun's Gift is effective, stands Kun, directing people to go away from the Plaza. Even Jongdae helps out, using his Gift of suggestive speech to quickly urge people away from the danger.

On any other day, Chanyeol would be content to just watch such an incredible show of Gifts but this is not such a day.

Hyunsoo visibly panics, giving his forces orders to fire at will as he trips on his feet to run back towards the Capitol building. Central's soldiers fire indiscriminately into the crowd and people crumple to the ground, the others fleeing in all sorts of directions.

Chanyeol joins the firefight, shooting cover fire to help give people time to run to safety. When his magazine is empty, he ducks into cover.

He's distracted by the doors of the Capitol opening to let out guards armed with rifles. Chanyeol's heart sinks at the sight of Central's reinforcement.

"Focus, Chanyeol!" Jongins hollers, Kyungsoo kneeling beside him and aiming his rifle towards Central forces on ground coming to prevent Sehun and Kun from using their Gifts.

"Wait- They're-"

As he watches the scene on the steps, another man, dressed in the garb of an officer under Central exits the building. Upon seeing this man, Hyunsoo panics and starts descending the stairs once again.

More forces from Central flood the perimeter of the Plaza, most of them only carrying riot gear and looking really confused. The guards on the steps take positions and start shooting but their marks hit Central's own hostile forces.

It was additional evidence that the faction members have done more than what was asked of them and thankfully, most of the citizens in the Plaza have cleared the area. The only thing

that matters now was catching Hyunsoo.

“To me!! Protect me!”

Hyunsoo screams pathetically, most of Central’s nearest available and unorganized people closing ranks around him. At this sight and before Chanyeol can even do anything, Kyungsoo gets out of his shooting position and yells at Junmyeon.

“He’s going to get away!” It’s all Jongin can do to run after Kyungsoo when he takes off like a shot towards Hyunsoo and his human shield.

Sehun falls to his knees, exhausted but uninjured, and as Chanyeol yells for Jongdae to look after his friend, the younger man pushes him to go after the prince.

His legs pumping underneath him to catch up, he sees the faction members breaking away from the positions to join the fray as well as the guards from inside the Capitol. In the edge of his vision, he swears he catches the sight of Baekhyun and he braces for impact.

---

Chanyeol never thought he’d see the Capitol like this. The bastion of their country, pillar of their society’s values and principles. Bathed in smoke and the reeking of death.

In the ongoing panic, screams rend the air. The only thing that kept him going was the thought that his friends were somewhere in the fray. They had to fight their way to Hyunsoo and finally hold him accountable to the years of disorder and dysfunction he has brought to his country.

Bodies against bodies, Chanyeol struggled to make his way out of the scrabble and suffocation surrounding him. They needed to make Hyunsoo pay for his actions and take back what was rightfully theirs.

The traitor proved slippery, like the snake he is, always just out of reach.

Chanyeol loses sight of him one moment and the next he has Kyungsoo in his hold, pistol to his friend's temple.

"Finally, I can end this chase." Hyunsoo pulls the two of them away from the struggle, and nobody dares to move, not even his own forces. Finally seeing the descent of their fascistic leader before their very eyes. Most of them flee.

Hyunsoo doesn't seem to mind.

"It's just so funny it has to be you. Always the spare. Always failing." The traitor tightens his hold against Kyungsoo, digs the barrel of his gun harshly to the side of his head. The prince is left with no room to struggle, blood flowing down his face from a cut he sustained in the ramble.

*It's happening*, Chanyeol thinks.

But there is something off in the scene. He's standing in the wrong place, his gun pointed towards Hyunsoo when in the dream he had he was unarmed.

Kyungsoo isn't looking at him and instead he was staring intently at someone else. Chanyeol follows his line of sight and finally registers what's happening.

It's Baekhyun.

It had always been. In the hospital it had been Sehun and, even before that, Jongin.

He was about to watch Baekhyun die in front of him.



---

He knows what would happen, has experienced it firsthand.

Chanyeol watches Kyungsoo's look of horror as Baekhyun takes the first step to rush Hyunsoo and he bellows.

“Kyungsoo!”

Startled by the noise, Hyunsoo shoots his gun towards Chanyeol but the momentum in the twist of his body causes him to miss. Chanyeol fires his gun and the bullet from his rifle travels through Kyungsoo's arm and punctures the traitor in the lung.

