

Onboard the Shinee Ship: Origins

Chapter 1

“There are a lot of ways you could describe Kim Kibum. Normal wouldn’t be one of them. He takes the word, flips it on its head and uses it as a platform to shine.”

-Lee Jinki

First year second semester student at Intergalactic University 4E27 – colloquially known as IU 27 – Kibum was already a well-known figure on campus. He wasn’t the smartest or the toughest or the richest (or poorest) kid in the area. He wasn’t the most attractive – hard to compete with modified persons and literal morphs, though he was still a far cry from the opposite. No. His allure was far less concrete.

He was one that belonged everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Black crowned head bowed over a digi-text or thrown back in a boisterous laugh at a dive bar in the heart of the city, he fit in because he said he did. Like a Moladhi charming everyone nearby or a Varium shifting features subtly to fit in better with a certain crowd, Kibum did the same. He was a flame among moths. Unfiltered, unabashed, shameless, he regularly made a spectacle of himself, drawing the attention of admirers and onlookers wherever he went. And yet, for all that he *could* belong to any group, he *wasn’t* a part of any group either. Not really.

Just another recognizable face in the crowd. Everyone knew he lived in the dorms on campus. Knew he worked after classes late into the night. Knew he loved his mother and didn’t talk about his father; knew he was an only child; knew he wanted to leave the planet when he graduated; knew he loved to talk about himself...

Only he didn’t. It was just the best way to get other people talking so he could learn about them instead. The best way to keep them from asking questions was to ask them first and listen well. “I went to Auggie’s yesterday. They had great pizza. Have you been? No? What about Renzo’s? Oh. I’ve never been to Beyond the Azure Belt. Yeah?” It worked with food, fashion, entertainment, studying... just about anything really.

As far as he knew, it was the best way to keep people at arm’s length so they couldn’t get too close. The last thing he needed was someone entering his life just to leave it again.

The thing about always keeping people away though, meant that you were also an easy target.

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“Normal? I suppose that’s one way to describe Lee Jinki. If by normal you mean in that unassuming sincere way that makes you feel like you’ve been wrapped in a warm blanket on a cold day.”

-Kim Kibum

Second year, second semester student Jinki was equally well-known in IU 27, though for vastly different reasons. Inherently book smart, studious, and uncommonly good-natured, he could be

considered one of the darlings of his year mates. With a disarming grin, bedhead messy brown hair, and an accommodating nature, he was easy to approach and generally happy to help.

Coming from a family of five – three younger sisters and a baby brother, he was a literal magnet for lost or confused first years; a champion study group organizer – especially during midterms and finals; and a veteran university event attendee. No stranger to making a fool of himself to make others laugh and being a literal library of personal stories, he was a campfire on a cold night, beckoning wanderers to his light.

It was common knowledge that he helped coach at his siblings' schools with grav jumping and low grav gymnastics – a variation of the original Earth sport; was attending university on a merit scholarship; and wanted to work on a spaceship when he graduated, though he hadn't decided his focus yet. By and large he had no enemies, unless you counted the occasional jealous friend or significant other. "I assure you. We only study together. I have no idea why they keep talking about me after our study sessions. Have you tried helping them with the subject? I can show you what we're working on."

Even 'enemies' could become friends when nudged in the right direction. And he enjoyed the relationships he had. It was nice to be liked in general and especially for the help he gladly offered, but... it would have been even nicer to have that one person who was all his too though. And vice versa.

If he was completely honest with himself, he could admit he was stretched thin at times, a perpetual fount of giving that he was afraid would someday run dry.

The thing about not being able to say no even when you don't say yes is... that silence is an answer and it may not be the right one.

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"Given the usual people he tended to hang around, no one really saw that coming."

-Anonymous Dancer at The Stars Align

A dull headache pounded between his temples as Kibum casually exited the classroom for the midterm test in astrophysics. His university uniform was slightly askew and he tugged at it self-consciously before brushing at the fringe of his bangs tickling his eyelashes. A quick glance around showed the hallway was relatively empty as most students were still taking their tests or were otherwise absent but there was a servobot gliding down the metallic surface. He considered getting a drink from it but shook his head. After that test, he deserved something more official.

With a quick stretch and a hand anchoring at the base of his neck to rub at tense muscles, he turned and strode for the spiral escalator that would take him to the ground floor where the general canteen was. He was dying for a coffee, even if it was the cheaper synthetic brand that most schools had because the original had gone extinct on Earth. Oh, it had been revived on Earth 2.0 but the pure stuff cost an arm and a leg for a fraction of the amount. Internally, he winced at the price and volume difference between the two and resigned himself to his affordable knockoff drink instead.

Reward in hand, he contemplated staying in the mostly empty canteen and finishing it but wrinkled his nose at the idea. It would fill up before too long and right now, he much preferred the idea of peace and quiet before his next and final exam of the day: essentially Spaceships 101. He could study but he was quite ready for it and the library would make a fitting napping zone once he was finished with his drink.

At least that was the plan anyway. He was having a nice little nap in a secluded corner of the overly windowed floor when he was abruptly awakened by the sensation of falling. *Bang!* "Ow..." he groaned, clenching his eyes tight as he reached back to rub at his bruised head. At least the floor here was carpeted.

"Oh Kibum. Did you fall down?" a mockingly familiar voice tsked from above.

Forcing one dark eye open, Kibum appraised a pair of second year humanoids – one Terran and one Moladhi. Huh. There were usually three of them. "Pretty sure that was you, Kieran," he responded flatly, keeping his face relatively neutral. He had an inkling of what this might have been about.

"Aw. Let me help you up," Crawven crooned, the tone a spine-tingling mix of mocking assistance and playful taunting.

"Thanks," Kibum drawled as he braced himself against the table before turning his back against the wall and looking up at the pair. "I take it this isn't a social call," he sighed, lightly threading his fingers together while he positioned one foot behind the nearest leg of the table.

Kieran took that opportunity to prop himself on the edge of the same table and look down with folded arms. "Word on the station is that you're the one responsible for Boro's temporary suspension."

Kibum laughed and shook his head, glancing around quickly as he did so. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he explained, looking back up to meet Kieran's gaze. There were no other professors or servobots nearby. There might have been a student at another table on the other side of the data wall but the glimpse was too quick to see more.

"So you have no idea about his biology test from his first year midterms being copied and sold to other first years in an act that runs the risk of expulsion if proven true?" Crawven asked, the manipulative tones of his voice plucking at Kibum's resistant will.

"Why would I know anything about it?" he wondered blankly, playing at a loss. "They're all locked behind student numbers, passwords, and pins. It's not like I'm his girlfriend or anything," he added with a dismissive shrug as he shifted his right foot closer to him and slightly under the table this time.

Both Kieran and Crawven narrowed their eyes as they leaned closer menacingly. "You think you're so smart, don't you?"

Kibum couldn't quite help the smirk that tugged at the corner of his mouth. He leaned forward to rest his right elbow on the table, chin clasped lightly in his fingers. "Aren't I?" he responded, one brow quirking tauntingly.

"You-" they both started to sputter, hands reaching for him.

Like a tightly wound spring, Kibum's left hand shot out to press – really hard – against Crawven's similarly affected groin, making the Moladhi squawk with a most undignified sound. Simultaneously, Kibum rose up from his seated squat, catching the edge of the table against his hip and raising it up enough to make Kieran flail in a vain attempt to keep himself from falling off. A waving hand smacked Kibum in the face when he took the opening between the pair and kicked off the wall to launch himself through the gap.

Behind him, the table banged as it settled back into place and he bumped into the data wall, confused sounds erupting from the touch screen. Crawven recovered faster than Kibum thought he would and he grimaced when claw-like fingers scratched at his back. "Star shards," he hissed, lurching forward and desperately sprinting around the corner. Movement in his periphery made him jerk in surprise but it was just another student with his head down walking immediately behind him. Strange... but not his concern and he turned to focus ahead again.

A second later, a dull thud, two surprised cries and one loud clatter erupted in his wake. It was enough to make Kibum pause and look back once more. Crawven and the stranger were in a tangled mess on the floor, a digi-text lying next to them, and Kieran was coming around the corner of the data wall. "Watch it, Jinki!" the Terran snapped, torn between helping Crawven up or just giving chase.

"Sorry!" the so-named Jinki apologized, holding his hands up in surrender as he apparently tried to stay out of any further trouble.

It was all the distraction Kibum needed to turn and hightail it out of the library. He filed the name away for later, knowing it sounded familiar at least, but he had other worries right now. Including another exam to get to.

Between finishing midterms and actively avoiding Crawven and Kieran, the accidental helper largely remained off Kibum's radar. He had his suspicions and he did at least recall that Jinki was the name of one of the second years he'd heard about at the university, but it wasn't like they had ever really interacted before. He tentatively put their encounter down as a freak occurrence and otherwise went about his week.

At least it was easier to stay out of their way in the evenings though. It wasn't that they never visited The Stars Align, but rather that they never recognized him when they were there.

While he was normally pretty good at tumbling out of things, the encounter with Crawven left Jinki a bit more bruised than anticipated. He wasn't entirely sure why the pair had been accosting the first year that day in the library, and perhaps they had good reason. It just didn't sit right with him that it was two against one. Two second years at that.

Fortunately, with his reputation, they were none the wiser that he'd intentionally walked between them as opposed to the accidental wandering he'd pretended with the digi-text in hand. Not that he could quite get the first year out of his mind. That side-eyed look was practically burned into his brain from the brief glimpse he'd caught of the other man. "Enough," he grumbled, waving away the memory as another twinge in his back reminded him he was still recovering.

Amidst the clamor of his siblings getting ready for breakfast, washing up, and otherwise preparing for the day, he turned his attention to handling them while his mother slept and his father worked the weekend shift at a tech scrap yard. Hajoon would be fine. At 16, she could get around the city without trouble and make her way to grav jumping practice at the local community center. Doyun would need help with her homework and at 13, she was just too young for her sister to want to help. 9-year-old Siwoo was head over heels for the low grav gymnastics practice that took place at the actual training center. And 7-year-old Daejung needed... motivation to not get stuck in the VR helmet all morning. It was hardly new tech but he could (and would) play for hours if you let him.

By the time everyone was settled and delivered and otherwise helped, it was midafternoon and Jinki needed to start getting ready to meet a post grad who had contacted him when he signed up to be a volunteer in his biology research. The venue was certainly questionable but he was willing to give it a chance. Who knew? Maybe he'd be able to put it down on his record for future employment purposes or other opportunities.

Upon arriving at The Stars Align, his hopeful optimism began to fade. This part of the city always looked bright due to the neon lights that never went out and the synthesized music beckoned potential visitors from every corner. Everything was legal and it was a respectable enough area, as far as he knew, but that didn't stop the niggling doubt that started to blossom in his gut as he made his way inside the brightly illuminated building.

Fast paced sultry music greeted his ears at the entrance, the sounds only growing louder as he made his way past the check-in point – 18 or older only. It was a club geared towards Terrans after all. The majority of patrons on the inside were Terran in appearance, though the odd Varium and Moladhi stood out in the midst. Surprisingly, a Dawbn seemed to be the music master, perched atop the spire upon which they watched the performances below.

While Jinki was there to meet the researcher, his attention was immediately arrested by the three performers onstage. A Moladhi was the main dancer, flowing multihued ribbons of costume fluttering around as she twirled and flipped, a single pole her anchor amidst the lower gravity in her portion of the stage. It helped make her look like she was flying, since her brilliantly dyed plumage was decorative at best. And she was magnificent, dominating the show as intended, but her secondary dancers were nothing to sneeze at either.

Closest to the door, a male dancer performed, scantily clad with a body chiseled to near perfection. He had no hair but his shorn head was adorned with metallic painted curlicues decorated with glittering gems that dazzled under the bright lights. Full gravity was obviously in effect by the way his muscles tensed and flexed when he maneuvered on and around the pole, but it seemed as if it barely touched him. On the far side, the third performer was resplendent in a different way, but partially hidden from view until Jinki could get closer. But having stood in the doorway staring for longer than he cared to admit, he figured it was time to start searching for his contact. Though how he was supposed to find him was beyond the second year...

At least until someone found *him* instead. "Jinki?" a stranger asked as they slung an arm over his shoulder, a sure grin etched on the Terran's face.

Dumbfounded, Jinki just blinked in response, brow furrowed in obvious confusion.

"I'll take that as a yes," the stranger went on, laughing low in his throat.

"Uh..." Jinki started to stammer out, raising one hand in quiet objection, but it mattered not. The larger man promptly steered him closer to the stage where two more individuals were sitting, a man and a woman, one across from the other.

"You made it," the man commented, waving them over and calling for a drink.

"Oh, I'm-" Jinki tried to say, just fine with no drinking, but he was quickly pressed into the seat next to the woman who appeared speculatively pleased. Jinki nodded to her and then frowned as he focused on the seated man again, trying desperately to get a handle on the situation. "Mr. Sloan?" he queried, noting that the avatar image had looked nothing like this individual before him.

"Huh? Oh yes. That's me," the man laughed with a grin that did nothing to assure his audience.

And the first – or was it second, no third – red flag went up for Jinki. Technically the first was the avatar pic as opposed to actual face timing or holo-calling the person. The second was the establishment. "I'm sorry but you don't look like a post graduate student," he admitted, feeling safe enough in making that observation.

"Ouch. And here I thought everyone said you weren't judgmental," Mr. Sloan sighed with a disappointed shake of his head. He couldn't help but laugh though when Jinki mutely gestured towards the other man's clothes and the general nature of the venue. "Right," he chuckled once, looking down at the cleanly pressed folds of the white suit and red tie he was wearing.

"I like him," the woman seated next to Jinki purred, leaning close to trace his bangs away from his face with a long painted nail.

"Uh, thank you, um... and you are?" he blinked, awkwardly leaning away to try and keep distance between them.

"Mrs. Sloan," she grinned, shifting her hand to place it on his thigh in a familiar manner.

"Oh, I should really be going," Jinki swallowed, trying to scoot away and remove Mrs. Sloan's hand without actually grabbing it.

"You're probably wondering what kind of research I asked you here for," Mr. Sloan commented while his gaze remained fixed on the stage. The male dancer and the third one had switched places and the latter was now immediately in front of them.

"I'm good," he commented, turning to try and get up before he saw the man from before standing directly in front of him blocking his path. Full on alarm bells clanged in his head but he felt boxed in and out of his depth.

"You are. Which is part of why you're here," Mr. Sloan nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you think this one's a man or a woman? Or a synth?" Mrs. Sloan asked, distracting Jinki's attention to look at the performer in front of them.

"Huh?" he gasped, mouth going dry as he looked away from her to the stage. Now that they were in easy view, it was impossible to miss the fact they were beautiful. They were the only one

wearing a teasingly revealing dress, flashes of skin showing through at every opportunity, but nothing revealing enough to determine whether they were male, female or other.

"The third one is usually a mystery performer. So far, Almighty Key has done a very good job of keeping their real persona under wraps," she giggled, fawning over the sharp-eyed performer, gold rimmed lids accenting the unnaturally blue irises.

Despite the fact that they moved with enviable grace and had a wiry strength that belied their femininity, they seemed oddly familiar. At least at certain angles. The thickly applied makeup didn't help either.

"As I was saying," Mr. Sloan commented, drawing both of their attention back to the conversation at hand. "You are a good person, Jinki. And good people can go anywhere and everywhere openly," he smiled, the expression lacking in warmth. "And no one suspects the young."

Jinki's hackles rose up at that comment and he sat up. "I don't think I like where this is going."

"You have quite a few brothers and sisters at home, don't you?" Mr. Sloan commented, returning his attention to the performer as if his words were casual and innocent. "It's not like that many mouths to feed are that affordable, even on this Earth," he scoffed, almost bored. "All I'm asking is that you help me... place information bots in auspicious places. I'll even pay you for your... research," he explained, grinning with the cold smile once again as he shifted his attention back to Jinki.

He started to shake his head no but froze when the smile faded from Mr. Sloan's face. It was not a pleasant expression.

"Good. Right," he tsked like he'd forgotten. "Well, if money won't motivate you, there are other ways to convince people," he added, gesturing at his wife.

As if on cue, she slid closer, one hand landing on the front of his chest before it started to slide down. The walls began to close in on Jinki and panic bloomed in his gut. He needed to get out of here right now, but he didn't know how. What were his parents going to think if they heard about this? What was he gonna do...?

Despair rose up and stopped as soon as the music did. The lights went out and a hush fell over the entire room. A low whirring sound indicated something was happening and then three beams of light like rays from the heavens illuminated the performers as they came down from their platforms, hand in hand. At the ground floor, they split off from each other, theatrically searching for something. Playful music accompanied their antics as they mingled in the crowd.

The Sloans were just as transfixed as Jinki was, watching the unusual spectacle as each performer found a 'victim' to take with them back to the stage. The man and the Moladhi found someone relatively quickly but Almighty Key kept searching, teasing and playing up the crowd for laughs. Jinki could hardly believe it when the light fell upon him and Mrs. Sloan as the performer leaned close, a heady floral scent washing over them as they did so. Mrs. Sloan allowed a soft sigh to escape as Almighty Key brushed the backs of their fingers against her cheek before running their hand down her arm, the same one on Jinki's chest.

Jinki was like stone as the graceful fingers curled around Mrs. Sloan's hand and shifted it next to his own. His heart hammered in his chest when those same fingers brushed against his wrist next and gave a gentle tug without ever looking at him. Instead, Almighty Key winked at Mrs. Sloan with a playful smile and deftly tugged Jinki after them. Raucous cheers rose up as the third and final 'victim' was chosen while the music started up with renewed energy.

Completely at a loss, Jinki didn't know whether to be elated or petrified and it showed. Stiff as a stick in the mud, he flushed brilliantly when Almighty Key used him as a sort of pole to dance around. It barely registered that the other two people chosen were being treated similarly. For Jinki, it felt like some kind of test or punishment, meted out by the enigmatic and beguiling Almighty Key.

He couldn't have said how long the dance lasted. It could have been mere seconds and it could have been an eternity that he was rooted to that spot, frozen on stage while a veritable deity made him look plain and small in comparison. But true relief washed over him when he was 'encouraged' to take a bow with the others and then guided to the doors at the back of the stage. His companions were aglow with the high of their experiences as they stumbled into the darkened space at the back. The backstage worker that popped into sight, crystalline body sparkling enough to draw their attention, made them giddier than they already were and they immediately followed its direction of, "Main room that way."

That was the last place Jinki wanted to go though and he stood rooted in place until a tap on his shoulder made him look back. "Almight-"

"Exit's that way," they murmured with a wink, the voice musically deep and utterly amused as they pointed to a spot in the darkness.

And then they were gone, the door separating the stage from the back sliding into place quietly. In the quiet of the muted sounds and lights, Jinki finally exhaled and blinked hard, still not entirely sure what had happened. He jerked when someone tapped him on the thigh and made him look down.

The backstage amethyst hued Dawbn was still there and pointed in the same direction that Almighty Key had. "Exit's that way."

"Thanks," Jinki breathed, waving at the shorter figure before he scurried towards the door – the handle of which was hidden in the dark and took a moment to open. It led to a simple hallway that would have otherwise been a tiny bit sketchy to Jinki but gift horses and all that, he was ready to be gone. The sealed door at the end opened with a blast of normal street sounds and tipsy voices and he had never been so happy to breathe in the artificially clean air of the city before.

Freedom was all the incentive he needed to set foot towards home before fate or bad luck or whatever you wanted to call it stepped in again. He could figure out the rest later. Though... whoever Almighty Key was, he would probably have to thank them at some point.

Chapter Two

"He puts on a brave face and acts like everything's fine but at heart, he's still a child."

-Passeri (Moladhi performer at The Stars Align)

In the wee hours of the morning with an empty room and just his typical two coworkers shuffling around the space, Kibum felt the weight of his shift finally sink in. “Ugh! These new boots are killing me,” he groaned as he laid out on one of the empty sofas in the quiet interior of The Stars Align. It was a vastly different environment when none of the guests were there and the music fell silent.

“Get up! No rest for the wicked,” Jackson tsked with an amused shake of his head as he sauntered by and tossed a nanoweave cloth at him. He’d put on more standard clothes but hadn’t removed the glitter and glam on his head yet. Probably wouldn’t until he got home really.

“I don’t wanna,” Kibum whined, lifting one bare leg through the slit of his dress and glaring at the end of the booted limb in childish offense. Cleaning up was always the hardest part of this gig. Not that it was a difficult task but rather that he really didn’t want to. He had nothing against cleaning – was a bit of a clean freak himself at home, but the whole “appreciating the other side of the job” seemed a bit much some days. Especially since it wasn’t really needed and they all knew it.

Passeri took that opportunity to swing around and plop herself on his stomach none too gently, her short beaklike mouth curled at the corners in as much of a smile as she could muster. “Then tell me more about this stranger who’s come by, not just twice, but three times now,” she crooned while tapping him on the nose with a finger that was covered in short grey feathers. They resembled fur more than anything but a closer look would reveal their true form.

Kibum coughed once from the initial impact – off-world Moladhi were heavier than they looked – and then rolled his eyes before grabbing at the nanoweave cloth as if he could escape. When Passeri made no effort to move and even Jackson returned to lean over the back of the sofa looking down at him, he exhaled in annoyed disgust. “He’s nobody. I told you.”

“No,” the Moladhi snorted, crossing her arms and leaning back to further settle herself in place. “The trio of ragamuffins who come in from time to time that you can’t stand are nothing.”

“This nothing you actually called a ‘jaunt’ for,” Jackson reminded him with a sly grin before he hid it behind his hands. The smile was just as obvious in his earth brown eyes though.

“Don’t we have cleaning to do?” Kibum grumbled, waving his cloth almost like a flag of surrender.

“Now he wants to clean,” Passeri laughed, her delighted trill echoing in the empty space.

“I guess that means we can go home then,” the Terran male teased, shifting one hand to brush at Kibum’s black bangs playfully. “Ixo’s gone home for the night and Garum’s already turned in so...”

“I don’t like you,” Kibum huffed, glaring at the other man with his famously sharp eyes.

“Drama queen,” Passeri giggled with a loud slap on his thigh.

“Ow!” her target yelped, playing up the name. It sounded like it hurt far more than it did.

His companions both scoffed in bemused disgust and got up with dismissive waves of their hands. They knew if Kibum really didn’t want to talk yet, he wasn’t going to, no matter how much they teased and cajoled otherwise. “You get that side and I’ll take the bar,” she encouraged, patting Jackson on the shoulder and pointing him towards the entrance.

“Yes my lady,” Jackson saluted, a goofy grin in place before he skipped away. Passeri preened after the comment and then calmly headed towards her area.

Finally alone again, Kibum sat up slowly and took a breath, gripping the cloth in his hand thoughtfully. Jinki had shown up again today – the third time since Kibum had rescued him in as many weeks. According to Passeri anyway. The first two times, Kibum hadn’t been working so he’d missed him. He hadn’t been coming for any shady deals, so it was obvious he was coming for the show. Kibum was relatively sure he was trying to figure out just who he – Almighty Key – was.

The second year didn’t stay long, his head otherwise on a swivel as he kept looking around to make sure the Sloans weren’t present, but it might have also been because he’d noticed Kieran, Crawven, and Boro there one of the evenings. Both groups were relative regulars, the latter more so lately, but the Sloans had been coming for a long time. At least according to Jackson anyway. They weren’t good people but they were far from the worst. Information brokers was a nice way of describing them. They liked easy marks – see nice guys like Jinki – they could blackmail with incriminating photos or intimidate into helping them harvest data in inconspicuous places. Ironically, they would pay for services rendered, so they could at least justify it wasn’t outright extortion, but once they had you, it wasn’t so easy to escape.

With a heavy sigh and a dismissive brush at his red dress – the cut modest in the body but revealing everywhere else, Kibum stood up and started making the rounds. The nanoweave cloth was spectacular at cleaning up absolutely anything and wiping down the surfaces to sanitize and sterilize at the same time. Garum was nothing if not a stickler for cleanliness, though he did have cleaning staff that did the rounds periodically throughout the evening. The Varium owned establishment might not have been the highest-class place, but it was affordable and impeccable in every respect that mattered. No doubt that was part of the reason Jinki had even allowed himself to come in the first place. Had it been a shady disreputable location, he might well have thought better of coming the first time.

Kibum kept expecting him to figure out who he was, but so far, nothing. Which was both gratifying and irritating. He’d even spoken to him after the jaunt. He never spoke to guests... His sigh wasn’t as quiet as he meant for it to be and he felt Jackson and Passeri’s attention shift to him. While he didn’t want to talk about Jinki, he could at least give them info on the others. “The ragamuffins have been coming more often lately because Boro’s girlfriend got expelled, he got suspended, and then they broke up so Kieran and Crawven have been trying to help him get over it.”

Jackson barked a laugh and Passeri commented, “I’m betting you might have had something to do with that.”

“Maybe,” he admitted with a quick shrug of his shoulders, recalling the first time he’d officially noticed Jinki. Okay, so he’d seen him around campus before and had heard of him in some of his circles but hadn’t had cause to actually see him until the library event.

“This kid,” Jackson chuckled, gesturing at him with his thumb and rolling his eyes. Kibum mutely offered an eye roll of his own and continued cleaning.

“I have always found it fascinating how Terrans have such varied peoples but act fairly similarly in many situations,” Passeri murmured, her voice carrying easily over the bar she was currently wiping down.

“Don’t lump us together,” “Don’t put us in the same group,” Kibum and Jackson denied at the same time, laughing together after they did. Passeri wore a smug smile while she gestured between them with one elegant hand. “It’s not like I tell anybody what to do,” Kibum defended himself, shrugging with one arm while the other ran the cloth over another stool and table.

“I swear. If you weren’t obviously a Terran, I’d say you were supposed to be a Moladhi,” Jackson snorted, wiping down the entryway frame with a quick flourish.

This time it was Passeri that scoffed. “Hardly. He’s much too honest,” she laughed, sashaying around the bar and moving in his general direction.

“Right. Our dear Almighty Key never lies,” Jackson said, an amused gleam in his eyes.

“What is this? Pick on Kibum night?” he grumbled, taking a breath before finishing up his section. Passeri and Jackson exchanged looks, laughter dancing in their eyes, but didn’t say anything else. “Besides, there’s nothing wrong with selective truth telling and the power of suggestion,” he added with a stiff finger pointing between them.

Passeri held her hands up in surrender at that and then gestured at herself. “Moladhi here. I breathe the power of suggestion,” she crooned, her voice changing several tones and a couple octaves as she reminded them of her vocal prowess.

Kibum managed to mostly control the impulse she was playing on but Jackson’s reactive shiver was semi-involuntary. “Show off,” he muttered, wrinkling his nose playfully in her direction.

She rolled her eyes and retorted, “You are a walking monument to the idea of showing off.” Her amber eyes traveled the length of him meaningfully and he flexed in response. Passeri giggled and acted coy.

Kibum’s shoulders dropped and he exhaled with narrowed eyes. “Get a room.”

Playful smiles turned to him at the same time. “And leave you to go home by your lonesome?” The Moladhi’s tone was teasing but the words were genuine.

The tips of Kibum’s ears flushed and he frowned with a wrinkled nose in response. “I can get home fine by myself,” he muttered, lightly wringing the nanoweave cloth between his hands.

“Ayah,” Jackson tsked, sliding over to sling an arm over Kibum’s shoulders. He was slightly shorter than the older man so it always had a big brother effect. “We are more than aware you are capable of taking care of yourself.” He poked the younger Terran’s cheek for fun and Kibum ducked the side of his face against his shoulder with a complaining sound. “Now do you want the company or not?” Jackson asked directly, fighting not to laugh out loud at the arguably cute display.

Kibum didn’t say anything in response, which was answer enough for them. “Alright then,” Passeri murmured, ruffling Kibum’s hair with long slender fingers before she reached down to grab the cloth from his hands. Standing next to him, she was a head taller than him – making her stand over Jackson too, but it only added to the motherly air she donned in that moment. “Go get your stuff. We’ll wait for you,” she encouraged, giving him a gentle nudge to get him moving.

The younger Terran left without a word. He slipped into the back, swapped out his performance clothes for his daywear, donned his typical hat and then threw on his face mask for good measure. Part of keeping up the appeal of his performance was maintaining his anonymity so such things were a must for him.

When he returned, Passeri and Jackson were having a casual conversation near the front. Kibum was slightly jealous of just how comfortable they were with each other. But their attention shifted when he got close and Passeri took him under her arm to guide him to the third entrance of the establishment: the roof had a special transportation system for late night workers especially. By and large the dome cities were safe but it was comforting knowing that was one less thing to worry about on their way to the hover hubs.

With Kibum sandwiched between them, they pushed the call button and waited for a hovercab to arrive. In the brief delay, they looked out over the city together, pointing at the faint stars above. Light pollution and the surface of the dome made them difficult to see, but if you squinted enough, the twinkling lights could be seen in the heavens, so close and yet so far away. "One day, I'll see them for myself," Kibum whispered, the words so soft they could have been a prayer or a promise.

"The Captain of some ship?" Jackson inquired, trying to see what Kibum saw.

"Like I'd be anything else?" he scoffed in response.

"One day indeed," the Moladhi agreed, gently propping her short chin on the top of his head.

"Passeri..." Kibum groaned good-naturedly. They knew it was for show though. He never asked for the attention but neither did he try to move or push her away.

"Cab's comin'," Jackson announced, waving politely as it stopped. He held the door open for the other two before they all clambered in, the Moladhi in the middle since she was the tallest. They typed in the address on the pop up holoscreen, added the credits passcode for The Stars Align, and the AI took them away without a word.

Conversation was light and comfortable on the ride. Jackson and Passeri carried most of it while Kibum looked out the window and observed the city that glowed all around them. Though he didn't speak as much, he silently enjoyed the warm contact of the Moladhi next to him. Her hand loosely covered his in the cradle of the space between their pressed thighs. The gesture was reassuring more than anything. A silent 'I'm here and I've got you' inherent in the contact.

When they reached the hover hub, they all filed out and headed for the individual pods first. Since he'd started working there and they'd started escorting him, it was tradition for them to see Kibum off seeing as they would take another hover bus to the next hub and then separate from there. "Tell your mother we said hi," Passeri smiled, patting him on the head once in an equally motherly gesture.

"And see you for your next shift," Jackson winked, stuffing his hands in his pockets with a bright grin. "Oh! And let us know if anything happens with your nobody," he teased before dancing backwards as Kibum moved like he was going to hit him.

"I'll let you know alright," he scowled, though the expression lasted all of two seconds before he broke into a laugh himself. "Get out of here," he snorted, shooing them both away and then waving as he watched them head for the hover tram platform. As for him, he stepped into the elevator looking doorway, typed in his address on the pop up holoscreen accompanied with his personal credits passcode, and then sat down on the automated fold out seat for the ride home. Larger more well-funded cities had teleportation hubs, but a relatively new planet like theirs had hover tech. Public transport moved through the air while personal transports like the one he was on now took a below the city platform approach.

Tunnels mirroring streets led to specific areas, making it easier for the individuals to head home when they lived further on the outskirts of the city. Most public hover cabs remained in the heart of the city where paying citizens could more easily be found. They were more expensive after all. But faster if he was being honest. Kibum stifled a yawn as he waited for the hover pod to get him to his general location. When he arrived, he stepped out of the elevator like entrance into the well-lit platform, tugged at the rim of his cap and then hunched his shoulders as he made the final leg of his trip home.

He told everyone at school he lived in the dorms but that wasn't true anymore. He had when he first got in, but he was denied financial assistance from the university and the government – due to 'insufficient academic prowess' and 'attendance concerns' - so had to give it up. He simply hadn't corrected them of the change since then. He'd be eligible for review at the end of his first year but until then...

It wasn't a long walk, maybe two and a half blocks, but leaving the platform sent him into a far more shadowed area that always had him on high alert. Again, crime was not rampant and even in these shady parts of the city, it was relatively safe, but he didn't feel like taking chances. His building was a collection of tiny apartments that nestled amidst other similar buildings. They all looked cookie cutter but it was home and he felt infinitely more comfortable heading inside to greet the AI at the front desk. "Evening Sunny," he called as he removed his mask.

"Welcome back, Mr. Kim," the female voice responded warmly, an emoticon face popping up on the holoscreen instead of her usual humanoid appearance. It wasn't even an emoji this time.

Kibum frowned and paused. "I told you to call me Kibum," he reminded her.

"I know, but company policy dictates I treat all residents with commensurate respect," was the standard response.

"Yeah, yeah," Kibum sighed with a roll of his eyes. It made him feel old and reminded him too much of his father... "Your visual appearance processor on the fritz again?" he asked aloud before moving closer as he forced his attention to the issue in front of him.

"Unfortunately, yes. A request has been put in for a replacement chip but it won't be here for two weeks, three days, four hours, twenty-seven minutes and counting," she answered matter-of-factly.

"Feh," Kibum grumbled, moving closer to the panel under the holoscreen. "Let me take a look, Sunny. I might be able to do a quick fix for now," he promised, kneeling while he waited.

"But a replacement is--"

"Sunny," he stated flatly, looking up at the emoticon with a pursed mouth.

"Okay."

Kibum laughed at the easy capitulation and then nibbled on his bottom lip as he looked inside when the panel retracted. Nothing too crazy. One of the chips was fried but if he bypassed it with one of the existing wires... the connection wouldn't be the most stable, but it should give her a more normal appearance again. From his back pocket, he pulled out his multifunction tool, clicked through the options until he found the one he needed and set to work with the quick fix. "Ow!" he yelped as a tiny spark shocked his finger.

"Is everything alright?" Sunny asked, the emoticon turning into a worried frown.

"It was a little hotter than I thought it would be," he grumbled, continuing to mumble under his breath as he fixed the issue for the time being. "There!" he grinned, tapping on the frame with his fist to indicate he was finished. "Much better," he added, looking up to see the cherubic face of their building's AI. Her warm smile made her full cheeks rise obviously and the wavy curls of gold framing her face always made her seem open and welcoming.

"I see that my visual appearance has returned to normal. Thank you, Mr. Kim," she beamed, tracking him with moving cinnamon brown eyes this time as opposed to the static image it had been previously.

"No problem. Hopefully they'll bring a *new* replacement part next time," he sighed, waving at her as he started to head to the stairs.

"Not likely, Mr. Kim. On the list of priorities, my appearance in this district and in this building especially is not particularly high."

"And?" Kibum asked over his shoulder, not waiting for a response before he added, "Everybody deserves to be seen."

Sunny's voice didn't change but he knew she was smiling when she said, "Thank you, Mr. Kim. I hope you have a good evening."

"Yeah," he sighed in agreement, giving her one more parting wave before he headed up the stairs to the third floor. Room 314 was nothing special but it was 'affordable' and it was basically the only thing his failure of a father had left him and his mother before he up and disappeared from their lives. He still had to pay for it though, necessitating the job he'd found at The Stars Align. At least he liked the job anyway. Exhaling softly, he stretched his neck and kicked off his shoes at the entrance before hanging the cap and face mask. "Hi mom," he called quietly, pressing his fingers to a still frame digital picture on the wall next to the door. "Passeri and Jackson say hi too," he added into the ensuing silence as he headed for the tiny bathroom.

He washed his face, took out his colored contacts, brushed his teeth and glared at the visage in the mirror. With no concealer to help him hide, his eighteen-year-old face looked too sharp and angled. There were bags under his eyes and he looked older than he should have. Groaning softly, he covered

his face with his hands and scrubbed before turning away. "One day. One day, Kibum," he promised himself, heading back into the main room and pulling out the wall bed before falling face first on it.

His stomach issued a quiet complaint but he curled up around it and ignored it. He'd forgotten to take extra food from the canteen today and hadn't been able to snag more than a couple bites of leftovers at work. If he didn't think about it though, he'd fall asleep eventually. And as always, he did. Not comfortably or happily, but sleep came all the same.

Chapter Three: First Official Meeting – Part 1

"Jinki's an open book. You can see when he's thinking and when he's finally made up his mind. Once he gets to that point, there's almost no talking him out of it. Which is why I have to come too, of course. You know. To make sure someone's got his back."

-Henry (Terran male 2nd year student and Jinki's best friend)

Classes and meetings and gatherings blurred together in the immediate days after his encounter at The Stars Align. At first, he was just grateful to have escaped and afraid the Sloans would perhaps try to track him down so he spent as much time as possible staying busy. They already knew who he was so they'd know where he lived and where he went to school if they really wanted him. Considering that, there was no point in worrying over it too much, so studying, mentoring, and coaching helped.

It didn't take long for the ball of knots in his gut to start unravelling though, especially after getting slammed one too many times in grav jumping coaching sessions, and rational thought returned with it. He'd been naïve for sure and hadn't done his homework on the 'researcher.' That was on him. It took him even less time to realize how lucky he was after the fact, though. A little quiet asking around in his familiar circles eventually revealed – via friend of a friend connections – the Sloans were known characters in the shadier side of things. Not true villains in any sense of the word, but definitely not someone you wanted to be indebted to or working for if you could help it. He heard at least one horror story from a second year's cousin's friend who had a friend who got caught up with them and it wasn't encouraging.

Truly, he'd dodged an energy round there. If not for the performer, he didn't know what would have happened. And honestly, even though he could push the Sloans out of mind, he couldn't quite shake the image of Almighty Key from his memory. They were both foreign and familiar at the same time and it bothered the cosmos out of him. He had so many questions, not the least of which was... why had they decided to help him? He was literally a nobody. Well, a 'good' nobody but that was precisely why he'd been targeted by the Sloans. So... why him?

And that was the question which had led him back to that terrifying and electrifying place three more times after the fact. The first time he'd only seen the Moladhi and two new dancers but that was probably because he'd gone on a different day. The second time it was the Terran from the first occasion, a Varium, and a different mystery dancer, not to mention a trio of familiar faces from the university as well. He was pretty sure that Crawven wouldn't have recognized him and Boro had been pretty far gone when he'd seen him, but Kieran was oddly observant from time to time.

It had taken Jinki a bit of time to muster up the courage to go a third time, but it was well worth it. He saw Almighty Key in a red dress, pinned up hair, and absolutely fantastic albeit heavy makeup, and very nearly got stuck in the entryway just watching them. The heeled boots gave them an extra leggy look and were a nice touch. But Jinki's gaze was drawn to the sharp lined eyes and the long slender fingers elegantly clinging to the dancing pole.

Three weeks out and he could still remember the way they felt in his hand, guiding him to the stage. Tracing over his arms and shoulders and chest in playful taps and swipes. Grazing his neck and collarbones as Almighty Key danced around him. He got chills just thinking about it and then went cold as he saw the crowd before the stage. In that moment before, they hadn't existed, but now he knew he himself had been a part of the spectacle. Personally, Jinki could only remember the bright lights and the way Almighty Key looked and felt. Right up until they grabbed his hand and pushed him back towards the exit.

The echo of their voice in his ear sent a shiver down his spine. He was fairly certain Almighty Key was male though it was also possible they'd used a voice modifier. It would fit right in with trying to maintain their hidden persona. But those eyes... "Ugh. Stop it!" he told himself, smacking his head as he tried to focus on studying in the library. There was supposed to be a study group joining him soon and he needed to finish up his notes before they arrived. Curiously, he glanced up to see if the Terran man he'd helped a while back had shown up in the library again.

Nope. The table was empty, though he had seen him once or twice in the interim. If he had to guess, he figured the scuffle between him and Kieran and Crawven had something to do with Boro's predicament. A pity that. They weren't his favorite people – they were a little on the bullying side – but they'd never really treated him poorly before. At least they weren't hounding the first year like they had previously. Or couldn't find him at an opportune time.

It suddenly bothered him that he didn't even know the first year's name. They didn't have any shared classes, didn't see each other at the gatherings Jinki went to, and he certainly never showed up for any study sessions or coaching lessons, so it made sense he wasn't familiar with him, but still... it bothered him. He had to snap himself out of his musings when he noticed the first of his study group members arriving though. Time to focus on other things. But since he did have a few first years in his study group, it wouldn't hurt to ask around, would it?

Jinki thought nothing more than beyond the satisfied curiosity of learning the first year's name was Kibum. His study group first years were able to single him out pretty quickly with a few descriptors and the mention of his possible contentious relationship with the second-year trio. Of course he had to explain himself and coming up with a slightly modified version of their first actual encounter had been easier than he thought it might be. It wasn't like he could just say that he'd actively put himself in the way of Crawven when the Moladhi was chasing Kibum but it was simple enough to explain that they'd bumped into each other in the library.

Since it was one of the places that Jinki practically lived in his free time at the university, that was easy enough to believe. The fact that Kibum was there, not as likely until Jinki explained he'd been napping when he first noticed him nearby. Why Jinki wanted to know his name was another question

but honestly answerable as curiosity since they had 'bumped' into each other, but Kibum had left so quickly he hadn't been able to ask. All of which led to speculative side eyed looks and eventually, just general acceptance before everyone settled down and got back to studying.

A few days passed with nothing changing out of the norm, though he did wrestle with himself on whether to try and go back to The Stars Align to see if he could thank Almighty Key or not. He wanted to, but it didn't feel right to attempt to single them out at the establishment. If only he knew who they were...

Eating lunch in the canteen with a couple of his second-year friends, Jinki was more than surprised when someone sat on the edge of the table nearest him, casting a shadow over the seated man. "A little bird mentioned you might have been asking about me recently."

Jinki experienced another shock upon hearing the oddly familiar voice and looked up, only to be stunned a third time. "Kibum!" he blurted unthinkingly, blinking hard before glancing around the confounded table and then back at the newcomer.

"So it's true," Kibum smiled, a catlike expression on his bemused face. His sharp eyes danced in satisfied amusement while his long slender fingers tapped elegantly on crossed arms.

"Hi... um... I-uh..." Jinki stammered as good old-fashioned thinking failed him.

"Just wanted to make sure," Kibum shrugged, turning a more neutral smile to the table as he acknowledged everyone present. But then his eyes dropped to Jinki's tray and he reached down to snag half the sandwich left on it. "Enjoy the rest of your meal," he murmured with a wink before taking a small bite and walking off casually, completely unphased by the encounter.

Stunned silence followed in the wake of his departure until Henry leaned across the table and swatted Jinki's arm, a sharp and noisy sound. "What... was that?!"

"I don't know," Jinki mumbled while he rubbed his arm, dumbfounded and with a furrowed brow as he looked at his tray. The fact that half his sandwich was missing confirmed that had actually happened but he was still trying to make sense of it. The voice...

"What?!" the rest of his table exclaimed, ignoring his otherwise obvious confusion. Maybe Jinki didn't know about Kibum's name and face correlation, but a majority of the other students did.

"You sly Terran," Larad, the Varium at the table, grinned, wagging his finger at Jinki.

"I didn't know you liked the younger ones." That from the Dawbn Ercite. The serious deadpan delivery made the others giggle even harder and Jinki flushed.

"It's not like that!" he waved his hands quickly, as if he could somehow clear the air of their immediate misconceptions.

Henry, another Terran male, snorted and shook his head. "He likes *helping* the younger ones. But Kibum never asks for help so it has to be that whole opposite persona thing." His grin would have been infectious if Jinki wasn't already so embarrassed.

A quick look around the canteen showed that their table was a clear spot of interest currently, with many furtive glances and whispered comments being shared among other tables. "Seriously guys,"

he groaned with a cringe, not sure whether to be impressed with Kibum's action or annoyed or both. Honestly. Who did something like that in the middle of lunch in the center of all these people?!

"Kim Kibum!" an echoing voice boomed out, stopping said person in their tracks and making every eye turn towards the speaker.

One lightly lined brown eye looked over his shoulder and a smirk tugged at Kibum's mouth. "Boro," he called back, the epitome of playing it cool. "Been a while," he added, turning just enough to get a better look, the remainders of a sandwich still pinched carefully between his fingers.

The Varium didn't move as he glared at the Terran, but a collective quiet gasp in the hall gave the surprise away. Just as Jinki noticed Crawven trying to sneak up on him from the other side, Kibum did too. Jinki's hand paused in midair, his mouth partially open from the warning shout he'd intended. He watched Kibum's lips move, something he couldn't hear but that looked like it might have been 'Mercy's breath,' and then the other man was moving.

Impulsively, Jinki started to stand up but forced himself to stop when the eyes of his table turned towards him. He barely knew Kibum. Or so he thought. And it wasn't like he could just 'stumble' his way in front of his pursuers this time... not with the way that Crawven was springing after him. His heartbeat sped up though when he saw Kibum jump onto a table, nimbly dance through the trays, and then jump for the circling escalator going up. Hands clung desperately to the side as he hit, briefly stunned, before shaking it off and pulling himself up.

Crawven was much too close behind, making up for the distance between them with his Moladhi legs clearing the jumping distance without the need of a table. Boro wasn't that far behind either, having sprinted across the canteen to follow in pursuit.

Jinki frowned. He saw two, but that made him nervous about where Kieran was. Nibbling his bottom lip, he tried to calm himself down as he settled back in his seat, an uneasy feeling swirling in his belly. It wasn't like he'd be able to catch up with them. And even if he did follow, he'd have to contend with the onlookers that were trailing them already. About half the canteen seemed to have shifted like they were either following or thinking about it.

"I hope he can outrun Boro," Larad grimaced, his androgynous features pulled tight in mild worry. "Last I heard, he was *not* happy about his breakup and suspension."

"As long as he can stay ahead of Crawven, he should be okay," Henry commented, looking back at Jinki curiously.

"Unless Kieran's waiting for him," Ercite added simply, their tone as logical as any standard Dawbn.

Their musings were not helping Jinki at all. In all likelihood, they would probably just rough him up a bit if they caught him. He'd get a little bruised and banged up, the student body would talk about it for a little while, and things would settle down like they usually did. At worst, he'd get suspended for fighting... right?

Ercite's next comment changed everything, "If he gets into an obvious fight on university grounds, he'll likely get expelled." The comment was for the table, but they were looking mostly at Jinki as if to gauge his reaction.

"Huh? Why?" Henry asked, frowning as he glanced in the direction they'd disappeared.

The Dawbn looked around to make sure no one else was listening in and leaned closer to murmur, "In the admin office, he's in the 'on thin ice' file. I only saw it because Boro got moved there recently too."

"But won't Boro get expelled if he gets in a fight too?" Henry asked, looking around the table.

Larad shook his head. "His family has money. At most, he'll get another suspension or maybe a temporary transfer. I don't know specifically, but I don't think Kibum has that protection."

"Star shards," Jinki scowled as he stood up and started heading further into the building.

"Where you going?" Henry asked, standing up as if to follow him. Jinki just looked over his shoulder and shrugged as if that answered everything perfectly. "Oh hoh!" the other Terran grinned, jogging after him immediately.

Jinki heard another chair moving and he figured Larad was following which meant he'd also picked up Ercite if history was any indication. Kibum might not have been anybody to Jinki except a very unique first year, but even though he'd had no control over it, if Kibum hadn't come to him in the canteen today, he probably wouldn't be in this mess. If he got caught, he knew what would actually happen to him? What was more, his voice and Almighty Key's voice sounded way too similar. If he actually *was* the performer, he owed him. Big time.

As soon as they cleared the main area of the canteen, Jinki waved at them, "Come on!"

"Where we goin?" Henry asked, giddy at the prospect of their current adventure.

"Maintenance shafts!" he called back, breaking into a sprint as they headed for one of the maintenance entrance panels.

"Don't you need an access card?" Ercite asked, their clear voice obvious from the back.

"Yes!" Jinki answered without slowing down. The thing about being a 'good' student and going to so many events at the university meant he now had access to most basic maintenance panels. This was mostly because it was easier to get into places that had the stuff one would need for events or you could cut through if you needed to find something in a hurry, but no one needed to know that... He kept it with his student ID card so as soon as they found the nearest panel, he slammed it on the scanner and breathed a quick sigh of relief when it opened.

Kibum was on the second floor, or should be, and finding him might not be as problematic as he thought. Once they were all crowded inside the narrower space, he opened the smaller sliding panel that showed an access screen. Tapping it brought up a quick overview of the current floor. A blinking light on the overlay in the canteen indicated there was a mess that needed cleaning up. Scrolling up to the second floor, he saw that there were smaller messes dotted along the length of the floor. Going up once more, he blinked when he saw a new one appear and nodded. "Third floor!"

"Access elevator," Larad said, pointing over their heads towards the blinking light atop a dual panel entryway down the hall. Not surprising considering there were a fair few in the interior walls.

"Let's go!" Jinki encouraged, running down to open the elevator. This one was even narrower than the usual and it was a squeeze fitting all four of them into it. Jinki used his card again to operate the elevator and pushed the button for the 3rd floor. As they waited for it to stop, he couldn't help but remind them, "You know you guys can get in trouble for this too, right?"

"Maybe, but this is so much better than going to ethics class," Henry laughed, nudging Jinki with his arm since it was about the only thing he could do in that moment.

"Wow. What we're doing now would certainly not be considered strictly ethically correct," Ercite snorted, sitting on Larad's shoulder so that they had to hunch over not to hit the ceiling.

The Varium smiled, "Not ethically, but one *could* argue morally."

Ding!

Jinki breathed a sigh of relief that caught in his throat when the door took too long to open. Impatiently, he tapped at the open key and then pushed at Larad and Henry to move out of the way. "Faster please!" he cried, trying to keep his voice from sounding too panicked. When they finally got to the 3rd floor access panel, Jinki had to use his key again and he awkwardly shimmied past the trio to do so. The doors slid open and he leapt out, sprinting in the direction Kibum and the others would have been heading. But he stopped halfway down when he noticed a loose crowd gathering around, though some were already starting to leave.

"What's going on?" Henry wondered, trying to see over everyone's heads, but as a Terran of only average height, he had no such luck.