Everything happens all at once.

Baekhyun is the first at the scene, kicking Hyunsoo's pistol away and making sure Kyungsoo is okay. He looks stunned but alert and Baekhyun's expression clues Chanyeol in on the fact that he is aware of the gravity of what happened. That conversation can wait.

Chanyeol is right beside them next and then Jongin, the both of them tending to Kyungsoo until Jongdae could look after him more carefully. They exchange tacit glances and every exhale he takes feels lighter than the last.

After witnessing the death of their tyrant, the rest of Central's defense surrenders. The guards from the Capitol building help the rebels and faction members round up the rest of the Central's forces. The stark red against the marble steps would be the start of a reckoning, something that was long overdue. Something bigger than all of them. Chanyeol feels a bit daunted, but they've come as far together.

Minseok leads the round up, Junmyeon having mysteriously left the grounds after talking to the officer from the Capitol. The latter watched the proceedings serenely, a prominent dimple highlighted in his cheek.

It is done. They succeeded. Even the occasional pained wince on Kyungsoo's face can't mar the smile he gives Chanyeol and they laugh at each other, Baekhyun and Jongin meeting eyes and shaking their heads in unison.

There was still a lot of work to be done but at least they were all together, safe and sound.

---

"I still can't believe you shot your friend to save my life," Baekhyun says, nursing a cup of coffee.

They sit in the hospital hallway Baekhyun's benefactor, the dimpled Capitol official from before, had secured for the rebels and faction members. The man had urged them to get some rest but the two of them insisted on making sure their friends were okay before they did.

Chanyeol chuckles, desperately trying to stay awake even as he leaned against the wall.

"That's awfully presumptuous of you," he clarifies, stealing the cup from Baekhyun and downing the remnants in one go. "I shot Hyunsoo, Kyungsoo just happened to be in the way."

The door to Kyungsoo's room opens and the doctor exits, removing his mask to tell them that everything was fine. It was just a flesh wound and they'd made sure to clean the cut.

The doctor also approaches them to shake their hands and thank them for finally ending Hyunsoo's regime of terror. Stunned at the response, Baekhyun doesn't even have anything smart to comment, not being used to such treatment, but Chanyeol is there to thank the doctor for looking after the prince.

They duck into the room to see Jongin standing there and pointing his pistol at Chanyeol, Kyungsoo desperately trying to pull him down with his good arm.

“Uhhh... What the hell is going on?”

“I can’t believe you shot him, Chanyeol.” Jongin cries out and Kyungsoo winces at the noise. “Are you fucking insane? He could have died!”

“Jongin, it’s okay. Calm down,” Chanyeol coaxes and he explains everything. Starting from how he was scared he might have the sight and until the realization that only the Do bloodline had it. Chanyeol explains how he came to the conclusion that he had been seeing people’s last moments all along. Including Jongin’s.

“So do you mean Baekhyun would have killed me?” He asks, his eyes narrowing at the would’ve-been culprit.

“Nah... I don’t think so... Right?” Suddenly unsure, Chanyeol turns to Baekhyun and the latter acts offended, earning a laugh — and a wince — from Kyungsoo.

“The very moment you entered the forest, Central forces burst into camp, so no. I don’t think it was me, *Jongin*. ” Baekhyun retorts.

“I’m glad everything went well,” Kyungsoo’s eyes gleam and something tells Chanyeol there’s more to his best friend’s statement than just a platitude.

“You- *Kyungsoo*, I can’t believe you’d say that after Chanyeol shot you,” Jongin whines again but Kyungsoo wouldn’t hear the rest of it.

Baekhyun pipes up cheerfully, happy that they could get on with their lives without Central looming over them.

“It’s cool though, at least you can have matching scars.”

Baekhyun ignores the glares that everyone direct him, all in favor of slapping Jongin on the arm he had shot all those months ago.

---

It's a crazy sense of reverse deja vu. Jongin and Baekhyun had excused themselves to check on their other friends, let the two of them finally talk alone. They knew it was a significant moment and Chanyeol can't explain how much he appreciates the gesture. However, it still took him a bit of time to finally let out things he'd left unsaid, things hanging heavily in the back of his mind.