Ercite did though, since they were still on Larad's shoulders. "Looks like Kieran and Crawven are standing watch in front of one of the empty classrooms. Credits to crackers, I bet Kibum and Boro are in there together."

That did not seem like a fair match to Jinki. Boro was a Varium and they were, by nature, pretty solid creatures. Not to mention that Kibum just looked so small in comparison. And they were a year apart... "Frag," he cursed under his breath, clenching his fist. How to help him without being directly noticed. If he helped again, they'd likely put two and two together or at least be suspicious. Not to mention, he didn't doubt they'd be willing to fight at least a little bit.

As he worriedly deliberated, the crowd continued to disperse, making it harder to stay unnoticed. Together, they casually ducked closer to the wall to avoid attention, but that didn't help their situation any. Jinki was about to say screw it when the doors suddenly slid open and Boro stumbled out, blinking his eyes hard and rubbing at his face. "He went out the window!" he coughed.

"What?!" Kieran and Crawven both looked back in uncertain surprise that leaned towards panic.

Jinki felt it too. There shouldn't have been enough room to get out the window, much less a ledge to stand on. His stomach dropped and he froze, turning his head just enough to look at his companions, all of whom were wearing uncomfortable expressions. They flinched away from the

pounding footsteps of the trio that pelted past them, either going to see for themselves or flee the scene. Only half aware of what Boro had said, the crowd followed along, hesitantly horrified or just plain curious as they dispersed.

Ever the voice of experienced reason, Ercite piped up quietly, "What Boro said should not be possible."

"But..." Larad trailed off, shaking his head with a confused look at the departing crowd.

"No. They're right," Jinki exhaled, flexing his hands as he slowly moved towards the classroom doors. They were closed and it was impossible to see inside.

Henry moved to stand at his side while Larad stood at their back and Ercite kept an eye out for other onlookers. Just as Jinki was about to open the door himself, they slid open and he blinked in surprise with a sudden inhale. "Kibum!" Dark eyes widened and Jinki saw that gut instinct reaction of fight or flight flicker in the orbs before it was gone in an instant.

"You," Kibum responded in a far too casual voice as he took in the rest of the people before him. "What are you doing here?" he asked, voice suddenly guarded and eyes narrowed.

Jinki was rooted in place and almost had no idea what to say. "I... uh..."

"He's here to help you," Henry offered with a quick smile and an easy shrug, playing it cool in turn.

Kibum's laugh was soft and short, almost a scoff. "Thanks, but I'm good," he explained, waving them off with one hand though the other remained pressed against his stomach.

He tried to walk past them but Jinki noticed the beginnings of a bruise on Kibum's face and shook his head. "You're hurt. Let us help you," he urged, the words soft and slightly pleading.

"I don't need it," Kibum countered as he hid a wince when he tried to step away again.

"Students," Ercite announced quietly.

Almost like it was something they'd rehearsed, Larad shifted to place himself in front of the doorway while Jinki reached to pull Kibum behind the taller Varium, effectively hiding him. The other Terran stiffened under his hand and he heard a hiss of pain but that was the only sound Kibum made as he looked at Jinki with cautious eyes.

"Maintenance panel?" Henry asked with a nod back the way they'd come.

Jinki shook his head while he encouraged Larad to start walking away from the classroom, gently guiding Kibum as he did so. "That'll only give people more time to circle back. Vids will see where we are in the aftermath. Right now, it's best just to get away from here and find a place to lay low where Kieran and company won't think to immediately look." He could feel Kibum's gaze measuring him, sharp and heavy.

"So Henry's room," Ercite suggested.

"Or Larad's," Henry added, flanking Kibum in a mirror of what Jinki was doing.

Larad snorted and looked back at the Terran. "Varium?" he commented, pointing at himself while they walked for a corner stairwell. The central halls had spiral escalators but the outer edges of the building were better known for more manual modes of travel, such as stationary stairs.

"Right," Henry nodded in slightly embarrassed understanding. "My room then," he confirmed a second later, a cheeky grin in place.

"Why are you doing this?" Kibum asked carefully, though he put up no resistance as he was casually guided to the stairs. Two people passed them on the way down, though neither paid any attention to the Terran hidden behind the Varium.

"Some would say it is the moral thing to do," Ercite nodded simply, looking ahead so as to not draw attention to those behind them.

"The moral thing to do," Kibum scoffed, the sound unmistakable this time.

"We can discuss the whys later," Jinki reminded them as he gently pressed on Kibum's back to nudge him in a different direction. He flinched just a touch when one arm moved to brush it away, accompanied by a slight shake of Kibum's head. Jinki adjusted to let his arm hover behind Kibum instead, ready to help if he could, though the rejection did sting at least a little bit.

They couldn't make it back wholly without notice of the student body, but as far as they knew, they didn't otherwise attract the attention of the three people they didn't want to see. The teleportation hub in the university was even nicer than the public ones – better funding did that – but they still only took students to the general vicinity of their dorms.

While their original intention was to split up and go to their separate dorms, Ercite shrugged from Larad's shoulder, "In for a penny, in for a pound."

"What does that even mean?" Henry asked as he scrunched up his face in confusion.

"An old Terran friend used to say it. In short, we're all in this together now."

"Why didn't you just say that?" the Terran grumbled with a laugh.

"I liked it," Larad assured the Dawbn who gave him a crystalline smile in return.

Jinki said nothing because he was more focused on Kibum. The other young man wasn't really looking at him but that gave him an excellent chance to study his profile, and the more he did, the more certain he became of the fact that Kibum was Almighty Key. Not that he'd say it out loud and here of all places, but knowing his identity, even if it was unconfirmed, helped shore up his uncertainty about what the morrow would bring. Almost certainly a meeting with the head of the university and likely a revocation of his maintenance access card. Given his record, suspension was likely the worst-case scenario, but he was more worried about Kibum in that regard. Both now and later. The bruise on his face was really starting to settle in, a blossoming of blue and purple colors on his cheek and at the corner of his mouth. And he didn't like the way he was still holding his stomach. Or maybe it was his ribs...

"Welcome to my room," Henry gestured grandly as he keyed in his personal code to open the small individual room designed for students. It had plenty of room for one person, but with all five of

them crowding in, it was just a little snug. Henry offered the bed to his guests but everyone waved it off so they settled on the floor. All except Kibum, and belatedly Jinki when he realized the other man wasn't going to sit down.

"I won't stay long. Just enough to give things time to quiet down," he promised, leaning against the wall with one ankle crossed over the other.

"We can walk you back to your room later," Jinki offered, leaning forward to get a better look of his face. The bruising really did look bad.

"No need. I can make my own way," he resisted with a wave of his hand, a relaxed smile on his face, even as he turned away, the bruised side partially hidden with the act.

"You know..." Henry trailed off, shaking his finger at the other man. "You're just a little ungrateful, given the situation."

One of Kibum's eyebrows rose and he tilted his head to purse his lips at Henry before answering. "I don't recall asking for your help."

"You--"

"Okay!" Jinki piped up, stepping between them with calming hand gestures. Henry fell silent quickly and Kibum gave Jinki a look before taking a breath and quieting down in turn. "You're right. You didn't ask for help but you looked like you could use it."

"I didn't ne--" he started to grumble again before he stopped himself when he realized what Jinki had said specifically. He looked down and his free hand came up to grab his other elbow.

"Okay," he said again, taking another breath. "Larad. Ercite. You guys wanna go out and get a feel for the situation?" he asked, turning to look at the duo now sitting next to each other.

"Sure. No one ever suspects a Dawbn," Ercite laughed, the sound melodious, like crystals clinking together faintly.

"And I can see if Boro's back. Looked like his eyes were going to be stinging for a little bit the last time we saw him," Larad added on, a speculative look landing on Kibum. The Terran said nothing but there was an unmistakable quirk to the side of his mouth.

"That would be great. Thank you," Jinki smiled, waiting for them to leave before he turned to look at Henry. "Do you have any med supplies?"

"I'm fi--" Kibum started to say before Jinki turned to just look at him, settling on the bruised cheek and glancing down at his crossed arm.

"Nothing much. Just the bruising spray and a coagulant cream," he shrugged, standing up to open a slide out drawer in the wall. All three of them were surprised when a quiet and familiar gurgle appeared. "And I'm pretty sure I have a spare nutrient bar around here somewhere," he added with a laugh and a shake of his head.

Kibum was steadfastly not looking at either of them as he seemed to want to make himself disappear in that moment. "Thanks, Henry," Jinki smiled, stepping over to retrieve the bruising spray.

He held it out and gestured slightly towards Kibum's cheek, a silent question, but wasn't surprised when he got another head shake in response before those slender fingers carefully took the spray from his palm. "Restroom's over there," he gestured, stepping back and out of the way so Kibum would be able to walk straight to it.

Without a word, he ducked his head and carefully walked past, his gate stiffer than it should have been. He was obviously hurting and trying very hard not to show it.

When he was inside with the door closed behind him, Henry moved close and whispered, "What are we doing?"

"I have no idea," Jinki shrugged in response. "Just trying to help as best we can."

"Remind me why again?" he laughed, rubbing at his temples with both fingers while a smile tugged at his mouth. "He's like a cornered cat, all fangs and puffed-up fur and no gratitude at all," he added, glancing at the door before taking a breath. Jinki laughed at the description but Henry rounded on him with a finger in his face, "You might think this is funny but if I get suspended over this, I'm blaming you."

"I didn't make you come with me," Jinki teased with a significant glance at the door himself.

"Oh, don't you even start that," Henry scowled in mock anger, raising a hand like he was going to hit him.

Jinki flinched, still playing along, but then shrugged. "I think I might have owed him a favor," he admitted, nibbling at his bottom lip with a thoughtful quirk to his mouth. When Henry made a confused sound, Jinki looked up and waved his hand. "I'm not positive yet. I have to clear something up first, but you'll be among the first to know when I do."

The other Terran tsked in annoyance but threw his hands up. "Fine. You'd rather stay silent than give me false info. I know. But seriously though. I do have to wonder how he got away from Boro earlier. I mean... he obviously didn't go out the window," he added, gesturing at the still closed door.

"Well, even if he doesn't tell us today, we'll likely find out soon. There's no way they're not going to call us in for questioning. Maybe even today," he added with a small grimace as the reality of their situation started to sink in. "Probably today with the window stunt and all..." he added, the grimace deepening.

Henry opened his mouth to say something but the restroom door opened and Kibum stepped out, still slow and stiff, but the bruising was already starting to look better. "Thanks," he murmured quietly, tossing the spray back to Jinki before glancing at the door as if measuring how far away it was and how easy it would be to go through it. But then his stomach made a small sound again and he flinched slightly.

"Nutrient bar?" Henry offered with a single laugh, holding the wrapped victual out towards the other man.

Kibum's swallow was obvious as he eyed the ration. He stepped forward hesitantly, almost like he was unsure, and then paused. A look flashed across his face, rather like he realized how he was acting in that moment, and the shift that followed was noticeable and immediate. His head rose, his

stride lengthened, and he took the bar confidently before returning to the other side of the wall to lean against it. The wrapper crinkled loudly as he opened it, but Kibum ignored the sound and his audience and calmly took a bite, too much tension in his frame to be wholly as relaxed as he was trying to appear.

"You're welcome," Henry scoffed, glancing at Jinki again. Kibum nodded in acknowledgment and Henry's glance turned into an annoyed glare.

Jinki gave a forced smile and gestured with both hands as if to calm him down before shifting his attention to Kibum again. "So... how *did* you manage to escape from Boro today?"

Chapter Four

"I've been an educator for too long to not be able to recognize hidden brilliance when I see it. Jinki's has always been obvious. The best in him appears when he wants the best for others. Kibum... needs a little polishing. And maybe then some. Perhaps it was a long shot, but I wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to see just what kind of gem was hidden beneath his shell."

-Terran Provost Kamari Adeleke

From the outside where Kieran and Crawven were already standing, a very lifelike holoivid showed Boro shoving Kibum into the empty classroom by the back of his neck. The view seamlessly flowed to inside the classroom and followed as the Varium hounded him, towering over the smaller Terran intimidatingly. The audio had been scrubbed but it was clear they were talking, an angry grimace on one face and a calm, albeit slightly nervous mask on the other.

Apparently what Kibum said wasn't satisfactory and Boro smacked him across the face, an open palm strike that sent him stumbling across the room. Kibum came up against the windowed wall and looked up before pressing his hand to his smarting cheek. He glanced over his other shoulder towards the back of the room and placed his hand against his hip. All the while, Boro kept speaking at him, the angry frustrated look still in place. Kibum ignored him until he was ready to turn around and face the other person. Keeping his eyes on the Varium, he followed the length of the windows and ended at the back wall, Boro shadowing him the whole way.

The desk and teacher's pulpit activation button was there and Kibum smacked it, immediately placing the solid structure between them as Boro sidestepped to avoid the student desk rising up under his feet. A game of cat and mouse ensued that revealed impressive scrambling abilities from Kibum but in a confined space, they weren't enough to keep him away from Boro's equally notable reach. Though, as soon as the Terran was hauled up in front of the Varium, he raised his left hand and blew a puff of powder into Boro's face.

His reaction was immediate and powerful. Boro shoved his target back and away from him. Kibum tried to recover but his feet weren't touching the ground when the back of his legs hit one of the desks. He curled up in an attempt to reduce the impact but it just helped him slide over the top and start falling between desks. Unable to control his vector and starting to turn upside down, he slammed into the edge of the other desk with his torso, obviously stunning him when he fell to the ground while Boro raged around, wiping at his eyes and bumping into desks haphazardly.

It took Kibum a second to recover but when he did, he set a tiny device on the ground where he had been and then crawled to where the teacher's pulpit was, effectively hiding behind the only full-length solid surface in the room. He carefully peeked around the corner to watch Boro start to recover while another image of Kibum appeared in the space he had been previously. It looked exactly like Kibum, but it waited until Boro noticed him again. Only then did it move, sprinting towards the window Kibum had touched earlier.

This time though, there was a small space apparent in the top of the window. Kibum used one of the desks as a step ladder so he could reach the top as Boro chased after him, his expression angry, confused, and maybe a little worried at the same time. The image of Kibum scrambled at the window, wriggling through the narrow space just before Boro made it. The Varium hit the window and his expression had shifted to obvious worry.

Kibum flailed on the outside, one hand clinging to the opening and apparently trying to find something else to hold onto. When Boro reached up like he was going to try and grab Kibum's hand though, he let go and Boro panicked, pressing hard against the surface to try and see where the Terran had fallen. Only then did he stumble out the doors to announce what happened. The vid extended to follow the fleeing trio and stayed zoomed out, simultaneously focusing on and following Jinki's group as they approached the door and Kibum as he made his way out from behind the pulpit to retrieve the small device and make his way out. The recording continued right up until Jinki and his group made it to the stairwell with Kibum in their midst.

Behind his wide desk, Terran Provost Kamari Adeleke steepled his brown fingers in front of him and tapped at his bottom lip thoughtfully while he peered at the three students before him with troubled gray eyes. "I don't suppose you have anything to say for yourselves, do you?" he asked them in a smooth voice that would likely be a tenor if he sang. Boro looked away, Jinki looked down, and Kibum kept looking at Kamari. The provost sighed and shook his mostly shorn head before he glanced out the window to watch the setting sun for a moment. The rays of the sun filtering through the transparent surface highlighted the thick intricate braid on top of his head resembling a black shallow fin and extended tapering tail.

Of course they didn't. The holovid spoke for itself. And he'd obviously listened to the audio beforehand. Kamari took another small breath and regarded the trio with pursed lips. "I at least wanted to give you a chance to defend yourselves if there was something before this. Seeing as that is not the case..." he murmured, his tone indicating he very much doubted that, "...Boro. Due to your aggression in this matter, you will be suspended for one week."

"Yes, sir," Boro responded meekly, ducking his head though he did manage a sidelong glance at Kibum as he did so.

"You may go," the provost added, gesturing with one hand towards the door.

He was just as surprised as Jinki, and probably Kibum too, though he was better about hiding it. "Sir," Boro said as he cleared his throat, standing up with a small bow before he stiffly walked from the room.

Neither Kibum nor Jinki moved and Kamari waited until the Varium was gone before he turned his attention to his next target. "I suspect you already know what your punishment is going to be, Jinki," he murmured, holding his hand out expectantly over the top of his desk.

Jinki winced but then ducked his head as he murmured, "Yes, sir." Resignedly, he pulled his student ID card out and then slid the maintenance access card from behind it. With the air of a kicked puppy, he shuffled forward and placed the card carefully in the open palm. His natural inclination was to apologize but he wasn't exactly sorry. Well, maybe for breaking the provost's trust but not for how he'd used the card...

"Thank you," Kamari nodded, taking the card and setting it in his desk drawer while he gestured for Jinki to take a seat again.

"I just wanted to say that it was my idea. Henry, Larad, and Ercite didn't have anything to do with it other than to go with me," he explained quickly, still standing in front of the desk.

Kamari's mouth quirked in amusement and he chuckled. "I'm well aware, Jinki. They've all received warnings, as have Kieran and Crawven, but are facing no further punishment. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing wrong with supporting your friends, even when they are acting out of the norm," he added with a glance at Kibum.

Jinki gave a nervous, slightly embarrassed laugh and rubbed at the back of his neck before he sat down again, casting furtive glances in Kibum's direction as well. He wasn't sure why he was still here exactly, but he also had to wonder how the other man could remain so calm in this situation.

"As for you, Kibum," the provost sighed, focusing the weight of his attention on the other Terran. "Please explain the holotech and blinding powder."

Kibum wrinkled his nose slightly and gestured at the space where the holoovid was. "As we all saw, I was clearly defending myself from a larger opponent."

Kamari raised his brow, the expression remarkably similar to the one Jinki had seen on Kibum's face a couple times before. "I was not disputing that, Kibum. Holotech like that is not easy to come by for a university student like yourself. And I really don't think I need to say more about the blinding powder."

For a moment, Kibum remained silent with his arms loosely crossed, rather as if he wasn't going to answer. "Kibum," Jinki whispered with a frown, obviously at least a little bit worried for him.

Kibum clucked his tongue and rolled his eyes at the sound of his name and Jinki's expression, but did take a breath and uncross his arms. "The holotech was a gift from my-" he paused with a glance at Jinki. When the other man nodded encouragingly, he sighed and continued, "former guardian before I came to university. He said it was for defense only." Kibum gestured at the place where the holoovid had played once more as if to drive home the point. "A friend at work gave me the blinding powder. She always says it's better to be able to escape than to stay and fight and risk injury."

The provost chuckled and nodded once in agreement. "Wise words. I will need their names and contact numbers to verify your story though," he continued, looking at Kibum expectantly.

"You think I'm lying?" he asked in arch offense, though his attitude deflated when he got another meaningful look from the provost.

"I will need that information by tomorrow afternoon," Kamari mandated, making a note on his desk by typing it into the holoscreen there so he wouldn't forget.

"Fine." Another raised brow pulled a belated, "Sir," out of him.

"In regard to your punishment-" he started to say before he was interrupted.

"He really was just trying to get away, Mr. Adeleke," Jinki urged, standing up awkwardly in his haste.

Kamari laughed with a bemused look on his face. A similar expression could be seen on Kibum's. "Sit down and let me finish, Mr. Lee." His tone said it was best that he listen and not interrupt again.

"Yes, sir," Jinki responded, sitting down carefully and glancing in Kibum's direction without actually looking at him.

"You're being placed on probationary notice for the duration of this semester," he announced, fingers steepled in front of him again. Both Kibum and Jinki looked askance at him. "What? Do you want me to suspend or expel you for not being able to avoid a fight?" he asked, the question intentionally dry.

"No," Kibum eventually responded with a shake of his head. "Sir," came the belated honorific again, no additional look needed this time.

"Half of your grades tell me you're not an intentionally poor student," he chuckled once, opening a file on his holoscreen and reviewing it. "Nor are you a traditional troublemaker," he commented, thinking out loud. "And you are generally well perceived amongst your peers." Kibum nodded his head to the side in mute agreement and Jinki could hardly believe his audacity. "Unfortunately, your attendance record, history of tardiness, and generally lackadaisical attitude towards the university as a whole give the impression you don't want to actually be here."

Kibum couldn't quite control the sudden intake of breath and he clenched his hands into fists. Even Jinki noticed and the provost pretended not to. "Sir. I *will* graduate," Kibum stated, the words firm like a promise.

Kamari laughed through his nose once and shrugged. "Well, that's something you're going to have to prove. No more being tardy. No more unexcused absences. No more troublemaking on school grounds. And," he added, holding up his hand with one finger hovering between them, "You must maintain a passing score in *all* your classes."

"But-" Kibum started to object before he fell silent when the provost continued speaking over him.

"Since that was something you were apparently unable to do on your own and since I've noticed a second year," and his gaze slid intentionally to Jinki who sat up in uncertain confusion, "who has taken an uncommon amount of interest in helping you recently, Jinki will be your mentor for the rest of this semester."

"Huh?" they both chirped at the same time, looking at each other in surprise.

"You," he pointed at Jinki, "will make sure that he," his finger shifted to Kibum, "attends all his classes as expected. You must meet and report to each other at least once a day and for any of Kibum's failing classes, you will either mentor him or help him find the resources to make up for his lack of knowledge."

"But what about university events?" Jinki asked, frowning. He didn't mind the whole mentor idea but he did have other engagements to handle as well.

"You can still go to them," the provost responded. "But you will no longer be helping coordinate them officially this semester." When Jinki opened his mouth to protest, Kamari opened his drawer and held up the maintenance access card mutely. Jinki closed his mouth and sat back.

"I have work in the evenings," Kibum explained, his posture stiff.

"And I won't stop you from that, but you must attend *all* your classes in a timely manner," the provost explained. "Even the early ones."

"But what if Kibum has classes at the same time as my coaching?" Jinki asked, his brow furrowed worriedly. He couldn't just stop doing that. He'd never hear the end of it from his siblings...

"I'm sure you'll figure something out," he responded nonchalantly.

"But... what if I don't and he's late?" Jinki couldn't help but ask, sitting on the edge of his seat.

The provost shrugged. "Then your life will probably be easier after the fact, though Kibum might not be so lucky."

Disgruntled, Kibum looked at the provost with the mildest glare he could manage and still get away with. Then he glanced at Jinki and his glare turned to surprise at the intensity of the other man's expression. "What?" he asked, leaning back slightly.

"Okay!" Jinki exclaimed, standing up abruptly with one hand clenched in front of him as he turned to address the provost. "I'll do it!"

Kibum jerked back at the unexpected enthusiasm and blinked. "Do what?"

"I'll be your personal mentor and make sure you pass with flying colors this semester!" he promised fervently, pointing his finger at Kibum with burning determination.

"Huh?" Kibum blinked in dumbfounded confusion.

"Very good then. I'll expect a progress report from you every week, Jinki," Kamari nodded in acceptance. "You may go."

"Yes, sir!" Jinki exclaimed, turning to bow at the provost before he started to head out on his own. Kibum remained seated, looking between the two men with a confused frown. When Jinki noticed, he turned around and returned to snag Kibum's wrist, giving it an insistent tug. "Come on," he called, pulling until he succeeded.

“Ugh,” Kibum groaned, both in feigned frustration and slight pain, nodding once at the provost before he was hauled away by the overly energetic second year.

Kamari watched them go with a crooked smile and a sigh. “Children,” he snorted, scratching at the corner of his age lined eyes. Oh, to have half their energy and enthusiasm nowadays.

Kibum allowed himself to be pulled along until they were out of the provost’s office and then he yanked his wrist free. “I can walk on my own.” This man didn’t seem to be wholly in his right mind. Perhaps it would have been better if he hadn’t helped him at The Stars Aligned...

“I know, but you weren’t moving before so I figured I’d give you a hand,” Jinki smiled with a nod as he fell back to walk beside Kibum.

Side by side, they traveled in relative silence as they exited the administrative building. They were just two students coming from the provost’s office, but it felt like they were being noticed more than usual to Kibum. He didn’t like it. “Aren’t you upset at what happened?” he asked, turning his attention to Jinki.

The other man shook his head with a small smile. “Not really. I more or less expected it.”

Kibum hadn’t and that made him frown. He stopped and crossed his arms to glare at Jinki. The glare strengthened when it took the other man a second to notice and pause too. “What’s your angle?” he demanded, feeling unsettled and off balance.

The question obviously confused Jinki by the honest surprise on his face. “No angle,” he explained with a shake of his head and a shrug. “Unless you count helping you as an angle.” Kibum just looked at him and Jinki laughed once, nodding his head towards the canteen. “Come on. It’s almost supper and I know that nutrient bar has probably worn off by now. As your mentor, allow me to treat you to a meal,” he grinned, the expression painfully genuine and bright.

Perversely, it made all of Kibum’s guards rise. “Why?” he asked warily, still standing his ground.

Another confused blink and head tilt. “Well, I’m hungry and I figure you’re probably hungry and you’re my junior so...” he trailed off, gesturing towards the canteen in the distance again.