“I would have appreciated it if you could have warned me.”

“I did and it didn’t matter.” Kyungsoo smiles at Chanyeol serenely. “What mattered was the fact that you chose to believe him.”

“Did you know?” The prince - *was he still only a prince? Chanyeol wonders. He's Chanyeol's friend, that's what matters.* - puts his smaller hand on Chanyeol's more calloused one. He hadn't noticed how hard he'd been clenching it and he relaxes in an instant. His shoulders slump against his chair as he brushes a hand through his hair.

“I had an idea.”

“From the start?”

“From the very beginning. In that room where we first saw him.”

“How did it-” Chanyeol was about to protest. About to tell Kyungsoo he should have told him about the vision but then Chanyeol is guilty because he's also hidden things from his friend and look where that got them. Kyungsoo looks like he reads the soldier's thoughts entirely and he smiles again.

“I chose to trust you and the choices you would make and everything turned out well.”

Chanyeol considers his words carefully and Kyungsoo holds his hand in his when he talks, his voice barely carries between them even in the small room.

“Would you have done anything differently? Be honest.”

“No, never.”

“There you have your answer, Chanyeol.” Kyungsoo claps his hands together as if to close away the topic. His eyes are suddenly sad. “You have a very unfortunate Gift but you are the testament to the fact that choices matter.”

His eyes search Chanyeol's face and then the cloud lifts, his grip on the soldier's hand turns into steel.

"If you ever try that "hiding it to protect you" shit again with me, I will disembowel you personally, Park Chanyeol."

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In the next few weeks under Kyungsoo's leadership, Chanyeol is court martialed and convicted of physical injury to the monarch and subjected to the punishment of being released from the military as soon as possible. The proceedings were very tongue in cheek, with Minseok winking at him as he announces the verdict and Junmyeon giving him a hug, complaining that he won't get to give Chanyeol orders anymore.

At the same time, a bureau is established which aims to help members of the faction who had been treated as ghosts by the previous regime to reintegrate themselves into society. Under this new body of government, it would also be ensured that the rights of those with Gifts would be protected and maintained by the state. To his surprise, Chanyeol is tasked with

heading the said bureau and included in his staff are their comrades and friends, including Yongqin, Yukhei, Kun, and most especially, Baekhyun.

The former spy finds him brooding on a particular bridge, watching some reconstruction being done to buildings that had taken a hit during the firefight at the Harvest Festival. He'd dreamt about it before, a delicate silver necklace in a white knuckled hand before a jump into the cold water. Pockets full of stone. He'd woken up with a start, blinking in the low light of a lamp, and opened his eyes to Baekhyun watching over him with a kind, knowing smile, brushing his hair away from his face.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Baekhyun bumps his hip against his before looking down into the water, watching Chanyeol's reflection smile at him from way below.

"We have a lot of work to do," the soldier replies, eyeing the people tearing down posters and other paraphernalia encouraging citizens to rat out their Gifted neighbors. Baekhyun follows his gaze and nods before leaning against his body, weight a familiar warmth against Chanyeol's side.

"That we do. But don't you think that's what's exciting?" He smiles, his eyes glinting around the edges and Chanyeol is struck with the realization that he'd follow the other man to the ends of the earth if he asks. He's not scared, just surprised at the thought. He laughs heartily as he agrees and the resulting grin Baekhyun gives him is all the more worth it.

Even as the Capitol rebuilds from under the tyranny it had experienced, Chanyeol is aware that there will be those who will capitalize off of the current instability in the region. They'd have their hands full with making sure to uproot Hyunsoo's influence and not just cut from the surface. Every new facility they take down gives hope to Chanyeol, hope that, like Baekhyun and him, there would be no more need for people to be separated across such arbitrary lines drawn by the greed of people in power.

Threats still loom across the horizon but the newfound unity within their people is encouraging. It gives Chanyeol the reassurance that every time he wakes up from a dream, there is a chance to change the future. Especially now, when he doesn't have to deal with the nightmares alone anymore.

## End Notes

Thank you for reading!

I would like to thank the prompter and the mods of Baecon and Eggs for their patience.

If you have any questions about something in the fic, please feel free to comment!

Stay tuned for... possible spinoff? ;)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!