“No, I mean why are you so starbent on helping me?” he questioned, his eyes narrowing to look at Jinki from under hooded lids.

To his credit, Jinki turned to face Kibum better and really look at him, almost like he was trying to confirm something. He took a small step forward, hands hanging relaxed at his sides, before he tilted his head and offered a curious smile. “I could ask you the same thing.” When Kibum’s face reflected dumbfounded confusion, he belatedly added in a low voice, “Almighty Key.”

Kibum couldn’t lie that hearing that persona’s name out in the open like this made his stomach do a nervous flip, but he managed to keep such a reaction from his face. He laughed once and relaxed, arms loosening from their crossed position. “I’ve no idea where you heard that name, but I like it,” he admitted, a playful smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. The wink he added was just a bonus and he genuinely laughed at Jinki’s reaction.

“Yes!” he cheered quietly, pumping his fist and obviously relieved that his guess was correct. “I thought I was right, but I wasn’t positive, and I just needed to make sure because I really wanted to th-”

“Shhh,” Kibum hushed, one finger rising to pause just short of touching Jinki’s lips. Surprised confusion flickered again and he nodded towards the canteen in response. “You said you were treating?”

Jinki laughed, a particularly warm and satisfied glow hovering around him. “Of course,” he said, stepping back to gesture towards the canteen again.

It was enough for Kibum that Jinki wasn’t going to press the issue. Even better that he was going to pay for food. He hadn’t had a solid meal all day and the nutrient bar was long since gone from earlier that afternoon. As he fell into step beside the second year, he gave him another side long look. So this goody-goody that he’d helped largely on a whim to repay him for the ‘accidental’ assistance was going to be his mentor for the semester. Hah. It was a nice thought but there was no way he was going to stick around for the next two months. And invariably he’d slip up again somewhere – most likely with his biology and human physiology classes – and Provost Adeleke would find some reason to let him go from the school.

It was a bitter pill to swallow but not one that he wasn’t unaccustomed to. He’d faced similar situations at school growing up. This would be no different. Even if, or rather when, he was kicked from this university, he’d still find a way to get out there... to space to become a captain. Somehow. His eyes rose to try and look beyond the protective dome covering them from the outer atmosphere, but in the day, he couldn’t see the stars or the moons orbiting this planet.

“Hey,” Jinki called, waving a hand in front of his face to snap him out of it. The tone sounded like it wasn’t the first time he’d called and Kibum looked down to focus on him.

“Huh?”

“I said what do you want to eat? I hear the varoasts are good, though we did get a new Dawbn food programmer so we might have some new options soon,” he grinned, the expression one of simple happiness.

Kibum snorted and then shrugged. “Whatever. I’m not picky.” Which wasn’t entirely true but he didn’t have the luxury to be as such. Jinki’s expression was skeptical. “Just... recommend something,” he urged, waving at him dismissively so that the other man would stop looking at him. It was fine on the stage, he was supposed to draw attention and stares, but here... it made him uncomfortable.

They both turned their heads to look when they heard a voice call out, “Jinki!”

“Henry,” the other man laughed as he noticed his friend running out of the canteen with a wounded look on his face.

“You were supposed to tell me when you got out of the Mr. Adeleke’s office,” he whined, clinging to Jinki rather like a disappointed child.

“Glad to see you’re in good spirits,” Larad grinned, loping up to join them from the rear, Ercite perched on his shoulder.

“That does bode well in regard to his punishment,” Ercite smiled, though their attention turned to Kibum as they pointed. “However, we seem to have a guest.”

Kibum’s good mood faded as Jinki’s friends joined them. It wasn’t that it turned sour, but his guards returned and his smile disappeared. Nonchalantly, he shrugged and nodded towards Jinki, “He’s been assigned as my watcher for now.”

Jinki’s face fell slightly at the explanation and shook his head while waving his hand in objection. “No. He’s officially my mentee this semester. And since I’m his senior, I’m treating my junior to a meal. Right?” he asked, looking at Kibum directly.

“I guess,” he shrugged in response.

“Well, if he’ll let you...” Henry teased from the other side of Jinki’s shoulder. But then Kibum glared at him and he grimaced in response. “Wow. His glare is scary, Jinki,” he whispered, hiding further behind the same shoulder.

The response made Larad chuckle and Jinki reached out to pat Henry’s head consolingly. “There, there,” he soothed.

“Hey!” Henry grumbled, brushing the hand away before reaching out to rough Jinki’s hair up.

“Henry!” his friend yelled, immediately giving chase when Henry fled behind Larad.

With the ridiculous and childish antics, it was actually challenging for Kibum to keep a neutral expression. He jumped in genuine startlement though when Jinki hid behind him, hands lightly touching his back and shoulders as he did so. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and he stiffened with a sudden inhale. Alarm signals went off in the back of his head and he stepped forward so that he could turn and level a warning glare at Jinki. “I’m going inside. You guys can eat if you want to,” he stated flatly, before turning again and heading into the canteen with a painfully straight back.

Jinki flinched and drew his hands back close to his chest with a quiet, “Yikes. That is a little scary,” he admitted, glancing at Henry who just shrugged in equally confused response. “And I thought Hajoon could glare.”

“She can,” Larad laughed, stepping over to pat Jinki on the shoulder. “Are you going to follow him?”

“He’ll probably just leave if you don’t,” Ercite added, their head tilted thoughtfully. They were probably mulling through generations of memory to try and start piecing together the puzzle that was Kibum.

“Ack!” Jinki yelled, smacking Henry on the shoulder as he ran by. “Come on!”

“Hey!” Henry cried, looking up at Larad and then lurching after in pursuit.

“Kibum! Wait up!” Jinki called and chased after the other man.

Chapter Five

“Henry often gets mad at me for being able to read a room so easily. Jinki thinks it’s amazing and I’ve always liked that about him. One of the upsides to being a Varium is you learn pretty quickly what all the micro-expressions mean, especially on a Terran. Jinki makes no effort to hide them which is why I feel very strongly about my responses towards him sometimes. On the other hand, galaxies bless him, Kibum is nothing *but* micro-expressions. It’s how I know he doesn’t mean any actual harm when he says or does certain things. Lucky for him.”

-Varium Larad

Maybe it was impossible to get a solid read on someone like Kibum, but Jinki wasn’t going to let the lack of knowing what he was thinking stop him. Unfortunately, Kibum also wasn’t very forthcoming about his schedule or dorm room number. He had to call in a favor from Ercite to figure out what Kibum’s classes were so he could at least shadow him, but then he had to figure out how to work around some of his coaching schedule snags.

Jinki worked at Hajoan’s high school with the grav jumping team after classes got out twice a week. Their school team was pretty good and usually made it to the global finals. He also helped with the low grav gymnastics team for Doyun at her middle school once a week after school. It was more for support than anything else. And he had to support Siwoo at the community center but she could only practice in the mornings before elementary school started. Daejung was easy because they practiced (really, played games together) on the weekends, but for the others... he’d have to figure out solutions for three classes.

“Why does it look like he just threw a dart at the list of times to see which ones he got and decided to run with them?” he wondered to himself. The classes made sense but the schedules were all over the place. He even had an evening class that would cut into when Jinki usually headed home to help with supper.

The first day was no problem as it was one of the few days where there were no conflicts. When Kibum noticed him standing beside the door of his classroom, he seemed surprised to see the other man. “What are you doing here?” Kibum asked in a flat voice.

“Making sure you’re here on time,” Jinki grinned, refusing to let the lack of enthusiasm bother him. “I didn’t see you coming out of the first-year dorms so figured you might have come early, but I guess I just missed you somehow.”

“I guess,” Kibum murmured with a shrug. “Well. I’m here. You don’t have to stick around anymore,” he added, eyeing the other man with a slightly softer expression than a moment ago, as if he was mulling something over.

“I know, but I need a way to contact you and if you give me your dorm number, I can meet you there to make sure you wake up on time too,” Jinki promised, looking expectantly at the first year.

Kibum sighed and shook his head, his face shuttering again. “It’ll be fine, Jinki. I don’t need you checking up on me like that.”

"Just in case," the second year urged persistently. "Especially since I have to figure out our schedules and I might need to contact you last minute."

"You have my class schedule?" he asked, honest confusion evident on his face. "How?" Wariness reappeared but it was paired with a slight degree of admiration.

Jinki laughed and shrugged, though he did admit, "I have my ways. But seriously. What's your dorm number?"

"It doesn't matter," Kibum exhaled, turning like he was going to head into the classroom.

"You do live in the first-year dorms, right?" he asked for clarification, holding his hand out to stop Kibum without touching him. He had the distinct impression he didn't like being touched without permission.

Kibum laughed once and rolled his eyes. "Where else would I live?"

Jinki shrugged. "Sometimes students get put in second-year rooms or other temporary housing when there's a shortage of space or if something comes up. I just wanted to make sure."

"Sure," Kibum nodded before pointing towards the classroom.

"Right!" he laughed once, stepping back to let him go. "Study hard!" he cheered, smiling when he at least got a half-hearted wave from Kibum before he disappeared inside. "Oh shards," he cursed after a moment. "I forgot to get his contact number. Oh well. I've got time to kill," he laughed to himself, looking around to find a corner to settle in and make some notes while he waited for Kibum's class to finish.

When it was about time, he packed up and moved to wait outside of the room once again. "Kibum!" he called when he spotted the younger student.

Kibum visibly flinched in surprise. "What are you doing back here?" he blurted while moving aside so as to not block the doorway.

"I never left," Jinki laughed in slight embarrassment. "So I just found a corner to study in."

"Why?" the other man wondered, looking Jinki up and down with just his eyes.

"So I can get your contact number," he answered, frowning in confusion when a couple other first years giggled at hearing his statement. Kibum groaned and placed his fingers to his forehead while the implication hit Jinki belatedly. With a worried sound, he waved his hand at them and pointed at Kibum, "He's my mentee!"

"Like that's gonna help," Kibum snorted, shaking his head.

"If you'd have given it to me in the first place, that wouldn't have happened," he reminded him.

"Don't you have a class to get to?" Kibum wondered, looking at his mentor pointedly.

"Ack! I do," Jinki yelled, checking his wristwatch to confirm. He started to run off but then stopped and ran back, stopping firmly in front of Kibum. "Contact number," he stated, holding his hand out expectantly.

Kibum raised a brow and laughed once at Jinki's act. He glanced down at the open hand and then back up to meet determined brown eyes. "Maybe next time," he smirked, using the back of his hand to push Jinki's hand up and towards his own chest.

Jinki exhaled noticeably and wrinkled his nose. "Next time, then. And don't be late for your next class!" he called back as he started running towards his own class. He didn't see the way that Kibum smiled at him as he left, a hesitantly soft look that almost reached his eyes.

And so went the first week. Jinki made make-up promises to his siblings and steadfastly tracked down Kibum at each class. Sometimes Henry or Larad or Ercite would come with him, since they were heading for the same class as him and they teased him for acting like an overbearing big brother or father figure. He ignored them of course, but couldn't deny it did sort of feel that way right now. Regardless, worry gnawed at him when the time got close for Kibum to be late, but he never was, to his credit. Eventually, with enough incessant pestering, he was able to get Kibum's contact number, though his dorm number remained a mystery.

Over the weekend, Kibum ignored Jinki's calls to try and set up out of class meetings to work on studying and picking up some of his class grades. At a university event over the weekend, Jinki's usual trick of asking around for info didn't come up with much. Apparently, Kibum was known for talking to people but he was difficult to get in touch with outside of in person. You could always send him a personal message, especially through the university's student ID system, but he could ignore it at will too. Which he did... That made Jinki consider checking out The Stars Align to talk to his coworkers, but it was a daunting prospect and he wasn't sure if that would be too... invasive this early on.

After much thoughtful deliberation, he figured he'd give it another week and instead focus on trying to get closer the old-fashioned way. Then again, that plan was better in theory as it also required being able to setup meeting locations and times and Kibum was apparently having none of that.

Okay. So maybe he didn't have a good way of getting in touch with Kibum. The contact number wasn't working for whatever reason. Personal messages fell flat too. That didn't mean his hands were completely tied. He had lots of other contacts for students he'd helped in the second- and first-year classes and some of them had classes with Kibum.

"Time to call in some favors," Jinki mused with a shrug as he looked over his contact list and cross-referenced classes and study times he'd previously organized.

In all honesty, it was only supposed to be a small group effort, if that. He really did message just a few people at first. After explaining what the situation was, almost all of the handful he asked were onboard with making this happen. That was enough for Jinki and it even worked pretty well the next day when a first-year student notified him of Kibum's location when he was checking the other man's 'usual' haunts outside of his known classes. Namely, the library where he'd been napping that one time and the canteen where he popped up from time to time.

Instead, he was gossiping with a group of first years near the sports and physical activity arena. That was not where he'd expected to find Kibum but lo and behold, his silhouette became noticeable as Jinki approached and the chatter died down before the same first-year he'd enlisted raised her hand and waved, "Hi Jinki!" Kibum started in surprise and turned to see the approaching man with a look of

calculated calmness. A chorus of greetings erupted from the five other students present, most of whom knew Jinki or were at least familiar with him, though Kibum remained silent.

"Hi!" Jinki waved back as he moved closer, allowing his gaze to settle on his target. "There you are, Kibum. You are a difficult person to find," he laughed, pausing next to Kibum while he looked around the group.

"Oh? Why are you looking for Kibum?" one of the less familiar Varium students asked, a playful lilt to their voice.

Jinki's current assistant waved her hand dismissively before he could answer and said, "It's not like that. Jinki's just Kibum's mentor."

"Just?" was the next hinting question from a different member of the group. Giggles followed the inquiry as all eyes turned to Jinki for clarification.

"Yes. Just his mentor," Jinki laughed innocently, turning a bright smile towards Kibum again.

Kibum clucked his tongue and exhaled quietly as he gave Jinki a once over. His attention shifted towards the rest of the group and he pulled a practiced smile into place. "I just remembered I've got something to do. I'll talk to you guys later," he promised, smartly turning on his heels and walking off.

"Aw. Kibum!" the group whined half-heartedly, though there were amused laughs and whispers at his sudden departure too.

Jinki would have had to have been blind to miss the furtive glances they gave him before he waved at them and ran off too. "Kibum! Wait up!" he called, catching up easily enough, but the standoffish aura around the first-year was slightly intimidating.

"You are strangely persistent," Kibum admitted after a moment's pause, looking at Jinki out of the corner of his eye.

"I promised I would be your mentor and I meant it. But I can't help you if you keep brushing me off after classes and won't find time to meet up with me to study," he explained earnestly, keeping pace with Kibum's quick steps.

The first-year quirked his mouth to the side in a partial frown and sighed, "If this is about me helping you, it's really not necessary. I already told you I don't need the help."

Jinki gave an equally frustrated sigh and shook his head. "And I told you, a promise is a promise."

Kibum stopped and turned to face Jinki with pursed lips and crossed arms. "Look. You're nice and this whole mentor thing is cute and all but stop. Consider whatever debt you think you have repaid or something," he muttered, one hand fluttering in front of him dismissively.

"Kibum," Jinki frowned, struggling not to feel too hurt by the abrasive attitude.

"I've got somewhere to be so just... give me some space okay?" he murmured, the pause indicating he had probably chosen his words with some care.

"Wait," Jinki called out, stepping after Kibum uncertainly. "I haven't been able to reach you on your contact number."

"Then PM me," Kibum shot back over his shoulder.

"I have been!" Jinki retorted, sighing in frustration when all he got in response was a quick shrug. Locating him was easy enough. Actually talking to him in a meaningful manner when he wasn't ready or expecting it... not so much. Jinki really did just want to help, but it was possible he was coming on a *little* strong. And Kibum had asked for some space, although he'd probably meant in a more permanent manner. Henry was right. Kibum was prickly... but Jinki remembered how he'd reacted in the provost's office the week before. He didn't want to fail and be kicked out of the university. So why did it feel like he was trying so hard to dare it to happen?

Reluctantly, Jinki stepped back a little bit and simply tried to press a bit more about which classes he was struggling with. He probably could have called in another favor from Ercite, but they had already taken the risk with Kibum's schedule. The same could be said for the dorm room number but that really felt... creepy to ask around about. His helpers kept tabs on where Kibum was and if he was in the general vicinity, Jinki would wander by to see if he was relatively alone or in a group. With the latter, he left him alone and with the former, he simply sat down nearby, trying to glean what he could from afar.

When the weekend came, he got a couple updates from his helpers again and he urged them to leave Kibum alone during his non-school hours. They said they understood and didn't message him again. Honestly, he thought that was the end of it. In retrospect, he probably should have known better. Little did he know that his helpers were recruiting additional help, turning it into a game of sorts. Whether it was because Jinki was in love with the mysterious Kibum and was desperately chasing him or he actually *was* his mentor, it didn't matter. The student body, especially the first years, were hooked. It got a very direct response on the second day of the following week.

Jinki tapped his call chip activator, a touch sensitive pad on his temple, to check the incoming message from one of his first-year helpers on his communicator. *He's coming to you today.*

"Huh?" Jinki blinked with a head tilt, trying to better understand what the message meant. As per usual, he was killing time in the library before his next class that would end with him heading to help with coaching afterwards. That also meant he was equally easy to find.

A ball of frustrated energy and a loud hand slap on the table made him jump in surprise. "What is wrong with you?!" Kibum scowled, turning a glare that probably could have curdled milk on Jinki.

Personally, wilting under the look would have been preferable to answering, but with the looks he got from the interruption, that wasn't much of an option. "What do you mean?" he asked, completely lost.

The glare darkened and Kibum angrily pulled up a portable holoscreen, spinning it around to show Jinki the forum title. "'Where's Kibum?'" he snarled, pointing at the title of the forum and the various responses under the tag. It was a private group and not open to the public, obviously, but that didn't mean it was small...

Jinki paled as he looked at it with wide eyes. "I didn't do it," he defended himself, swiping it away and looking around to see how much attention they were drawing.

"But you started it!" the first year pointed out with clenched fists.

"I only asked a couple people," he promised, standing up and making soothing motions in Kibum's direction.

Kibum barked a laugh and rolled his eyes. "I can't decide if you're that naïve or just plain dumb," he drawled, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

"Hey," Jinki complained half-heartedly, undeniably taken aback by the comment and hurt. "You don't have to--"

He didn't get a chance to finish before Kibum reached out to grab the front of his uniform with one hand and pull him close. "They are following me near where I *work*, Jinki," he hissed, the tone quiet but venomous. Jinki winced again. "Fix it!" he snapped, shoving the second year back before slapping his hand on the table again. "And for the love of all the galaxies, make sure it never happens again," he spat, turning to stalk off.

Stunned, Jinki could do little more than stare after Kibum's stiff back as the other man left. His chest tightened and he felt pricks in his eyes from the intensity of the encounter but he forced himself to take a breath. Another breath later and a large swallow allowed him to look down and focus on what Kibum had left on the tabletop. A contact number. Different from the one he'd given originally. Shaken, he snatched it up and swiped it into his contact list before looking around uncertainly.

Curious faces quickly turned away when they met his gaze and Jinki knew their conversation had been seen, if not entirely heard. He swallowed again and tried to sit down to focus on his notes, but it was no use. His eyes burned again and he scrubbed at his face before calling up his contact list once more. He had a couple groups listed, but only one for his besties.

Emergency. Need backup now. He sent the message with a location pin in case any of his friends were nearby and shakily tried to settle his nerves while he closed his notes and texts.

"Jinki!"

He jerked when he heard his name, stomach flopping for a second before he recognized the voice. "Henry," he breathed a sigh of relief that almost released the floodgates.

"What's the emergency? Are you okay?" his friend asked as he hurriedly ran up, looking around for any sign of trouble.

"Weren't you in class?" Jinki mumbled in a tight voice, struggling to hold it together.

"Doesn't matter," Henry promised, grabbing Jinki's face in both hands and looking at him closely. "Who did this to you?" he growled, looking around to find the culprit.

"Kibum," he sniffled without thinking, starting to huff as the encounter washed over him once more.

Henry's mouth fell open and he growled, "That little..."

"No," he blurted, tugging at Henry's arm insistently. "My fault," he hiccupped, really starting to struggle to keep it together.

"Hey, hey," Henry soothed, tugging his uniform sleeve up higher so he could dab at the helpless tears that were starting to leak from Jinki's eyes. "Come on then. Let's go back to my place first," he smiled, patting Jinki on the head in a consoling manner. He tapped his communicator activator and sent a voice message to the group chat so that Larad and Ercite would be able to find them soon.

Somehow, Henry was able to help keep Jinki together as they made it across campus to his room. And even when they reached the safety of Henry's dorm room, Jinki only sniffled and had the occasional tear leak free. He kept Jinki company until Larad and Ercite arrived, which didn't take them long, given the call.

"What happened?" Larad asked as he removed Ercite from his shoulder when they entered the room shortly after calling in.

"Kibum's mad at Jinki and he's," Henry started to explain, pointing at Jinki, "convinced it's his fault."

"Ah," Larad chirped, sitting down and opening his arms to pull Jinki into a protective embrace.

"Larad-" Henry tried to warn but it was too late.

In the circle of his friend's arms, Jinki didn't exactly break down but it gave him permission to cry, effectively rendering him ineffective in telling the situation. Fortunately, Henry had gotten most of the gist and he showed the forum to Ercite. To their credit, they actually cringed.

"No wonder Kibum is mad," they commented, tapping on their lip with a crystalline finger. "Oh. That's not good," they commented, pointing at a new upload on the forum, drawing their combined attention.

"That's new," Henry grimaced, seeing a video recording of Kibum and Jinki's encounter in the library. "Oh no," he hissed with a cringe, seeing the comments already starting to pile up under it. "Really?" he added, seeing a follow-up video with Henry and Jinki and *those* types of comments piling up just as fast.

"You Terrans never cease to amaze," Ercite laughed, though it was a hollow sound, given the situation and Jinki's stifled cries.

"No arguments there," Henry agreed with wide eyes that progressively narrowed with some of the comments. He gasped at one particularly creative one and finally joined the chat, though it was under Jinki's name. *I am reading these and you are all terrible!*

There was brief confusion about the poster, but when they realized it was Henry, as it was supposed to be a private room and he shouldn't have been able to sign in under Jinki's account, they got flustered for a second and then settled into asking him questions directly so he was eventually forced to just sign off with a disgruntled air about him.

"Yes. Because confronting them never added fuel to a fire," Ercite commented dryly while they watched Henry in bemusement.

"You're not helping," he grumbled, pointing a finger at the Dawbn. But then they heard Jinki laugh, albeit weakly. "Or maybe you are."

"We do love to imagine," Jinki sniffed with a tentative smile on his tear-stained face.

Larad patted him on the head in a friendly manner and sighed, "Can we get the full story now?"

"Yeah," Jinki admitted with a final sniff and a reassuring nod. It didn't take him long to explain it now that the initial rush of emotions had worn off. But that didn't change the original problem either, which was that Kibum obviously needed, or at least desired, more privacy and Jinki's ask had effectively taken that away. Again, it wouldn't have been so bad if they weren't snooping around his work, but... he could see why that might not be such a good thing.

"Okay. You try to control the firestorm from this forum situation," Ercite instructed, pointing at Larad.

"Me?" he blinked in surprise, androgynous features reflecting uncertainty.

"I know you have a friend who dabbles in this arena," they snorted, head tilting in such a way to convey amusement. Larad just laughed and rubbed at the back of his neck. "You just do what you do," they pointed at Jinki. He pointed at himself in uncertainty and they nodded. "Henry and I will look out for Kibum for now. It's hard to get mad at a Dawbn," they winked.

"Doesn't hurt you guys have generations of experience to pull from," Henry scoffed, nudging Ercite lightly. They simply shrugged and nodded in agreement.

"It'll work out, Jinki," Larad promised with a quick nod. "We've got your back," he added, tightening his arms around the Terran lightly while looking down.

Jinki took a breath and grabbed Larad's arms firmly. "Thanks guys," he murmured, looking around the small group in gratitude. "I think I can handle it from here," he added, finally looking at his wristwatch to check the time. "Wah! I'm late for class and I have coaching soon!" he gasped, flailing until he was able to get free from the Varium's hold.

"Jinki," Henry laughed, standing up and steadying the other man with a hand on his shoulder.

"One missed class won't hurt you," Ercite chuckled, raising their hand and patting him on the hip reassuringly.

"It's probably better that you finish pulling yourself together before Hajoon sees you anyway," Henry added with a grimace. Larad and Ercite nodded in mute agreement.

"Yeah..." Jinki chuckled belatedly. His oldest younger sister had a knack for being able to see right through him sometimes. Today would not be a good day for it. He sniffed once and rolled his shoulders and head before taking a deeper breath. "Can I ask you guys a favor?"

Henry snorted and grinned. "Already on it," he promised, clapping Jinki on the shoulder.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask," Jinki laughed, though the grin was infectious.

"It's you, Jinki. Of course we do," Larad chuckled, patting him on the back.

Jinki turned a skeptical look on him but didn't argue. "Fine, fine. I'm gonna go but I'll see you guys tomorrow, right?" he asked, pointing between the three quickly.

"We'll be around," Henry grinned, walking towards the front of his room to see Jinki out. "Now go be the badass assistant coach we know you are!" he added, giving his friend a gentle shove out the door. When Jinki was gone, he turned back to the other two and exhaled forcefully.

Larad raised his hand preemptively. "Forum damage control."

"Where's Kibum?' duty," Ercite spoke next, raising their hand with the hint of a laugh in their voice.

"Shameless," Henry laughed, eyeing the Dawbn. "But it's probably best that you do. Don't want to add fuel to *that* fire..." he commented, recalling the second posted video.

"What will you do?" Larad asked, tilting his head to the side so his medium length mahogany colored hair brushed his shoulder.

"What else? Go figure out what Jinki missed so he won't feel so bad about it later," he winked, brushing his hands quickly. "Let's do this!" he cheered, obviously trying to keep himself in high spirits about the whole thing.

"Woo," Ercite said in a half-hearted manner, one hand partially raised, while Larad barked a laugh.

"Terrans," he grinned striding for the door. In the process, he picked Ercite up and placed them on his shoulder. Together, they all exited Henry's room.

Chapter Six

"As you know, Dawbn inherit most of their knowledge from their parents. Mine happened to spend a lot of time around Terrans. Given that, around a certain age, general patterns are pretty predictable. Jinki's been my friend for a while so I tend to know how he'll respond to any given situation. Kibum's a little more challenging, him being who he is, but he's still a young Terran after all."

-Dawbn Ercite

In retrospect, there were probably many other ways Kibum could have handled the forum issue. The pressure of being followed, even unobtrusively, coupled with the fear of being discovered at his work made it easy to lash out. He was well aware that Jinki himself never would have set up the forum, but he was the all too easy target of Kibum's ill contained emotions. The burst of anger burned hot and fast, fizzling to a dying ember almost as soon as he had walked away. But the fuse he lit with it was not so easy to put out.

It started with his evening class. He went because he was supposed to and he wasn't going to avoid Jinki just because he'd gotten mad at him earlier. But Jinki wasn't waiting for him outside the class like he usually was. Ercite was. "That's new," he murmured to himself, nodding at the Dawn uncertainly before heading inside.

They nodded back and tapped their communicator, obviously sending a message to someone. Likely Jinki. And then left, leaving him otherwise alone. But all through class, he kept feeling like he was being watched, more than had been the norm these past few days. Every time he looked around, it seemed as if someone else was looking away. Oh, not the whole class, obviously, but enough to make him feel on pins and needles. He wondered if it had anything to do with the forum page, but since the student whose account he'd 'borrowed' had already changed his password, it wasn't like he could check it again. The page was invite only and he certainly wouldn't be invited at this point.

Kibum left the class feeling like he'd learned nothing and far more tired from being 'on' the whole time. But he still had work to get to and it was at least a distraction he could focus on to try and push away the continuous sensation of being watched and followed. It took him longer to arrive due to taking several detours, just to be on the safe side, but he didn't think he'd been observed heading into work.

Passeri and Jackson could tell something was off almost immediately though. "What happened?" the Terran man asked, leaning close to poke Kibum in the cheek while they were getting ready in the dressing rooms.

Kibum flinched and smacked the offending digit away. "Nothing."

"Uh huh," Passeri crooned, her tone saying all that needed to be said. When Kibum just gave her a look and Jackson laughed in accompaniment, she narrowed her eyes and added, "School drama?"

Kibum said nothing, which was answer enough for Jackson. "Oh?" he wondered, slinging an arm over the younger man's shoulder and giving him a shake. "Did you get into a fight? Dating squabble?" He gasped theatrically and joked, "Did someone catch you cheating on a test?"

With a grimace, Kibum shrugged the arm off and steadfastly sat in front of the mirror to start applying his makeup. He was aware of Passeri and Jackson exchanging glances, their expressions losing what merriment they had to genuine curiosity and concern. He glanced down at his hands lightly clasped on the top of the table and watched one thumb slide against the top of the other slowly. "It's Jinki," he murmured, uncomfortable with the heavy sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Oh..." both his companions murmured quietly. "Did something happen to him?" Passeri asked, coming closer to put a hand on his shoulder.

It was so gentle and warm, he almost wanted to brush it off. He didn't but he did nod. "I yelled at him today," he admitted, no longer feeling particularly vindicated about the confrontation. "I think I hurt him," he mumbled, ducking his head as the words slipped past his lips.

"Ouch," Jackson hissed, the sound of a chair rising up whispering in the space after the word.

"Well, you can be quite a force sometimes, chicklet," Passeri murmured brushing at the back of his hair with her fingers in a soothing manner, the talons scratching ever so lightly. She didn't speak

then, leaving an opening for him to add on if he wanted to. But he didn't so she continued, "Perhaps he just needs a little time to collect himself. Things might look better on the morrow," she promised, propping her chin on his head as she sometimes did.

"Maybe," Kibum sighed, looking up to see the bottom of her chin before he looked at them both in the mirror ahead. For some reason, he doubted it, but there was no time for that tonight. They had a show to do.

"Come on then," she urged, patting his cheeks lightly with both hands. "Let's get you ready. It's almost time to start," the Moladhi reminded him, reaching out to pick at the tubes of makeup on the surface, offering suggestions quietly as she did so.

Work went by all too quickly and Jackson and Passeri escorted him to the hover hub as usual. Sleep came quickly and so did the morning. He woke up later than he intended to and only because he had a voice message that was pinging on his direct line. Tiredly, he tapped on it and heard Jinki's familiar voice. *'I'm not sure if this message will reach you. I just wanted to make sure you didn't forget your class. Since you didn't answer, I guess you might be sleeping but... I hope you'll be there.'*

The tone was both equal parts defeated and hopeful and Kibum didn't even know what to do with that. Other than to end the message and scramble as fast as he could to try and make it to campus in time. The hover hubs weren't likely gonna cut it so he paged Sunny. "Call me a cab, please!"

"Understood, Mr. Kim," she answered immediately. If he didn't know better though, he could have sworn there was a curious note to her voice.

Even with the help of the cab, he very nearly didn't make it. He didn't even have time to make his usual detour like he was coming from the dorms and had to beeline it straight from the main entrance. Panting hard, he stumbled into the hallway in front of his class, half-expecting to see Jinki there, but all he saw was Larad. The Varium noticed him with narrowed eyes and a very intentional look at his wristwatch.

He breathed a slight sigh of relief before jogging closer. "Where's Jinki?" he wondered, checking to make sure he at least had enough time to ask that. Larad didn't answer and simply pointed at the entryway with one long finger and a stoic expression. "Fine," he grumbled, stalking inside, though he didn't miss the way the Varium also tapped his communicator like Ercite did the day before. Also like the day before... more furtive looks throughout class.

And the pattern continued outside of class. As usual, he had time to kill between classes – a tactic he used so that he wouldn't be tempted to go back home so as to save money on power – so he tried to meet up with his usual groups of 'friends.' Something was definitely off though. A third – mostly Terran and Varium – were more into giving him disapproving looks, another third – almost entirely Terran – literally ignored him, and the other third – as many Moladhi as Terrans – quickly turned into gossip hounds.

It was from the last group that he eventually saw the videos that were fueling the shift. "One of the admins of the page keeps trying to take the videos down but they haven't been having much luck making it permanent. We've even had to move pages a couple times already," Psittasi preened, actively showing Kibum the videos she'd saved to her data profile. The Moladhi was a colorful first year

with teal, gold, and red plumage. She was also a notorious gossip and had previously been one of his better sources of indirect information.

Today, that remained true but in a very uncomfortable manner. Kibum grimaced upon watching the first video. Had he really been *that* angry? The comments she had managed to save and made no effort to hide under it were not exactly kind either. And he blanched at the second video. Jinki was crying. Or at least trying very hard not to. And Henry was there offering what comfort he could and the lingering comments there did not to assuage his discomfort.

The heavy lead ball returned to the pit of Kibum's stomach and he briefly felt lightheaded. He swayed for a second and Psitassi steadied him with a quick hand on his shoulder. "You okay, Kibum?" she wondered, peering down at him with dark gold eyes.

"Yeah," he forced a smile and waved her support off, pretending to rub at a headache. "I didn't sleep as well as I'd hoped last night," he explained, which was true enough. "I'm gonna go find a corner to take a nap in," he added, forcing a paper-thin laugh.

"Already?" the Moladhi blinked, tilting her head to the side speculatively.

"I'll see you around, Psitassi," he waved, trying to flee as fast as he could without looking like he was running. To his relief, no one actively tried to chase after him, though the feeling of being watched never really abated. No wonder... So this was what it was like when the 'fun' friend wasn't anymore. He had to admit he wasn't as ready to for the shift in public perception as he imagined he might have been in a different situation. He was used to being noticed, but not in this way, and he didn't like it.

Thinking about the whole thing really did start to give him a headache though and his stomach gave a thin growl to remind him he hadn't eaten anything of substance since right around lunch the day before. And with the cab ride this morning, he really didn't have much on hand to get anything. He really enjoyed his job – it was one of the few places he felt absolutely free, oddly enough – but with his part-time status, it barely paid enough to cover the cost of his university fees, much less everything else... Feeling himself slipping, he sought out an empty corner and tucked himself into it, using the barrier at his back to force a false sense of security.

"Take a breath," he told himself softly, closing his eyes as he focused on drawing air in his nose and out his mouth in several long counts. After a few more, he opened his eyes, steady and in control again. "Okay," he nodded, firming his shoulders and putting on one of his many masks. "It's just another day," he promised, clenching one fist before shaking it out and feigning being at ease.

And that was true, but it was one that continued to chip away at him. His usual haunts were no longer sanctuaries and finding a place that had neither prying eyes nor curious gossips was far more challenging than it should have been. Around lunch time, he knew he needed food but wasn't sure he wanted to brave the crowds there. Wasn't even sure he'd be able to snag bits and pieces off his 'friends' plates this time around either, given the situation.

Standing outside the dining hall and off to the side so that it looked like he was simply lounging and not deeply considering whether it would be worth the trouble, Kibum jumped when he heard, "Hey." For just a second, he thought – hoped – it might have been Jinki but when he looked, it was

Henry, one hand swinging loosely at his side and the other behind his back. His mood took an abrupt nosedive and he sighed, already putting on an air of disinterest.

"Yeah?" he asked as if bored, sparing a glance at the second year approaching him.

Henry snorted and shook his head. "You really are something."

Kibum shrugged, looking ahead, but then shifted his attention back to Henry. "Come to harangue me or gloat over the situation?" he scoffed, inspecting his fingers before dusting his hands off and shifting like he was going to leave.

"As if," Henry exhaled with a roll of his eyes. "I'm just here because Jinki asked me to come," he added before Kibum could start to leave.

The words made him pause and Kibum's expression slipped as he turned wary, uncertain eyes on the other man. That had to be a lie. "Why?" he asked instead of blurting what he thought.

"Well... he thought you might be hungry and since you didn't come to the canteen today, here," he offered, showing what was in the hand behind his back.

It was a freshly wrapped sandwich that looked just like the one he'd stolen from Jinki's plate last week. Stars, had it only been that long ago? His stomach clenched at the sight and he wanted to take it, but there had to be a catch. There always was.

"Take it," Henry urged, completely unbothered by the handful of onlookers that were watching the exchange from afar. When Kibum continued to look at him warily, Henry rolled his eyes and actually tossed the sandwich towards him.

"Hey!" Kibum yelped, catching it out of reflex before pulling it close, holding firm.

"He said even if you're mad at him, he still has to take care of his mentee," Henry chuckled, a wry smile on his face. "I may not like you very much right now, but Jinki is a man of his word. And if he asks me to do something for him, who am I to say no?" he shrugged, giving Kibum a single wave before rubbing at short brown strands and heading back inside the canteen.

Kibum watched him go for a long moment before he looked down at the sandwich in his hands. It was still warm and the seal hadn't even been broken yet. He couldn't quite help the hint of a smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth before he looked towards the canteen again. Seriously though, Jinki was just so unlike anyone he'd ever met. Kibum really had no idea what to do with him. But the food on the other hand...

For once, he had a full belly when he went to his next class. His checker this time was Henry again and they exchanged quick nods in recognition. Henry tapped his communicator and Kibum went to class and the day resumed as it always did.

He didn't have work that evening, though he still went home late. A small smile crept over his lips when he checked the incoming message for his personal contact. *Good night.* 😊 He wondered just how long Jinki might have deliberated on adding the smiley face, imagining the other man adding it, then deleting it, then eventually adding it anyway after talking to himself.

The next day, Kibum discovered that a new round of speculation had started from his and Henry's encounter the afternoon before. No one had been close enough to hear what they said but Psitassi certainly wanted to find out. He had to give her something or else she would likely make something up on her own, so by lunch, their encounter became an uneasy truce... between rivals. Kibum rolled his eyes at the embellishment but played along by neither confirming nor denying it to anyone else that asked.

He had three classes that day and while he didn't see Jinki again, he did get a check-in from Ercite, Ercite, and Larad respectively. The Dawbn even brought him a snack from the canteen. From Jinki, obviously, but he managed to mumble a thanks when he took it from them.

Work in the evening was better than the last shift. Neither Passeri nor Jackson asked about his slightly better mood, but he could see them exchanging smiles and quick snippets of conversation while throwing him reassuring looks. They gave him a sense of normalcy with their banter and escorted him home as usual. When he finally checked in with Sunny, he found he had another message waiting for him.

Good night. 😊 It pulled another small smile from him before he went to sleep in his small apartment. He woke the next morning with enough time to arrive at the university and pretend like he had stayed in the dorms overnight. He was mildly disappointed that Jinki wasn't waiting for him, but not entirely surprised. Henry checked on him for his first class and by the end of it, he figured it was probably about time to try something different.

He had to avoid Psitassi, not surprisingly – the woman was a glutton for drama and gossip – but giving her the slip wasn't too challenging. When he was in the clear, he sent a quick message. *Lunch in the canteen today?*

Not even five seconds later, he got an answer: *Sure.*

Kibum laughed. There was no way he'd checked the sender before responding. Unless he really was just that forgiving, which was possible, but not likely. Ah well. A few seconds later, he got another response: *If you're okay with that, I mean.*

That got an eye roll and another laugh. *I'm the one that asked, didn't I?*

There was a moment of no response during which he could imagine Jinki face palming. Then:

Yeah.

Right.

Okay!

All in quick succession, one after another. Kibum barked a laugh at that and shrugged. Nice to know he wasn't the only one feeling out of sorts about the whole thing. Now he just had to kill time before lunch and avoid... Psitassi! Kibum turned and did an abrupt about face when he noticed the Moladhi heading his general direction with a couple of her friends in tow. His heart thumped harder when he noticed Crawven down the other side of the hall, but it looked like he hadn't noticed Kibum either, or at least wasn't paying him any mind.

That was fine by him. He had no desire to run into him or any of that particular trio. Phantom pains from his encounter with Boro bothered him from time to time and Kieran had a sneering glare that could rival his own. So yeah. “No thank you,” he murmured, ducking into an offshoot hallway to find a place to lie low until lunch.

When it did come time, Kibum found it difficult to actually force himself to follow through with it though. Standing on the second-floor platform looking down over the student body attending lunch, it felt like half the school was there. He knew that wasn’t the case but there were so many people... It was strange how that was never a problem at work but here, it was a whole different animal. And the smells of the dining hall made it hard to focus too, all the delicious scents making his stomach roil and grumble. But this was what he’d asked for...

He always had liked to stir the pot, and if he could get free lunch out of it too... Kibum took a deep breath and started heading for the spiral escalator. “Here we go,” he murmured, putting on his usual façade. Contrary to the worst imaginings of his mind, all conversation did not stop when he reached the first floor. Nor did every eye turn to him at the same time. It was true that he drew attention and managed to start the occasional gossip conversation, but those that noticed him were more speculative than accusatory in their glances – not stares.

So maybe the canteen didn’t fall silent at Kibum’s presence. Jinki’s table did when he got close enough to be noticed and all four of them *did* turn to watch him as he approached. It was almost enough to make him want to run. Almost. But Jinki’s face was a mix of uncertain welcome and Ercite actually gave him a small wave from their vantage across from Larad and next to Henry. Reacting to them more than anything, he managed an awkward wave in response and paused at the edge of the table nearest Henry and Jinki.

Henry and Larad looked at him with neutral, unreadable expressions. And Jinki, galaxies bless him, offered a pale smile and a quiet, “Hey.”

“Hi,” he responded in kind, eyes darting around the table before settling on Jinki’s warm brown orbs. His back and neck prickled like he had a target on them and he had no doubt he’d drawn various eyes but for some reason, Jinki’s attention was a steadying force. “Can we... um... Can we start over?” he asked, flushing at the fact that he’d stumbled in his ask. He didn’t miss Larad’s quiet huff of amusement or Henry’s raised eyebrow in his periphery, but he kept his focus on Jinki.

The still weak but brilliant smile that lit up Jinki’s eyes washed over Kibum like a soothing balm. “Yeah,” was the single word answer, but it felt like something far more eloquent. Jinki mutely gestured at the floor where Kibum was standing and he stepped back to allow the seat to rise up and unfold.

“Thanks,” he murmured, settling himself carefully on the edge of the chair, almost afraid to make himself comfortable. Obviously welcome, he still felt out of place and awkward. At least until Henry picked up the slack.

“Anyway! As I was saying, we should totally go check out that new holovid, *Pirate’s Crusade 3*,” he encouraged, obviously backtracking a little bit by the smiles on Jinki and Larad’s faces.

“But 2 was terrible,” Larad reminded him with a deadpan look.

Henry waved his hand dismissively. "Yeah, but this one is supposed to fix that. Even Ercite said it looked pretty good," he added, gesturing at the Dawbn meaningfully.

While they carried the conversation, Jinki quietly pushed another freshly wrapped sandwich from his tray and towards Kibum. His shy smile was slightly embarrassed. "I didn't know what else you liked," he admitted with a shrug before nodding at the sandwich and then shifting most of his attention away to the rest of the group.

He kept glancing back though so Kibum knew it was mostly for his sake. Feeling almost guilty about it, he reached out to pull the sandwich closer and then blinked in surprise when Larad reached over to place a bright red piece of fruit on Henry's tray. "Here. You said you liked these."

Henry looked crestfallen. "Now you tell me," he bemoaned with a glance at his tray, half picked over but with plenty of food remaining. "I'm so full," he grumbled, accepting the fruit and surreptitiously pushing the tray under his other arm and closer to Kibum.

His mouth literally watered at the sight of the mela. He hadn't had fresh fruit in... weeks now. "I think we could probably catch a holovid but I might have to bring Hajoon. She's been dying to see that since the first trailer came out," Jinki explained, his genuine and easy grin returning. It faded just a touch when he glanced back at Kibum and nodded slightly towards the food, but it didn't disappear entirely.

"Feh. No problem," Henry assured him with two waving hands. "She's the cool sibling after all," he teased, winking across the table.

"Hey!" Jinki laughed in mildly offended outrage.

Kibum was right in the middle of taking a bite of the mela when Ercite asked, "Would you like to come too, Kibum?" When he looked across the table at them, there was a gleam in their eye that looked like they meant to catch him at that moment and he didn't know to react.

Caught with the fruit in his mouth, it made the rest of the table laugh and embarrassed Kibum. He tried to put it away before Henry smacked him lightly on the shoulder and added, "Finish your bite first."

"Ercite," Jinki chided with a look at the Dawbn who simply shrugged in response, completely unrepentant. Then Jinki shifted his attention back to Kibum, handing him a cloth napkin to wipe at the juice on his chin. He tried to stifle the laugh and succeeded in keeping it at a smile, but added, "You're welcome to come too. If you want," he encouraged, mouth twitching again when Kibum swallowed hurriedly.

"I can't this weekend," he answered, shaking his head and looking down. He barely had enough money for food, much less holovids.

"Next time then," Jinki nodded, not pushing the issue before he gestured at the food one more time. Clearly he was worried Kibum hadn't eaten enough.

"Sure," Kibum answered with a hesitant smile, hurrying to take another bite before someone said something else that might embarrass him. He didn't miss the amused fist bump Larad and Ercite shared at their end of the table, or the distracted way that Henry also kept pushing bits of food in his

direction while he talked to the rest of the group. Kibum nibbled on the mela and stuck the sandwich in his pocket for later while he picked at the remaining food on the tray.

They hadn't said it outright and he wasn't entirely sure he believed it, but it felt like he was part of the group. At least a little bit. Hovering on the outskirts looking in, but... it seemed as if they'd made a spot for him to come in. If he wanted. If he dared. For the first time in days, the subconscious tension in his gut started to unwind and he sighed, a peaceful, calm exhale.

Chapter Seven

"For an older brother, Jinki's pretty cool. A little on the lame side considering all he does is study and help people – including us – but there are worse things. It's just that... when he gets an idea in his head, it can be a little difficult for him to change course. Even without the teasing, Doyun and I knew something was different about Jinki when it came to Kibum, his 'special' mentee. Oh, of course he acted about the same as he always did for everyone he helps, but there was also this... sense of extra worry. Like looking after Kibum was more all-encompassing. Seriously. It was fascinating to watch."

-Lee Hajoon (Jinki's 16-year-old grav jump sister)

Despite their success in making up, meeting up with Kibum outside of school hours was not as easy as Jinki hoped. At least he was responding to his personal messages this time... He looked at the message: *Enjoy the movie.*

Jinki sighed and glanced at the rest of his group. Hajoon had tagged along and so had Doyun, just making it over the age limit. They were giggling animatedly while they talked to Henry and Larad, at least a little bit smitten with both of them. Ercite remained quiet next to Larad's leg, one hand grabbing the fabric of his pants to make sure they didn't get lost in the crowd. *You really are welcome to come too*, he sent, hoping that maybe he'd get a positive this time. No such luck though. The incoming message he got was a thumbs down sign instead and Jinki sighed.

"Oh! The line's moving!" Henry urged, reaching over to swat at Jinki and grab his attention.

"Huh? Oh!" he blinked, laughing at being zoned out while his sisters teased him about it, each coming close to hang on one of his arms.

"Please don't tell me you're dealing with school stuff now too," Hajoon groaned theatrically as she shook his arm.

"Oh! Maybe it's a mentee," Doyun guessed, grinning broadly, the expression bright with her earth brown hair pulled back in a loose horsetail.

The sisters looked at each at the same time and suggested, "A *special* mentee!" with all the innuendo they could muster.

Henry snorted and nodded in agreement. "If I'm right," he started to say, eyeing Jinki speculatively, "he's *special* alright."

Hajoon and Doyun squealed in animated excitement and abandoned their brother for Henry. "Tell us!"

"Jinki never spills the beans for anything like this," Doyun whined, looking up at Henry expectantly.

Jinki sighed and smacked his forehead with his palm. He flinched when a hand touched his back, propelling him forward, and Larad's voice drifted to his ear. "He won't tell them too much," the Varium reassured, nodding towards the entrance where the rest of the group was heading.

"I know," Jinki confirmed with a shrug before roughing his family brown hair with one hand. "I did invite him again, just in case."

"Space, remember?" Ercite laughed from their vantage on the other side of Larad.

"You're one to talk," he shot back with a grin, recalling the canteen event.

"Okay Mr. Helpfully Pushy," they said with an easy shrug.

Jinki rolled his eyes but didn't argue. He couldn't. He was unintentionally pushy with his good will sometimes and it was easy to see why that might have scared Kibum. He was going to have to really be aware of that going forward.

Even if he still had a few hurdles to get over when it came to Kibum, at least the movie was good. Well, entertaining was more accurate, but they had fun.

Sunday was a bust for meeting his mentee, but there was always something to do on campus and Jinki was no stranger to such activities.

He finally had a chance to meet up again on Monday when Kibum came out from the dorm area to meet him on their way to the canteen before class. For a moment, he almost didn't think the first year would come. But then he did, uniform rumpled and looking like he hadn't slept enough, but Jinki's smile conjured an answering one on his tired face. "Good morning," he greeted, trying not to hurry as he moved closer to walk beside his mentee.

Kibum winced at the greeting, a skeptical look on his face. "Is it?"

"So far," Jinki answered without skipping a beat. "Come on. What do you want for breakfast?" he asked, wandering in front to walk backwards so he could have a clearer view of Kibum.

"You're paying, right?" Kibum asked, his pace nonchalant and unhurried.

"I said I would," was the quick answer.

"Then whatever," he shrugged, a tiny smile playing on his lips.

Jinki scowled, an empty threat, and shifted to walk beside Kibum once more. "You've gotta give me something to go on. Otherwise, I'll just keep end up getting you sandwiches for food and nobody wants that." Kibum shrugged with a noncommittal sound and laughed once when Jinki raised his hands like he wanted to throttle the younger man.

"Surprise me," he offered instead, an impish grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Hopeless,” Jinki snorted, giving a half-hearted roll of his eyes before he shepherded his companion into the canteen.

The weekend had done nothing to allow the rumors to die down and they received plenty of looks and whispers when they entered. Not that Jinki let it bother him. The rumors had no basis in reality after all. He could tell that Kibum was a little tense though. A surprising revelation considering how confident he usually seemed otherwise.

When they didn’t give the rumor mill much to feed on over breakfast, general interest waned pretty quickly. Especially since Henry wasn’t there to make things even more interesting. Small talk expressions, grimaces about grades, and exasperated eye-rolls were entertaining but hardly dramatic enough for the typical gossip.

“Terran biology is your worst subject by far,” he reminded his mentee, much to his aggrievement.

“Ugh...” A pitiful groan paired with his chin resting in his palm and an obvious grimace made Jinki want to laugh.

“Hey. We’ve got less than two months to turn your scores around before the end of the semester. Find a time we can meet and I can help you sort it out,” he promised confidently, pointing one finger at the young man, a knowing look gracing his features.

“How about never?” Kibum mumbled, glancing at Jinki once but otherwise keeping his attention focused elsewhere.

“Or tomorrow,” Jinki shot back, using his grin as a weapon.

Kibum scoffed and wrinkled his nose. “I’ve gotta get to class. Thanks for breakfast,” he added, pocketing a snack for later and heading off quickly.

“Hey! Wait!” Jinki yelled, scrambling to clean the table so he could follow.

So maybe helping Kibum get caught up in all his classes was going to be more challenging than Jinki thought, but at least he didn’t have quite the resistance to the other subjects. And to be honest, Kibum was quite proficient in anything to do with science and tech. Also not surprisingly, he was good at oration and diplomacy. Well, maybe not mutually beneficial diplomacy but he could probably talk the opposition into agreeing by sheer force of will and doggedness if he needed to.

Their first full week together actually went pretty well, all things considered. Kibum was skittish to let Jinki in and he absolutely would not give up his dorm number but was approachable in most other aspects. Jinki hadn’t quite worked up the nerve to go back to see him at The Stars Aligned, but it was like a shared secret between them for the time being. Henry knew Kibum had a unique job but Jinki hadn’t enlightened his friends yet. Wouldn’t either, until Kibum was ready to share. This was more difficult between his siblings – sisters mostly – who had started pestering him incessantly about Kibum since Henry’s hint at the movie, but still manageable.

And even if Kibum wasn’t one to share a great deal of information, for now it was enough that he looked like he was starting to put on a little bit of weight. At least Jinki wasn’t able to see his

cheekbones quite so clearly anymore. Maybe that was why he seemed to be in a better mood nowadays too...

Another weekend came and Kibum deferred meeting again. That gave Jinki more time to work with his siblings, and hang out with Henry, Larad, and Ercite though. And that was great, until he overheard Henry murmur, "Almighty Key?" while scrolling through his personal feed. "Hey... isn't this Kibum?" he added curiously, making Jinki's stomach flop.

"Huh?" he grunted, looking away from the vid they were watching together in Henry's dorm room.

Obligingly, Henry turned the screen so that everyone could see and showed the side-by-side image of Almighty Key with the otherwise normally dressed Kibum. "It was posted in one of the school forums. Random tag but I guess this counts," he explained, leaning around to see the original image for himself again.

"Who posted it?" Larad asked, eyes scanning the page as he looked for the name.

"It's an anonymous post, which is interesting, given it's the school site," Henry frowned, one brow rising. His attention shifted to Jinki who had remained incredibly mute while he looked over it for himself. "Is that really Kibum though?"

"Uh..." Jinki trailed off, blinking dumbly as he was put on the spot. It was, but should he admit it? Kibum wanted to keep that part of his life secret so even with the post... could he confirm?

"I think it's probably him," Ercite nodded, saving Jinki from having to say anything, but their response made him choke all the same. The Dawbn looked at him with a muffled laugh and rolled their shoulders in a slow shrug.

"Yeah?" Henry mused, tilting his head to the side like he was still trying to puzzle it out. "I don't know... did you know about this?" he asked, turning his attention to Jinki.

"Eh? I mean... Kibum didn't *tell* me he was Almighty Key so..." he trailed off, hedging his words very carefully. It wasn't a lie. Kibum *hadn't* told him. The fact he did know was completely unrelated.

"He did," Larad grinned, his brownish green eyes dancing with amusement as they observed him carefully, reading all the unspoken things he wasn't saying.

"Jinki!" Henry wailed in complaint, clinging to the other man's shoulders like a whiny child. "I thought I was supposed to be your best friend! Why didn't you tell me?!"

Caught off guard by the question, Jinki wanted to say 'You are' and 'It's not like that' at the same time, but it came out as, "You're not like that!" Henry gave him a baffled look while the words registered in his head before Jinki clapped one hand over his mouth and used the other to wave frantically in front of him.

Larad barked a laugh and Henry snorted shortly after, a bright grin lighting up his face. "Oh, never change, Jinki," he chuckled, slinging an arm over the other man's shoulder and shaking him gently.

Jinki shrugged and managed an apologetic shrug but kept himself from saying anything. In the resulting quiet, Ercite wandered close with a side-eyed look at the Terran but they didn't say anything as they looked at the pictures instead. "What do the comments say?" they asked, pointing under the pictures before they started to scroll down, scanning the posts that had started flooding in shortly after the images had appeared.

Henry sat up and cleared his throat, changing gears blindingly fast. "They look to be a mixture of surprise, awe, and confusion mostly," he laughed. "Like this one," he grinned mischievously. "'Is that really Kibum?! Why is he a prettier woman than I am?!' He really is pretty," he added with a knowing look at Jinki and a quick wink.

"You should see him perform," Jinki snorted without thinking, his face flushing red as three pairs of eyes turned to look at him at the same time.

"You've seen Almighty Key performing?" Larad asked, one corner of his mouth pulling up into a lopsided grin and an eyebrow rising suggestively.

Jinki clapped a hand over his mouth again and simply stared at them in mute response. "I suppose we can take that as a yes," Ercite barked a laugh, turning their attention back to the holoscreen.

"Jinki!" Henry whined once more, clearly upset at being left out.

"Looks like someone is slightly disappointed by this revelation," Ercite added, pointing at a recent comment. "'Didn't you want to show Almighty Key a good time @(student tag)?' And right under it – 'No I didn't!' I still do not entirely understand your largely Terran fixation on form," they admitted with a sigh, craggy brows furrowed in thought.

"It doesn't hurt that Dawbn only have one form," Larad grinned with his hands rising on either side of him.

"Or that Varium have many," Ercite responded, their head tilting as if in challenge.

"Hey! We have more than one form too!" Henry piped up, pointing between the other two in mock – or maybe it was slightly genuine – outrage.

"Oh to be a Terran with an easily modifiable physical form," the Dawbn bemoaned, mimicking the very Terran gesture of placing the back of their hand against their forehead.

"It's not my fault the Terran genome is so simple," he grumbled back, making a face at Ercite before glancing at Larad to see if he was going to say anything.

Amidst the chatter of their discussion, Jinki frowned as a niggling worry settled in his gut. "Give me a minute guys," he urged, finally speaking up and trying to step outside.

"Attempting to escape, are you?" Henry scowled while his focus shifted on a dime. He snagged Jinki around the chest with one arm so he couldn't stand up just yet, his tone playful and joking.

Jinki was hit with a sudden surge of irrational annoyance at being detained and it surprised him. He bit his lip to keep from saying anything at first, but then grabbed Henry's arm and tapped it firmly.

"I need to get in touch with Kibum. He didn't want people to know," he explained abruptly, his tone sharper than he meant for it to be.

"Oh..." Henry trailed off, removing his arm quickly. Jinki didn't look back to see his expression but it felt like Henry might have been slightly hurt.

"Oh! Look at this comment!" Larad called – loudly. "It looks like Kibum might have a fan club already."

With effort, Jinki was able to keep himself from checking and simply stepped out of the room. The hallway was mostly clear in the immediate vicinity, though there were a handful of students and residents wandering in the distance or talking in the hallway. He thought about calling Kibum but didn't think it would be the best course of action with so little privacy right now. Instead, he opted to send a message.

Didn't know if you'd seen the forum post recently. Someone outed your role at work. Just wanted to make sure you knew as soon as possible. He sent the message and looked around to be sure the coast was clear. No one else seemed bothered by the news or they were otherwise oblivious to it. The post was relatively new so it was likely it hadn't made the rounds yet. That didn't mean it wouldn't be a bigger deal come Monday... Jinki frowned and chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before sending another message: *Will you be okay?*

There was no immediate response and no indication that Kibum had received or read the message at all, but that didn't mean he didn't see it. It was equally likely he was trying to figure out what to do. Jinki knew that Kibum's job was based on his performance and maintaining his persona. If people knew who he was, how would that change it? Maybe he'd just become like the other Terran or the Moladhi and perform as he was. But would there be a space for him?

He didn't know and he suddenly found that it was something he thought he needed to know. The fact that Kibum wasn't answering him immediately wasn't helping in this instance either.

In point of fact, Kibum wasn't answering because he didn't know how to answer. He read Jinki's message and his vision tunneled with a strange ringing in his ears. After a second, he shook his head and blinked hard, forcing himself to take a breath. Hiding out in the open was no place to fall apart. He took another breath and peered around the planted tree he was currently resting behind.

On the edge of the university, it was one of the many evergreen types that dotted the landscape, but since there was no bench and it was near the border, most people didn't hang around it. Perfect for him on most occasions and certainly ideal on weekends when he wasn't working and didn't want to be at home. Now was one of them but it still felt too out in the open just then. Content in the knowledge that there was no one nearby at the moment, he reviewed the message once more with a frown on his face.

Someone outed your role at work.

Who was it? It wouldn't have been a coworker. Shouldn't have been a customer. There was almost no chance they would have recognized him from The Stars Align. Given that, unless it was

someone completely different, it had to be a student. Damn that Jinki for the whole 'Where's Kibum?' fiasco. And damn himself too for that matter. Not that he could change anything about it right now.

It wasn't like he'd never thought he'd be exposed. It was always a possibility after all. Garum had been very upfront about it being possible and likely after a point. Especially since he didn't want to use any props or prosthetics for hiding his identity. But that didn't mean he was ready for it to happen *this* soon. He hadn't even been working there a full year yet. Sighing, he scrubbed his face with both hands and went back to the message screen.

Will you be okay?

He almost wanted to scoff at it. Such a dumb question. Of course he was going to be okay. He was Kim freaking Kibum. He'd made it this far on his own and he was damn well going to get past this stupid stumbling block too. But... when was the last time anyone had actually asked him that question? Had genuinely cared?

Oh, many people threw the question out like candy. 'You okay?' 'How was the test? Did you do okay?' 'I heard you got into a fight the other day. You okay?' All general interest and surface concern. But when Jinki asked such a thing, it... felt different. Real. And Kibum didn't know what to do with that. He understood Passeri's concern – she mothered everyone younger than her. Jackson just *followed* her concern, a useful echo. Sunny *acted* concerned because she was programmed to. Even Eric showed some degree of concern but Kibum could never be sure if it was because he felt pity for him or was more worried about the possibility of future trouble.

"Ugh," he groaned, waving the holoscreen away and staring at the scene in front of him. On a raised platform above a fair portion of the city, the University was impossible to miss, but it gave a phenomenal vantage from which to see everything. Yonichi was a bustling city on Star Seeker's Rest. The fourth established planet out of seven on the not yet fully terraformed planet's list. The dome that shimmered faintly in the distance protected them from the harsh atmosphere beyond and confined them to whatever abode the people chose unless they had the money to travel between them.

Kibum had only managed to come here because his guardian had given him the money for the trip. Even then, he'd only been able to stay since he had his... father's apartment to live in. But he still needed money to live and The Stars Align had seemed like a dream come true. It didn't pay as much as he'd like but it gave him something he hadn't really been able to find elsewhere: freedom and happiness. Now that it was threatened, he wasn't sure what he was going to do about it.

"Guess I should go see Garum then," he exhaled, working his jaw back and forth as he mulled it over. The vibrant green grass under his nervous hands ripped and fluttered away in shreds as he plucked at it thoughtlessly.

But he hadn't responded to Jinki yet and he wrinkled his nose once more before bringing up the contact screen. *Will you be okay?* The question glowed in front of him, almost taunting, and he tapped on it to send a response. Yes. Then he hit send and closed everything out again so he could wander off towards The Stars Align and see if Garum was available yet.

Chapter Eight

"According to Terrans, it's a little cliché that we Moladhi are so attracted to pretty things. They say that birds from their original planet used to like shiny things too. I say, what's so bad about liking something pretty? I guess that's also part of why I really liked Kibum from the start. Maybe a part of me realized he was Almighty Key. Probably not but I can hope. I think it's just nice because he always really seems to listen to me when I talk. Even my own family mostly just nods along when I have something to say, but Kibum listens and even tells me things too. Come to think of it, more people have been talking to me this semester as well. It's nice. I bet Kibum has something to do with it. I should thank him later.

-First-year female Moladhi Psitassi

The owner of the Stars Align said he would back Kibum up, regardless of what happened, but it was cold comfort. Everyone was talk until push came to shove and Kibum wasn't one to really believe until he'd experienced it for himself. Needless to say, things started to get interesting first thing on Monday...

"Kibum!" He looked around and noticed Jinki waving at him from the entrance to the dorms again. At least that hadn't changed anyway.

"Hey," he waved, stuffing his hands in his pockets and falling into step beside the other man. He could feel Jinki's eyes on him, asking silent questions. When he didn't offer any information, his companion was forced to ask.

"So? How did the weekend go?" he wondered, keeping his voice chipper and light.

Kibum raised a brow when he looked at Jinki and then noticed a couple people looking their way. "Fine," he commented making sure to meet everyone's gaze. He wasn't ashamed of what he was doing or worried about what they thought of him and he'd rather they know that early.

"You sure?" Jinki pressed, drawing closer as he noticed Kibum looking around.

He nudged the second year to get him to step back a bit and then answered, "Positive."

"Hmm," Jinki hummed, rubbing his shoulder almost like he was a little hurt. But it didn't last. "Oh! Did you check the forum? You have an official fan club now," he laughed with a grin.

Kibum frowned and gave Jinki a sidelong look. "Which me?"

It was a surprising question by the way Jinki's face scrunched up. One hand gestured towards the entirety of Kibum and he blurted, "*You*."

That made him snort. "Sure." Almighty Key had a following, of course. They were literally fabulous, as intended. But Kibum?

When he saw that Kibum didn't really believe him, Jinki theatrically rolled his eyes. "They're the same person, you know? Just two very different sides of him."

"Yeah, yeah," Kibum waved off, more to get Jinki to stop talking rather than because he actually believed him. He frowned suddenly though when he saw a familiar face ahead. "Isn't that Larad?"

"Huh?" Jinki chirped, turning his attention towards the canteen entrance. "Oh! Morning Larad!" he called, all sunshine and warmth. As they drew closer, he commented on what Kibum was already thinking. "You're not usually here for breakfast. What's up?"

Larad laughed once and nodded towards the inside of the canteen. "Guess," he chuckled with a shake of his head.

"Henry?" Kibum warranted, eyes narrowed suspiciously while he looked around the Varium.

"Who else?" the taller man chuckled as he waved them inside, his sheer presence helping to create a buffer that kept most at bay for the time being. Varium that chose to model Terrans often presented as larger than average ones, making them some of the more inherently intimidating individuals on campus. Right up there with fully grown male Moladhi who *averaged* six to six and a half feet in height.

When they approached the table, Henry and Ercite were waiting for them, having staked out a place near the wall so they wouldn't be in the very center of the area. Henry saw them and immediately stood up, "Kibum! Over here," he called, gesturing firmly for the seat next to him.

Wary, Kibum automatically took the seat next to Ercite instead, hearing the snort from Larad behind. This was probably his seat but he likely wouldn't fight him on it and at least the Dawbn was more thoughtful in their questions. That didn't mean he wasn't privy to Henry's disappointed pout though. For a second, it looked like Henry was going to move and sit at the head of the table, but Jinki slid himself into that spot with a look at his friend.

"But-" Henry started to complain, gently shaking Jinki's arm.

"Sit down," Jinki laughed, pushing on Henry's shoulder towards the seat across from Kibum.

"But you never tell me anything and- whoa!" he yelped when Larad pushed on his other shoulder, quickly settling him in place so he'd stop drawing so much attention. Henry paused to glare at the Varium for all of half a second before he shifted his attention back to Jinki. "And he's finally here and now all he'll do is glare at me." He stopped talking and looked over to see Kibum doing exactly that, albeit a milder version than usual. "See?!" he exclaimed, pointing at the other Terran while he looked at Jinki.

"Best be glad Kibum is not a Moladhi," Ercite commented dryly, looking up at Henry.

"Huh?" he chirped in confusion, glancing down at the Dawbn. Ercite clacked their mouth closed with a sharp shutting noise and Henry yelped, yanking his hand back to hold it near his chest.

Kibum couldn't help it. He laughed and smiled at the Dawbn, unsurprised when they winked at him. "Oh come now," he drawled, thinning his mouth in a disappointed frown that he barely managed to hold in place. "Biting is strictly a last resort. You never know where something has been," he shrugged, tilting his head and giving Henry another side-eyed look.

Henry grumbled under his breath before looking to Jinki for help. "Look at how he treats me. He's insufferable," he complained, a quiet whining tone to his voice.

Larad elbowed him in the ribs and snorted, "Laying it on a little thick this morning, don't you think?"

He coughed once and adopted a shy, sheepish smile while looking up at the Varium. "Maybe a little," he admitted, wrinkling his nose and laughing.

Jinki reached out and touched Henry's head in a combined motion of a light smack and a pet. "Go ahead and start eating," he instructed, gesturing towards the trays already stacked with food. "You too," he added, brushing at Kibum with his fingertips.

"Oh!" he flinched in surprise. "I thought it was theirs," he admitted, pointing at the other three.

Leaning in close, Jinki whispered, "You might have noticed they're a little bit curious so they wanted to hear from you first. Hence," he explained, gesturing at the table. "That and having a group is rather nice for cover, don't you think?" he winked, keeping his attention focused on the table and not on the rest of the room at large.

Kibum had to admit it was nice not having anyone else randomly come up to try and pry information out of him. He could still feel eyes on him watching, and he knew students were leaning closer, their ears stretched as they attempted to listen in. At least for the morning, he could pretend that things were mostly normal. Not to mention someone had raided the fruit cart for pickings and he carefully snagged a beautifully orange arancia. He'd had a chance to try fresh fruit when he was younger, but it was still an expensive commodity in the stores. His guardian had sometimes previously bought them for weekends and special occasions but when Kibum started living by himself, the best he could get was the canned stuff. If he was lucky.

He felt eyes on him and noticed Jinki watching him with a gentle smile. Almost shy, he turned away and addressed the group, but Kibum was almost certain the comment was for him. "I hear Obsidi is trying to get the agriculture department to grow a batch of fragolas so they can synth them into the new round of dishes next month."

"Oh!" Henry perked up, grinning broadly. "The artificial ones aren't bad but you can't beat the fresh ones," he sighed, happily content with that news.

As was Kibum. His mouth literally watered at the thought of the delectable sweet red berry. For his ninth birthday, his mother had managed to get two that were covered in chocolate. She said he could have both but he demanded she eat one with him. Ever since then, they had been one of his favorite fruits. He ducked his head to hide the smile that threatened to come and focused on peeling the orange one in front of him instead.

Breakfast was otherwise an interesting affair. Henry kept trying to ask questions related to the developing situation with Kibum but Jinki had quite a knack for shunting the conversation in a different direction with Larad and Ercite helping guide the topic after the fact. Even when he didn't necessarily want to talk about a particular subject...

"So Kibum, what's going on-" Henry started to ask.

"Oh!" Jinki gasped, snapping his fingers like he just remembered something. "Don't we have a test next week? In astrophysics?"

Henry stopped and frowned. "No. I think the professor said we had a quiz but not a test next week."

"Ah. Right," Jinki mused, tapping his bottom lip thoughtfully. "I think you said you had a test next week," he amended, turning his attention to Kibum.

"Huh?" he blinked, caught off guard.

"Right. You did mention you were trying to figure out how to help him study for the Terran biology test coming up," Ercite chimed in, pointing at Kibum herself.

A dark cloud settled over Kibum at the reminder and he huffed.

"He keeps avoiding studying with me," Jinki lamented.

"What? Why?" Henry asked, waving his hand in front of Kibum's face to draw his attention.

"I hear it's his worst subject," Larad commented, leaning close to keep his voice low as he explained it to Henry.

Kibum narrowed his eyes and glared at Jinki who merely shrugged. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Maybe," he grumbled, crossing his arms and looking away. But that also meant looking at part of the room at large and there were still plenty of curious gazes turned in their direction. He flinched back slightly and then shifted his attention to the mostly empty tray in front of him.

Henry knocked on the table to make him look up and gestured at the Dawbn. "If you don't want Jinki helping you, Ercite's pretty knowledgeable in that subject."

Ercite raised their hand and nodded. "Lots of Terran friends in the family. And Varium," they added with a grinning glance at Larad who preened in quiet satisfaction.

Kibum waved one hand dismissively and responded, "I'll be fine." He jerked in surprise when something lightly tapped the side of his head. Looking over, he saw Jinki's hand hovering in the air, fingers partially curled as if he'd flicked him. Kibum didn't even know how to school his features until he really noticed Jinki's playfully amused face.

"I've been dying to see how you would react to that," he admitted, pulling his hand back as his smile turned sheepish and apologetic.

Still mulling it over, Kibum furrowed his brows and asked, "Did you just flick me in the head?"

"Yes," Jinki responded with a nod and zero hesitation.

"Huh," he chirped back, reaching over and returning the favor, albeit harder – and not exactly intentionally so.

"Ow!" Jinki winced, holding the corner of his forehead with one eye closed, indicating it obviously stung.

“Oops!” Kibum flinched, drawing his hands back with an aggrieved grimace. He’d ‘played’ as such with his guardian’s kids sometimes but developing Varium had different response patterns and that was quite obvious now.

“You okay, Jinki?” Henry asked, leaning over to make sure he was.

Jinki nodded quickly, blinking tears out of the one eye. “Ayah, he’s got a good flick. Remind me not to get into a competition with him in the future,” he forced a laugh, still keeping the one eye mostly closed as he nodded at Kibum.

“Sorry,” he whispered, almost ready to reach out and smooth down the spot he’d hit.

That inclination vanished when Henry gasped, “Did you just apologize?”

Kibum pursed his lips and looked at the other Terran with a glare again. It didn’t last. Ercite made a quiet motion at Larad towards Henry. The Varium reached over and flicked the Terran in the forehead. Henry yelped and grabbed his forehead almost theatrically with an affronted look at Larad. And Kibum laughed. He couldn’t help it. None of their antics made all that much sense to him but they, at the very least, seemed genuine. Or at least they seemed to genuinely care about each other. And even when they were hurt, it appeared to be in good fun. All of which made him laugh, his mouth hiding behind his hand and his face turned down as he tried to cover it.

“You have a nice laugh,” Jinki complimented, his slightly watery eyes dancing as the corners of his mouth turned up.

Surprised, Kibum looked over, his fist still in front of his mouth. “Hmm?” he hummed, certain he’d heard right but not really believing it.

“Ooohhh!” Henry hummed with a suggestive grin, making both Jinki and Kibum look in his direction. “Oof!” he coughed again as Larad elbowed him in the ribs like before. “Larad!” he complained, turning to hit the Varium’s shoulder and arm playfully with both fists. “Why are you being so mean to me today?!” he complained, though his voice was quiet.

Inexplicably, Kibum felt his cheeks warming more than usual and when he glanced over at Jinki to see how the other man was reacting, the shy smile that always reached his eyes making the heat grow stronger. Kibum swallowed and then coughed once, forcing a look at his watch. It wasn’t quite time for class but it was getting close enough. “Oh! Look at the time!” he exclaimed, brushing at the front of his uniform reflexively as he stood up.

“Leaving already?” Ercite asked, a sly quirk to their crystalline mouth while they looked up at him.

“Gotta go to class,” he explained. Nodding his head once, he added, “Thank you for breakfast.” And before anyone could say anything else, he turned to leave, heading for the wall so he could just follow that instead of walking through the middle of the room.

“Wait up, Kibum!” Jinki called, scrambling to follow after him.

Kibum continued to walk away without looking back but then he heard a quiet uneven sound and Jinki's gasp. Something made him look back and he inhaled quickly when he saw the second year awkwardly stumbling towards him, a look of concerned panic on his face.

He could have moved out of the way and let Jinki just fumble by. He had done so to others in the past in their drunken or otherwise uncoordinated attempts or accidents. But... he braced himself and reached out, his right hand catching the flailing left hand while his other hooked under Jinki's right arm. Momentum carried the second year forward, his face bumping into Kibum's chest while the other flailing hand grabbed onto his shoulder and upper arm.

Awkwardly, Jinki looked up and apologized, "Sorry," as he got his feet under him and stood up. "Thanks," he offered, a breath of fresh air that was quickly whisked away.

Jinki's balance was relatively quick to return but his hands were slow to leave and Kibum felt them, hot and heavy against him, just like the weight of others' gazes turned towards them. As Kim Kibum, he didn't like this spotlight. It burned too bright and made him feel small and vulnerable. With far too many eyes on him, he gasped and pulled back, breaking their contact as fast as possible. He didn't say anything when he looked down and essentially fled, hurrying off towards his class as quickly as he could, his stomach in knots and pulse racing.

"Wait up, Kibum," Jinki called, jogging after him all too soon.

Kibum headed for a quiet alcove as opposed to his class directly. When they reached a spot of relative privacy, he whirled on Jinki and hissed, "Why did you do that?"

Taken aback, Jinki drew up short and flinched. "Do what?" he asked in bafflement.

"Fall like that," Kibum responded, his gaze wary and arms crossed.

Honest confusion flashed across Jinki's face again. "Because I tripped," he explained uncertainly, a hesitant frown working its way across his features.

"But why?" he asked again, undeterred.

Jinki shrugged and laughed once, a slightly forced sound, though that could have been because of the response Kibum was giving him. "You might have noticed I do that sometimes. Wouldn't be the first time I've fallen in the canteen," he added with an embarrassed laugh as he smiled and rubbed at the back of his neck. "At least I wasn't carrying food this time," he added, shrugging helplessly.

Kibum looked him over and tilted his head in confusion. "You mean it was an accident?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, yeah," the other man answered with a quick nod. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you did I?" he asked, face shifting suddenly to concern as he drew closer like he was going to look Kibum over to be certain.

"I'm fine!" Kibum gasped, taking a step back and sticking his hands out in front of him in reactive warding.

"Oh! Sorry!" Jinki reacted in turn, stopping short and pulling his hands close, clasping them together in front of him. "Thanks for helping me, by the way. You'd think with all the grav jumping and

low grav gymnastics I help with, I'd be more coordinated off the court," he admitted in embarrassment, one hand coming free to rub at the back of his head again while his eyes practically disappeared in the resultant smile.

"Ah," was all Kibum could muster, nodding along before he looked over Jinki's shoulder at the students passing by. "Okay. Well. I'm glad you're okay," he mumbled quickly, waving once as he started to walk around the other man. "I'm gonna go to class now."

"Yeah! You should," Jinki laughed and nodded, stepping out of the way and gesturing for him to go first. "Study hard, Kibum! You can do it!" he cheered, one fist rising up in support. The first year laughed once and gave one parting wave in response. "I'll be here after class!" Jinki added, making Kibum duck his head and hide his face with one hand.

The man obviously didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. And with comments like those, people were sure to start thinking they were more than a mentor and mentee. Wouldn't they? Although that could also have something to do with those video clips from before too... Anyway! He had other things to worry about right now! Like class and work later.

At least class was easy. There wasn't much time for gossiping and as soon as the bell rang, it was easy enough to flee to where Jinki was outside the classroom anyway. Though while some people were tactful enough not to try and bother him while he was with the second year, other students were willfully oblivious.

"Kibum!"

"Oh no," he groaned, catching Jinki's attention as they both looked to follow the voice.

Psitassi, in all her multicolored glory, was rushing through the hall towards them. The Moladhi was taller than both of them, as was typical for her species, and she grabbed Kibum's shoulders in both hands, shaking him in mild affront. "Why didn't you tell me you were-"

Kibum immediately put a hand up to clap it over her beaked mouth, muffling the sound of 'Almighty Key' in the process. "Psitassi," he exhaled, giving her an annoyed look. He was surprised to notice Jinki's hand on one of Psitassi's wrists in his periphery though.

"Sorry," she giggled, lowering her voice and removing her hands to look at the second year beside him. "Hey Jinki," she nodded before turning her attention back to the other Terran. "But seriously. When Crawven, of all Moladhi," she gasped, practically enthralled, "asked me to find out where you kept going after school, I was very confused at first." It was true. Her confusion seemed genuine.

"Excuse me?" Kibum commented, turning a head-tilted look on her.

"Yeah," she confirmed, tapping her bottom beak with a taloned fingertip. "I mean, he told me," and then she raised both hands to her face in a shy, Terran equivalent of blushing fashion, "that I was the only one he knew that could help him with this."

Kibum shivered as her vocal cords went through a full range of pleased adoration, more accurately conveying precisely what she was feeling in that moment. He had to pinch himself to shed

the lingering effects and he cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him with a surprised chirp. "And did you stop to wonder at all *why* he wanted to know this?" he asked, tone dry and annoyed.

"Not particularly," she admitted without guile, her dilated pupils constricting slightly when she paused. "I mean, it was Crawven that asked." Kibum continued to look at her with a deadpan expression, a slight nod agreeing with her as he waited for the dots to connect. "Oh..." she trailed off after an extended pause. "Crawven. Who is friends with Boro and Kieran. The same Boro you got into a fight with not that long ago," she continued, her hands and fingers talking in front of her as she made the desired connections. "*That* Crawven."

"Yeah," Kibum agreed with a tight nod of his head.

"But you're-" she paused and lowered her voice before leaning closer to whisper, "Almighty Key. That's amazing!" she gushed, super excited by this revelation.

Kibum's eye roll was so hard it almost pained him as he sighed. "Psitassi-"

"It *is* amazing, Psitassi," Jinki interjected, literally stepping in between them as he lightly grabbed the Moladhi's arm and pushed her to turn with him to start walking down the hallway.

"Hmm..." Kibum hummed softly to himself as he trailed them at a distance, listening in.

"But don't you think that if this was something Kibum wanted the school to know, he would have told them himself?" the second year prompted, looking up at the taller first-year student.

"Probably," she agreed with a hesitant nod. "But I still don't understand why this isn't a good thing. I mean," she gestured, one hand moving to point in Kibum's direction as her face expressed obvious awe.

"And it could be," Jinki consoled, agreeing with her though he held up a hand to stall any response. "But think of it this way. If someone suddenly found out that you had a crush on Crawven and went and announced it to the student body, how do you think that would make you feel?"

It was difficult for Kibum to keep himself from laughing at the analogy since her crush on Crawven was almost universally known on campus. Especially since her answer was, "You mean it was supposed to be a secret?"

Jinki had far more tact. "Exactly," he agreed, shaking one finger at her in agreement.

"Oh..." she cooed in disappointed understanding before turning back to look at Kibum. She didn't realize he was so close though and flinched. "Kibum. I'm sorry," she apologized earnestly, clasping her hands in front of her. "I wouldn't want someone telling my secret either."

He was a hair's breadth from laughing outright when he saw Jinki's look warning him not to. Kibum opened his mouth and coughed instead, swallowing hard before he brushed at his uniform with one hand and shrugged. Without a word, he waved a hand at her almost like he was giving her a pass. It was just safer than trying to say anything with the way Jinki was watching him.

Psitassi blinked several times, the feathers on her head fluffing up slightly after they'd flattened hard against her skull. She looked around to make sure no one else was nearby and inched

closer to Kibum. "I know it's supposed to be a secret, but would it be okay if I came by to watch you perform?"

This time, Kibum's tongue answered before he could think about it. "It's not like I could stop you." His hand gave a fluid dismissive wave but he froze when Jinki frowned at him, though it softened at the Moladhi's response.

"Really?!" she crooned excitedly, her feathers fluffing up completely. Kibum knew that usually only happened when a Moladhi was genuinely happy. "I'll let the group know! They'll be so happy to come too!" she announced, talking fast before running off with all the ecstatic energy of a kid escaping from a candy store.

"Eh..." Kibum hummed, reaching after her half-heartedly before he gave up and then looked at Jinki with a crooked mouth. He gestured in the space that Psitassi had been in previously. "That one is a model example of the old Earth phrase: bird-brain."

"Be nice," Jinki chided with a shake of his head and a disappointed furrow between his brows. His crossed arms didn't help any either.

"Like you?" Kibum teased, his hand shifting to point at Jinki.

"Would it kill you to try?" he shot back, flashing a quick grin before waving his hand, warding off an answer. Kibum glared but the second year continued, "Besides. I thought you two were friends."

Kibum looked to the side and scratched at the back of his neck with a single finger before he tried to answer. "Mmm... more like acquaintances."

Jinki looked after where the Moladhi had been, skeptical. "Didn't look like it to me. She adores you," he pointed out, giving Kibum a dose of side-eye in return.

"That's not my fault," he defended himself, crossing his arms over his chest and looking away with a slight sniff. Such a defense didn't change Jinki's expression though and it made Kibum feel oddly guilty. He scoffed and waved a hand as he threw a response out, "Everyone knows she's the best gossip in the first years."

"Ah. So you use her then," Jinki hummed, a disappointed sigh accompanying it.

There it was again. Another strange twinge of guilt. "No," he denied, turning a frustrated expression on Jinki. "I listen to her when she tells the group things." He stopped there but it didn't seem to be enough of an explanation for Jinki and the silence became uncomfortable to Kibum. "Okay. So maybe I ask some prying questions from time to time too and she sometimes finds out what I want to know," he added, hands fluttering in front of him like trapped birds. Silence again followed as there was no additional reaction from the other man. "Ugh! And maybe I give her pieces of gossip to spread when there's a call for it," he added in growing frustration. And still, no response from Jinki. Just that same implacable look. "What?" he finally scowled, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. It got worse when Jinki chuckled at his reaction.

"I'm sorry," he apologized immediately, schooling his features as quickly as a Varium. "I was honestly curious how much you'd tell me before you had enough."

Kibum's mouth opened of its own accord and he scowled. "You-" he started to say, pointing a finger at the older student before huffing and turning around, stalking away.

Jinki jogged to catch up behind him with a quiet, "Wait!" Fingers caught his wrist lightly and he came to an immediate stop, looking down at the capturing hand and then up. "Sorry," the second year apologized again, letting go immediately. "I just felt a little bad for her, that's all."

"And what about me? I'm the one that's caught in the middle of this because of her," he reminded the older student, gesturing off the way she'd gone again. Jinki gave him a look that roughly equated to 'Really?' and Kibum sighed again. "Okay. Fine! I'll bite. Why do you feel bad for her? And not me," he added in a petty small voice that barely made it past his lips.

Jinki literally laughed under his breath and smiled but didn't comment on the last part. "According to Ercite, she's from old money. Youngest in her family. Coddled and sheltered with no aspirations beyond finding a partner. The closest thing you'll find to innocent among the Moladhi. Why do you think she comes across so much gossip?" he asked, brows rising intentionally.

Kibum wrinkled his nose and scratched at his head without saying anything. He'd known she had money and he knew that Moladhi were also creatures that were drawn to beautiful things, but they additionally thrived on attention. It meant they were beautiful in some way too – Passeri had educated him extensively on that. Hence her adoration of Almighty Key. And honestly, among the Moladhi in their school, Crawven was a fine specimen, albeit an ass if you asked him. "So why's she here then?" he grumbled, looking away.

It was interesting to watch the thoughts go across Jinki's face then. "I don't personally know but Larad and Ercite think it's probably just to keep her out of the way while her family works on setting her up with someone on this planet to further their connections. You know they're thinking about establishing an eighth dome in the near future."

For a moment, Kibum paused and really looked at Jinki again. "You're surprisingly in the know."

That got a chuckle out of Jinki and he gestured at himself with both hands. "Mentor and general facilitator to everyone that asks," he explained with an accepting shrug.

"Goody-goody," he grumbled, sighing as he continued to look at the other Terran.

"If you say so," he accepted without offense. "Does that make you a charity case then?" he teased, leaning closer just a touch.

Kibum pursed his lips and looked through narrowed eyes. "I still think you must be covering your ass in some way."

But Jinki straightened with a shake of his head and a wagging finger. "No. I'm covering yours. Speaking of which," he intoned, focusing his attention once more. "Terran biology."

"Ack! Why are you doing this to me?!" he whined, looking up pitifully and closing his eyes.

"Come on then," Jinki laughed, lightly brushing his fingertips against Kibum's back as if to guide him down the hall. "If we hurry," he began when Kibum started walking along, looking at him as they went, "we can get a start before your class."

"I don't like you," he grumbled with a heavy exhale. Jinki chuckled and for some reason, it made Kibum want to smile in response. He didn't but galaxies did he want to.

Chapter Nine

"Despite the fact that I'm his younger sister, Jinki really doesn't do me any favors when we're on the field. It's probably a good thing, but you'd think he'd have some sympathy for little old me when he weighs twice as much as I do. Okay. Not that much, but seriously. Maybe I should ask his new friend to come more often though. He wasn't quite as on his game as usual."

-Lee Doyun (Jinki's middle younger sister)

Kibum had to lay low from work for a couple days while Garum took a couple extra precautions, so that meant he wouldn't work until the next week. A shame really. He could use the money... but as it stood, he had his hands full at school.

True to form, Psitassi seemed to have been one of the makers of the Kibum fan club and though she did not run around with gaudy holosigns randomly cheering him on, there were a handful of other people who did. He wasn't too surprised with the Moladhi who joined the ranks, or the odd Dawbn, but he didn't expect a couple Varium or the actual number of female *and* male Terrans that started to approach him if he was by himself or with Jinki. The only plus side to them was they kept the less than enthused students – like Crawven and his ilk – completely at bay.

"Why are you so bad at being a buffer?!" he demanded in annoyed frustration after being... not really accosted but certainly bothered by a trio of 'fans.'

"I'm literally one of the least intimidating people in the school," Jinki laughed with a shrug, waving back when the latest trio turned to wave farewell, giddy with their success.

The effect was similar when he was anywhere near Ercite as well. "No one minds a Dawbn," they commented nonchalantly, completely unbothered by the lack of attention they themselves generated.

Surprisingly, Henry wasn't half bad as a deterrent, but that was largely because Kibum's fan club kept trying to make him out to be Kibum / Almighty Key's rival. What kind of rival, they were careful not to say, but there was no mistaking the sly smiles and odd giggles that followed the suggestion.

"Hey!" he grumbled in complaint. "I was here first. If anything, he's *my* rival!" he tried to defend himself, all bravado and a thumb jabbing into his chest. It was not the defense he thought it was.

"Really?!" Excited squeals and giggles all around made him deflate.

In frustration, he looked around for something to wield as a weapon, but there were precious few loose items anywhere on campus and he scowled before shaking his fist at them. "You want a rival? I'll give you a rival!" he frowned, already chasing after the small group.

Kibum didn't know whether to laugh or roll his eyes at the display. Completely ineffective at convincing the audience of what he wasn't but dramatic enough to chase them off in delight and feigned fear. "I'll take it," he admitted with a satisfied shrug.

Not surprisingly, Larad was the best at being a deterrent. Varium weren't known for being hostile but they were large and, as Kibum had been reminded in his bout with Boro, they could do a fair bit of damage even when they were being careful. That had been true on numerous occasions with his pseudo-siblings too... With a single unreadable look, the eager duo deflated and slowly backed away, leaving Kibum alone.

"I think you might be my new best friend," he laughed, flashing Larad a crooked smile.

"Oh?" the taller man hummed, daring to actually pat Kibum on the head like a doting older brother.

"Or not," Kibum grumbled, brushing the hand away as the crooked smile became a slight grimace. Larad simply shrugged and hummed under his breath before they resumed their walk.

As nice as it was to have... escorts was probably a good term, the school was simply becoming too much to keep using as a home away from home. He just didn't know where he could go to kill time off campus that was cheap and otherwise free from people who would be distractions.

"Why don't you just go back to your dorm room?" Jinki asked with a nod towards the dorms after he broached his frustration with the second year.

Kibum waved his hand in front of him and shook his head. "No thank you," he responded tersely. Jinki didn't pry but he had a thoughtful look about him now whenever he asked around the whole dorm room situation. Kibum wouldn't be surprised if he was starting to suspect something either. Especially with the way he always avoided saying anything about his mother or guardian. Truth be told, he was the only person that knew Kibum had a guardian, short of the school anyway.

"Well, it's not a full-proof plan for all your free time but you're welcome to come with me to my coaching sessions if you're just looking to kill time around your classes," he offered en route to another of Kibum's lessons, one hand gesturing fluidly with the statement.

Kibum took a breath and scratched at his face, both hands free. All their materials were digital anyway and easily accessible from their personal data channel. One could have a holo-reader for more in-depth reading, like in the library, but it was easy enough to work around otherwise. "You said you coach at the high school and middle school your siblings go to?" he queried hesitantly.

"Yep," was the quick response and a bright grin. "Hajoon's twice a week in the afternoons, Doyun's once a week, and if you really want to be busy, you can join me at the community center in the mornings to work with Siwoo," he added with a playful wink. "Not that I think I'd ever get you to join that time slot willingly," he chuckled with a shake of his head.

"Probably not," Kibum snorted in agreement, but really only because it was nowhere near his actual apartment. Knowing his luck, it was probably also a morning after he worked at The Stars Align too.

"Either way, the offer stands," Jinki encouraged, pausing at the entryway to Kibum's next class. He looked inside and his mouth twisted to the side like he wanted to say something, but the side-eyed glance said he didn't know how it would go over.

"Just say it," Kibum laughed once, already pretty sure he knew what it was about.

Jinki wrinkled his nose but used his hands to shrug and took a breath. "You're doing alright with pulling your other grades up but... we really do need to address--"

"Terran biology. I know," he sighed with a slow roll of his eyes. He almost didn't realize he crossed his arms at the same time and he noticed Jinki glance down at them. Self-consciously, he forced himself to relax and brushed at one thin eyebrow instead. "I've got some time this weekend," he tried to say as nonchalantly as possible, but it fell much flatter than he intended it to.

"Don't sound so excited," the second year chuckled, hiding his mouth behind his hand to try and temper the appearance of his mirth.

"Shut up," he grumbled back, shuffling awkwardly in place.

Jinki's laughter faded but his smile did not. "We could meet in the library--"

"Not a chance," he interrupted quickly, glancing around to see if any of his fans, or others, were in the vicinity. Yep. There was one down the hall. Watching like a creeper. From afar.

Jinki followed his line of sight and nodded in mute understanding. "I could go to you," he offered instead, the implication being Kibum's dorm room.

"Nah ah," he denied just as quickly. There was no way in the solar system he was going to show... well anybody his room if he could help it.

"Hmm," the second year hummed thoughtfully, brow furrowed as he tapped at his chin. "Well... if you don't mind the noise of various siblings," he began to explain, giving Kibum a hesitant look. "You could come by my house to study," he finished when no interruption or denial appeared.

"You said you have four younger siblings, right?" he asked with a wrinkled nose and slightly pursed lips.

"Yep," was the easy answer.

"And you help all of them before and after school?" he added, hand waving in front of him to denote the time difference.

"With training and homework and breakfast and supper and..." he trailed off, face scrunching as he tried to think of anything else that should have been there.

Kibum frowned and jerked his head back to look at Jinki closer. "When do you ever have time for yourself?" he asked, surprised by the question that slipped out. It took Jinki aback too and his expression blanked for a second. "I mean, you mentor me, tutor others, go to school events as much as physically possible. What is wrong with you?" he asked as a playful aside before turning serious again. "You hang out with your friends and stuff but what do *you* like to do?"

Infuriatingly, Jinki simply shrugged and tossed out, "I like to help people."

"Ugh. That's such a lame answer," he scowled, blinking around a slow eye roll. "I will get a better one later," he demanded, pointing at finger at Jinki's nose. "But it's almost time for class."

"Right," Jinki coughed once, moving back a step to make sure he was out of the way.

Kibum reached out to catch Jinki's wrist when he saw another student moving behind him. "Watch out," he called, pulling the other man closer and bracing his shoulder to hold him steady as the Varium walked by with a glance at them.

"What?" they asked in a neutral tone.

"Watch it," Kibum grumbled, his brows furrowed and eyes slightly narrowed. The Varium simply laughed under their breath and raised one brow before shrugging and continuing on.

"Thanks," Jinki murmured quietly, his voice sounding uncharacteristically close.

Kibum's gut tightened when he realized just *how* close he was. The space between them was barely a hand's breadth, Kibum was still holding Jinki's wrist, his other hand was gripping the nearest shoulder and... Jinki's fingers were lightly resting against his side. "No problem," he murmured, letting go and stepping back quickly while he looked away, briefly enchanted by the light dancing in the other man's beautiful brown eyes.

A quiet murmuring of delighted giggles at the end of the hall made them both look over. Kibum's fan club of four now were grinning so hard it looked as if their faces might split at any moment. Jinki offered them a single wave with an awkward smile and they squealed before running off in contentment. "Never a dull moment," he laughed, looking back at Kibum.

"No," Kibum agreed, leaving the answer intentionally vague as he looked the other man over.

"Good luck with class," Jinki encouraged, pointing towards the doors.

"Yeah. Sure," he responded with a glance at the door in question. Terran biology. Ugh... Stifling a sigh, he looked back to see that the second year was already walking off and he started in surprise. That was different. "Jinki!" he called, feeling his mood lift slightly when the other man turned around without pause, his honest face an open question. Kibum gestured at the door, then tapped just above his communicator, and gestured at Jinki in mute inquiry.

"No problem," he smiled back, his eyes nearly disappearing in his face. It didn't help his brown bangs very nearly covered them currently. He needed a trim.

Nevertheless, it made Kibum smile to get such a response. Satisfied with the answer, he finally convinced himself to turn around and go to his literally least favorite class.

Jinki really didn't think much of his invite for Kibum to join him in his coaching sessions after school hours. He sent him the info of course, because he said he would, but beyond the possibility of finally getting a chance to figure out what the issue was with Terran biology this weekend, he figured that would be the end of things.

Until then though... on Thursday afternoons, he helped Doyun with her middle school team. "Jinki!" she called as soon as he arrived, waving her arm energetically as she always did. She had yet to grow out of her youthful exuberance of little sister energy. Hajoon would still greet him, but not like this anymore.

"That's Coach Lee," a couple of her friends reminded her to which she promptly stuck her tongue at them. They were just as fast to return the gesture.

He waved at them with a smile. Honestly, he didn't mind if they called him Jinki but their head coach was a stickler for rules and that was one everyone except Doyun abided by. And that only because they were siblings. Speaking of said coach... "Coach Choi," he greeted with a quick bow as the tall, muscular man with thick eyebrows and short black hair approached.

"Jinki," he greeted, a smile resting easy above his chiseled jaw and strong chin. "Can you run them through the paces?"

"Of course!" he answered energetically. "I'll just change and be right back."

Coach Choi waved him off and Jinki hurried to get into more grav jump appropriate gear. A high impact body suit and gravity manipulation pads with a thin helmet for good measure. It wasn't usually an intentionally impact sport but it often ended up that way sometimes. Jogging out in the plain gray attire, he saw the mixed middle schoolers getting stretched out and warmed up but then noticed Doyun waving to get his attention before she pointed near the entrance with a confused look on her face. Following her gesture, he looked and frowned curiously when he noticed a figure that looked suspiciously familiar. "Kibum?" he murmured to himself, jogging over until he was close enough to confirm. His eyes widened when he realized it really was him.

"Nice suit," was the first comment out of his mouth. Yep. Definitely him and not some weird hallucination.

Jinki moved his arms in front of him in a somewhat self-conscious manner. The suit was made of a thick material but form fitting so players couldn't grab onto it in a match. As such, it did little to hide his physique and it made him awkward in front of Kibum. So much so that he blurted, "What are you doing here?"

Those thin eyebrows rose in amusement and a playful smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You invited me, didn't you?"

Dumbly, he blinked at the answer. "Yeah," Jinki eventually managed to force out. "I just didn't actually expect you to come," he admitted with a laugh.

"Ouch. I'm hurt," Kibum teased, tilting his head to the side to look around Jinki. "Your sister?" he prompted with a nod.

On cue, Jinki turned to see Doyun running up herself. "Uh huh."

"Who's this, Jinki?" she asked, pulling up short directly beside him as she looked Kibum over, a wary expression on her face, though it was partially hidden by the helmet, a hard casing that covered the head entirely with a transparent face shield.

Kibum looked at Jinki expectantly while he tried to figure out how to answer. If he said his mentee, she'd probably take it about as well as one of Kibum's fans... "A friend from school," he answered with a gesture at the first year. "Kibum. He didn't have any plans after school so I suggested he come and see how good you guys are," he complimented, leaning down slightly to be closer to her level.

"Yeah?" she asked with a bright grin, one of her teeth chipped from an awkward encounter earlier that week. "Do you grav jump too?" she wondered, arm flailing back towards the group.

"Can't say that I do," Kibum shrugged, his eyes rising to look over them again.

"Jinki! Doyun! You coming?" Coach Choi asked, his voice louder than it needed to be.

"Oops. Yes, sir!" Jinki answered quickly, reaching out to give Doyun a nudge first. He turned to point at Kibum but couldn't find the right words so he simply shook his finger at him instead and then ran off to join the team.

"Good luck, Jinki!" Kibum called after him, his voice dancing with mirth.

It took most of Jinki's control not to look back and say anything. He had practice to attend to anyway and if he got distracted, it would probably not end well for him. With practiced ease, he corralled the players and listened while Coach Choi gave them the rundown. Just a training match today after their usual drills. Half and half with a relatively even mixture of males and females on both sides.

With nervous excitement, they adjusted their grav gear and waited for the coach to turn on the gravity manipulation field. Two shimmering barriers popped up around them when he did, one inside the other, heralding the rise of the gently humming sphere from the floor. It floated to the center of the interior barrier and fell completely still as it stabilized. Another switch clicked and there was a pulse like a sound wave washing over them. The grav gear vibrated faintly, synching to the sphere's signal.

"Players ready?!" Jinki called as the familiar thrill of adrenaline pumped through him, his feet rising hesitantly off the floor.

"Sir!" they shouted in unison, the vibrations bouncing around the resonating chamber.

"Let's go!" the second year cheered, clicking the high grav command on his gear. "High grav!" he called, feeling the automatic pull of the sphere towards its center of gravity.

"High grav!" the group echoed in unison, following his speeding trajectory.

Like the hare being chased by the hounds, Jinki stayed in the lead, shouting commands as he reached various points around the interior field. Low grav let him slingshot past the center of the field once he was beyond it, swinging close to the edges of the interior field but never crossing it in his trajectories. Boost left or right disrupted the gravity command to allow a short burst of speed in either lateral direction while boost up and down provided the same effect in a three-dimensional field. Zero grav created a short hovering or gliding window while no grav allowed for an immediate cessation of all artificial gravitation effects, sending the players plummeting from natural gravity.

Glancing back, he saw that most of the players had managed to keep up relatively well. A couple were lagging behind, having gotten the controls on the grav belt mixed up. Doyun was not among them, determined sibling that she was. Now that they were good and warm, it was time for obstacle drills. "Coach Choi!" he called, glancing down at the older man who was wearing a satisfied smile on his face.

"Good job, Jinki! Keep it up!" he congratulated, activating the asteroid looking platforms that rose up from the ground where the gravity generator had come from.

"Static practice!" he announced, waving a hand forward to send the kids past him. His next task was to 'inspire' them to use the obstacles and their grav gear to get around the field without allowing him to push them into the secondary field – the out of bounds zone that stalled players for ten precious seconds in a scoring game.

Players scurried to and fro while he gave them a head start. After counting to ten, he joined the fray, careful to not target Doyun unfairly. That aside, he had a longer reach than they did so it made for great practice for when they would have to compete against year mates. Even so, it was still a workout using the obstacles as platforms to assist his attacks. It only got worse when they shifted to dynamic practice, and harder still in the last stage of drills: chaos field. It was his favorite but also the most challenging because the obstacles constantly moved, often times knocking into players that weren't observant enough, and the gravity field was always shifting, reversing gravity effects just as often as warping them altogether.

By the time Coach Choi finally called it, he was thoroughly exhausted and more than ready to take a break. "Recovery!" the coach shouted, ending the chaos field and allowing for a gentle descent of the players.

"Coach!" one of the female players panted, pointing a limp hand in Jinki's direction. "Coach Lee is trying to kill us!" That made Jinki laugh. He would have countered her but he didn't really have the breath for it.

His sister had his back though. "That's what you get for slacking off in practice, Magda," she huffed, waving at the other girl dismissively.

"That's rich coming from his sister," she shot back, tapping the face shield so it retracted and allowed her voice to come out louder.

She flinched when a couple of the other players laughed at the accusation. "Clearly you didn't see him launch her into the out of bounds zone a couple times," one of the male Terrans snorted.

"Hey!" Doyun yelped, rounding on the other player. "It was only twice!"

"More than me!" they taunted merrily.

Jinki finally caught enough breath to shout, "Hydrate!"

"Sir!" came the automatic response, general chatter falling away though quiet conversations continued without fail.

“Good job,” Coach Choi commented as he moved close to clap Jinki on the shoulder. “You can take a break for now. I’ll work with them on team tactics,” he added with a nod towards the open space of the hall. “Friends of yours?”

Jinki blinked in surprise and turned to see who he was talking about. “Uh... not exactly,” he answered when he realized they were a couple of Kibum’s fans, if he wasn’t mistaken. Kibum himself had moved closer to the field, intentionally settling away from the entrance and the seats nearby, apparently unphased by being in the literal open. His followers had enough sense to be nervous.

“As long as they don’t disrupt practice or start taking pictures, they can stay,” the coach explained with a warning look in their general direction. There were only three of them, but Jinki was pretty sure one was just shy of fainting.

“Yes, sir,” he agreed, tapping his face shield out of the way as he wandered over to his bag to retrieve his own hydration bottle. Only then did he shuffle in Kibum’s direction and half-sit half-fall into place next to him.

“Huh,” Kibum grunted, eyeing him with an unreadable expression while Jinki took the opportunity to simply rest.

“What?” he asked without looking at the first year.

“You’re so awkward on solid ground, I never would have pegged you for a decent grav jump player,” Kibum teased, the sound of a smile obvious in his voice.

“Yeah well, looks can be deceiving,” Jinki agreed with a slight turn of his head, just enough to give the other man a side-eyed look. He took a quick sip while Kibum snorted and then asked, “Your fans behaving?”

Kibum shrugged, the motion obvious in his periphery. “More or less. They came to haunt me but got distracted by you. I think they might be your fans soon,” he winked, reaching out to poke Jinki in the side with a single finger.

“Hey!” he yelped, annoyed and embarrassed by how much it tickled and made him want to squirm. With a groan, he sat up and took another deep breath. “Manage to get any studying done or did you spend all your time staring too?” he asked, leaning over to look at the ‘sleeping’ holoscreen that had some sort of homework on it.

His mentee didn’t deign to answer. Instead, he pushed Jinki back with one hand and waved the screen away instead. “I don’t stare. I observe,” he corrected, daring the other man to correct him.

“Sure,” he intoned with a slow nod of his head.

“Shut it,” Kibum grumbled, caught between being annoyed and laughing again. Jinki didn’t respond, focusing on taking another drink of water. Eventually, Kibum spoke again, “Your sister’s not half bad either.”

“She’s nowhere near Hajoon’s level yet but she loves it the same,” he agreed with a nod. “If you come tomorrow, you can watch her run circles around me,” he winked with a laugh at himself.

“She’s that good?” the first year asked with raised brows, clearly surprised.

Jinki shrugged and hedged, "Maybe not *all* the time but she has her days." He grimaced with wide eyes upon recalling a few of her very punishing ambushes.

"Tempting," Kibum hummed, a sly smile dancing at the corners of his mouth. "Hmm..." he sighed, eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he nibbled on his bottom lip. "If I come to Hajoon's practice too, will you come to one of my performances?"

"To The Stars Align?" Jinki blurted with a start, not expecting that. Kibum smiled and nodded in response. He frowned slightly, immediately running the numbers through his head. "I don't know," he hesitated, watching the smile start to slip from Kibum's face. "You always have such late shows," he explained quickly, waving one hand in front of him to show he meant no offense.

Kibum scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Not during the week, dummy. Galaxies know you're stupid busy then. For a weekend performance," he clarified, expression shifting to genuine interest.

Jinki managed to keep himself from blurting out an automatic yes. "If you agree to come to one of Siwoo's practices too..." he trailed off suggestively.

Kibum hissed between his teeth with a grimace. "Three practices for one of my performances? That's just mean," he commented, leveling a skeptical look at Jinki.

"Maybe," he shrugged, glancing at Doyun. "But if you go to Doyun's practice *and* Hajoon's and don't even try to make it to Siwoo's, she will forever hold it against both of us."

One of those thin eyebrows rose again and Kibum crossed his arms in wary contemplation. It was easy to see he rather was entertained by the idea of seeing Jinki trounced by Hajoon but that early morning practice was no small ask. "Fine, but you have to come *this* weekend," he relented, holding one finger in front of Jinki firmly.

"This weekend?" Jinki echoed, one of his brows rising to mimic Kibum.

"Yes. It's your fault I'll likely have a gaggle of new watchers and it should be your job to help keep them under control," he explained with an unabashed wink.

Jinki face palmed with a muffled groan. "Okay," he agreed with a heavy sigh, sliding his hand down his face so that it paused to rest on his cheek. "Please tell me your shift is on Saturday..."

"Give me *some* credit," he snorted with a laugh, reaching up to brush at black bangs with his fingertips. Jinki just looked at Kibum with a skeptical twist of his mouth.

They both jumped when Coach Choi surprised them. "Jinki! You ready to get back up there?"

"Yes, sir!" he responded almost without thinking. Only after he'd waved back at the coach did he turn to look back at Kibum with an apologetic grimace. "Sorry."

Kibum shooed him off with a wave of his hand. "Go have fun trouncing the younglings. It's not like I'm going anywhere," he added with a glance back towards the entrance where a small but growing crowd of 'fans' were lingering.

Chapter Ten

"You know, it's impossible to really watch anybody else during practice time and Jinki is pretty hardcore about taking studying seriously, but even I can see that he's at least interested in Kibum. Oh, he acts like this for all his mentees. The whole big brother thing. But it's not the norm for him to invite someone over. Of course he gave the whole 'unusual circumstances' thing, but come on. I'm young yes. Blind... no."

-Lee Hajoon (Jinki's oldest younger sister)

It wasn't that he thought Jinki was not telling him the whole truth, but it was strangely gratifying to see that Hajoon could indeed 'run' circles around her older brother as promised. She was also harder to fend off with questions Doyun hadn't been inclined to ask at the time, but when Jinki threatened to stop helping her – even as an obvious bluff – she let it go for the time being.

Granted, it didn't hurt that their coach was a tiny fireball of a Terran woman who was quick to keep her team in line. Pale in complexion with ice blue eyes, flaxen tightly braided hair and a sharp nose, Coach Jung had a voice that could rival a bullhorn and a quiet ferocity to match it. A retiree from a previous championship team, she was whipcord muscle and unbending command and Jinki was utterly at her mercy as much as the rest of the team.

Kibum almost felt sorry for him. At least until he saw Coach Jung eyeing him speculatively and he immediately retreated to the entrance to escape her dire gaze. A couple of his fans were there too, but they seemed equally intimidated by the woman and loathe to trespass in her domain. If he'd had any money to spare, he would have offered Jinki supper afterwards. Poor bastard looked completely worn out.

Hajoon hardly fared any better. "You were slacking off today," she complained, one arm slung over her older brother's shoulder as he stoically supported her along.

"Maybe you just got better since last week," he breathed instead, giving her a gentle nudge before looking at Kibum. All he could manage was a sympathetic smile.

"Ugh..." his sister groaned with a bedraggled laugh. She pointed right at Kibum and glared at Jinki in the process. "I know he's the mentee Henry told us about but I'm too fragging tired to ask about him today."

"Thank the galaxies for small miracles," he teased, offering the still quiet Kibum the ghost of a smile. "Oof!" he coughed when Hajoon thumped him in the side with her free fist. "Now you're just being mean," he pouted, giving her a puppy dog look that she immediately folded to with a pitiful sigh.

"I hate it when he does that," she admitted to Kibum, raising one hand to dab at her sweaty hairline with the back of her wrist.

Obligingly, Jinki turned to look at the first year with said expression and Kibum's lips curled into a bright smile. "I would say that I agree but..." he trailed off, shrugging and keeping the rest of the sentence behind his closed lips.

"Special mentee indeed," she scoffed, a crooked smile alighting on her face.

The teasing Jinki shared with his siblings with almost enviable. When Kibum had lived with 'siblings,' the exchanges had been practice barbs more than anything. And rough housing was far less playful. It wasn't that they had a bad relationship exactly, but it was clear from the beginning they'd never be the best of friends either.

They parted ways at the nearest hover hub on the way back though and Kibum promised he'd come by tomorrow. "To study!" he huffed when Hajoon gave him a questionable look. "She's worse than Henry," he added, looking her up and down once with his eyes. Finally recovered from practice, Hajoon took it in stride and posed, framing her chin between her thumb and index finger as she smiled brightly.

"Come on you," Jinki chuckled under his breath, deftly catching her under the arms and bodily pivoting her towards the hover tube.

"Jinki!" she yelped, groaning with her head thrown back at the treatment.

"Give her much more time and she'll start grilling you," he explained to Kibum as he wrangled her into the entryway like any good older brother would.

"See you tomorrow," Kibum waved once, laughing outright when Hajoon had to have the last word.

"Bye, special mentee!" Only her hand jutted between the doors to wave animatedly before Jinki yanked it back so the carrier could close behind them.

Taking a breath, he looked around and was relieved to see that his general 'fans' were nowhere to be found. Apparently they'd had enough for the day. So had he in all honesty. He'd intended to spend more time studying the past couple days. And while he'd had more peace from perpetual interruptions, Jinki's secondary endeavors were all too easy to watch. His uniform and demeanor hid a surprising physique and athleticism that Kibum had not expected and he didn't know what to do with that information.

Sunny greeted him when he got back to the apartment complex, her screen in working order again. Either the replacement part had come in or his patch job had worked better than expected. That put him in a good mood, but the quiet of the apartment dampened it. On the activity screen, he had a blinking notice about this month's energy bill and he sighed. Waving it away, he brushed his fingers against his mother's still frame image and smiled softly.

"Hey mom. I'm back," he murmured, carefully removing his shoes before stepping further inside. He went through his evening routine with single-minded intensity: minimal shower, nibble on one of the stored bits of food from lunch, focus on homework, and then settled on the small fold out bed. He turned the lights off but looked towards where his mother's picture was, grateful for the dark that kept ghostly flashes of memories from surfacing. "You'd like him." He was quiet for a long while, taking one slow breath after another as he let a thought percolate in his head. "Should I bring him so you can see?" he finally whispered, pulling the thin blanket up to his chin with a furrowed brow.

In the approximately nine months he'd been here, he'd never brought anyone over. Not once. The place was plenty clean. What floor space he had was empty of clutter. The walls were bare but otherwise unmarked, all of which made it easier to forget he'd lived here before. The standard tepid

metal covering like those in most cheap housing complexes could almost make him think it was a cookie cutter version of his old home. Almost. There was space for two people in the form of a small table and two chairs that could slide up like the ones in the canteen. It had a small storage space in the corner where a food processor could be accessed – for a fee. The bathroom was cramped but tidy...

“Maybe,” he mused, closing his eyes tightly as he curled up into a ball on the bed. It was weird how Jinki was actually a maybe considering even Passeri and Jackson were hard nos... Go figure.

Morning came all too early and he lazed about for a little before he forced himself to get up and head out. Better that than sitting in the dark or turning the lights on and wasting electricity. Jinki was supposed to let him know when he was available so he opted to go to a run-down park in his area of the city. Not half as nice as the ones near the school, it was a favored location of the older poor, anybody with a pet – usually modified or synth versions of old Earth dogs and cats, and those like him just looking for peace and quiet.

Green grass dominated in the sectioned off space with smooth pathways running around and through it. There were also the occasional benches under the odd real tree, half-grown things with straight brown trunks crowned in green and yellow foliage. The majority of trees were simply holograms, towering behemoths of winding branches and overflowing leaves and vines of greens and golds and reds. Very lifelike ones but fake all the same. Cheaper that way and to greater effect. It was lacking in flowers or any non-Terran plants, but that wasn’t unusual for Terran based planets, especially those that were in the process of being fully terraformed. Sentry drones patrolled the area, keeping an eye on everything to maintain a certain degree of safety and comfort amidst the citizens.

Finding a patch of grass in the early morning sun, Kibum laid out and pulled up his personal link to scroll through the pages at school. Notices about finals coming up, announcements for special events, athletics competitions, volunteer opportunities, some global science conference highlighting a new energy source, etcetera kept showing up. Forums held answers to innumerable questions and if he dove into those, he knew he’d find references to Almighty Key somewhere. Not that he had any real interest in seeing what else the rumor mill had managed to churn out about him.

Psitassi was still dying to see him perform but he hadn’t been to work yet. That was probably why he’d had a larger than usual following lately. They wanted to make sure when he was going to work so they could follow him. Probably. He rolled his eyes at the thought and turned the screen off. He didn’t have to worry about access to information since he paid for it with his school money, but it was boring right now. Resting in the rarely changing weather inside Yonichi, it was all too easy to fall into a light slumber.

The sound of an alert in his ear woke him with a start and he blinked quickly. “I’m up!” he blurted, tapping the communicator to receive the incoming message.

Sorry. Breakfast took longer than expected but I’m ready if you are. Just let me know when you’re heading this way. The message was relatively short for Jinki but Kibum read it in his voice, imagining the smile that likely accompanied it.

He sent a single thumbs up image in response, largely because he knew it annoyed Jinki when he did so. But it was better than no response. He laughed to himself when he recalled the face Jinki had made upon hearing his explanation for the first contact number. It was his father’s before Kibum had

been given his own individual contact number – like all Terran minors under the age of 13. Derived from their genome and codified into manageable numbers, all people born on a planet under the Universe Concordium Agreement (UCA for short) were eligible for a contact number that was usable anywhere in their territories. He perversely hoped his father was still in the territories somewhere and just constantly got bombarded by all the messages and calls that were meant for him. It would serve him right. Especially the angry annoyed ones he had probably generated from not responding.

As it stood, there were precious few people that had Kibum's personal contact number and not the message delivery code assigned by the school, which he largely ignored. He still had to check it for official school messages from time to time though...

"Okay," he sighed, sitting up reluctantly as he activated the location function on the message that would show him where to go. "Eh?!" he exclaimed in horror. It was on the other side of the city. Not a particularly well-off area but well enough to be a place he himself wouldn't go regularly. Granted, it was decently close to the schools Jinki's siblings would be going to but still. "Oh come on," Kibum whined, tapping the ETA number. Just over two hours on foot and a cab would cost him an arm and a leg. He could go by hover hub but that would only cut his time in half – give or take – and cost money he didn't want to spend.

Frustrated, he activated his communicator and typed out a message. *Why are you so far away?! It'll take me forever to get to you.* He huffed after hitting the send button and then frowned as an uncertain sensation teased him. He was missing something wasn't he?

A message came back quickly and he read: *Aren't you at the school? Shouldn't be THAT far.*

"Ack!" he face palmed, berating himself for not recalling that fact. Thinking on his feet, he chewed on his bottom lip and sent back, *Took a walk for some fresh air. Ended up a little further from my room than I thought.* Not a lie at all. Everything was quite true in that statement.

He jumped when a call actually came through. Clicking the connect button, Jinki's voice flowed through quickly, "Morning!"

Kibum raised a brow at the unnecessarily chipper voice and grumbled back, "Morning."

"So. Where are you? I can come pick you up if you're really that far out," he asked, focused enough on the call but clearly distracted by the muffled noises in the background.

"Eh..." he trailed off with a breathy whisper. He couldn't give his actual location. That was way too far from the school and way too close to home. But maybe... "A little further than where I work." That was a lie but it wouldn't be by the time Jinki would arrive.

"Yikes! Some walk," Jinki chuckled, no doubt shaking his head at the answer. "If you send me a location pin, I can give you a lift on my mom's hoverbike. She's sleeping right now so she won't need it at the moment."

"Oh," Kibum mumbled, briefly jealous of such a commodity. It would make things so much easier out here. "Sure," he added after a slight pause, listening hard to the continued noise in the back of the call.

"Yes, you'll meet him soon. Siwoo... Daejung! Give me a sec! Sorry Kibum," he apologized, his voice suddenly getting louder as his attention returned. "I'll be there in about thirty minutes. See you soon!" he smiled before the call ended rather abruptly.

Kibum was half certain his siblings had cut him off but there was nothing to be done. He debated where to drop the location pin and then shrugged as he chose a spot on the closer side of The Stars Align. Now all he had to do was get there in thirty minutes. He made it with about five minutes to spare and had an even greater surprise when it was Hajoon that pulled up on the hoverbike.

"Hey special mentee," she grinned with an infuriatingly teasing tone.

It took Kibum a second to recognize her face when she pulled the helmet off but he knew her voice instantly by the name she gave him. "That's Kibum to you. And where's Jinki?" he asked suspiciously, his arms crossed in front of him.

Hajoon laughed and tossed her straight brown hair over her shoulder with a flick of her hand. "He couldn't escape Daejung so I volunteered," she winked, activating her personal screen to show him a glowing ID card. "Doyun was so mad because she doesn't have her hoverbike license yet," she explained in giddy excitement.

"Lucky," Kibum drawled eyeing the bike and the rider intently. A glorified bicycle without wheels, the hoverbike floated at hip height with a long padded seat that had a rail at the back to keep you from sliding off and foot pedals to press down on for security.

"Yes, you are," she preened her cheeks rising in amusement while she tossed him a second helmet.

"You... are a brat," Kibum snorted, catching the helmet deftly and putting it on with only minimal trouble. He hadn't really worn one in a while.

"And your ride," she responded without missing a beat. She didn't even pay him any attention when she turned her sights on the hoverbike and settled in place with natural ease. "You coming?" came the question after a brief pause, turning her head to look at him.

Kibum deliberated on whether to say yes or anything at all. He really did. Was it worth it to acquiesce to this child's whims as his only source of transportation in a reasonable amount of time? Maybe. Probably not. Did he tell Jinki he would come? Yes... Stifling a groan, Kibum kept his mouth shut and dutifully slung his leg over the bike to settle into place behind Hajoon.

"Hold tight!" she instructed in an excited voice, revving the bike – as much as one could – before kicking off.

He couldn't help it. Kibum yelped as he slid back, bumping into the railing at the back and clinging reflexively to her sides. Hajoon giggled, the sound involuntary, and he was oh so tempted to tickle her again, but even he wasn't fool enough to do something like that while in the air.

While they made their way through the second level of traffic, primarily reserved for vehicles of a non-hover car variety, Hajoon rattled off question after question at him. "How did you meet my brother?" "How did he become your mentor?" "Why?" "What are you studying?" "Why aren't you at the school? Really?" "Did you eat breakfast?"

The questions seemed never ending as the sixteen-year-old turned into an insatiable toddler. Kibum let them wash over him without answer as he took the opportunity to look around instead. It was usually dark when he traveled by cab and though they weren't flying very high, it was enough to see the patterns of the city change as the tall buildings in the center fell away. The university hung over a large portion of the city, unmissable no matter where you were, but the rest of the landscape shifted like ripples on a large pond. Tall spires in the center; a slump where businesses of various sizes nestled; another slump for parks and natural breakers for sound; followed by a step up for well-off residential homes and at the outer edges, public housing.

Beyond those were charity houses – places where residents lived who had mostly out of dome jobs or little to no money to afford a place of their own. If not for the apartment his father left him, Kibum likely would have had to stay in one such place. He pushed the thought away and blinked when Hajoon announced they were almost there.

The first thing that came to mind was the fact that Jinki lived in a *house*. A *two-story* house. It shouldn't have been a surprise considering the size of his family and the fact his parents always seemed to be busy, and since Jinki had to have mentioned it before, but compared to Kibum's own living situation, it hit him like a punch in the gut. An ugly niggling feeling of envy stirred and he angrily stamped it down. It wasn't Jinki's decision to live in a house. It was just where he had ended up. Had Kibum's situation been different, he might have been able to say the same.

His eyes alighted on a larger slab of space that the hoverbike wouldn't need and he frowned. "Hovercar?" The question hung in the air for half a second before Hajoon realized it was directed at her.

"Yeah. Dad works on the weekends and he's using it now." The explanation was quick and simple, a shrug accompanying the words like it was no big deal. Another blow to Kibum's sense of worth. He was certain Jinki had told him about it before but hearing it and knowing it were two different things. And then they went inside. "We're back!" Hajoon's voice was subdued, like she was trying not to be too loud.

"We're in the back!" That was clearly Jinki's voice. At a much higher volume too.

Kibum looked over and noticed the flash of annoyance on Hajoon's face. "Shh!" she hissed in response, nudging Kibum and pointing at the shoe storage box beside the door before she headed in. "You'll wake mom."

"You know her room is soundproof when the door is shut," Jinki reminded her as he clumsily made his way into the open, hampered entirely by a youthful growth that seemed to be attached to his waist. "Daejung," he laughed with a heavy sigh, one hand resting on the boy's black crowned head.

"This is new," Kibum commented with a finger pointing between them while he slid his shoes off. He turned his attention away to put them in the shoe box and then flinched as a new body appeared in front of him when he looked up. "Ayah!" He hadn't even heard the young girl come up...

Hajoon wandered close and smacked the girl lightly in the back of the head, sending straight black strands flying forward. "Quit sneaking up on people!" she chided, earning her a pretty impressive glare from dark eyes that practically sparked and a downturned mouth set in a dour position.

"Siwoo does that to everyone," Jinki explained with a quiet grunt, obviously trying to extricate himself from his brother's grip. The boy seemed otherwise determined to remain exactly where he was, his eyes glued on Jinki's face with an expectant look.

Kibum gave the girl a slightly crooked look, inspecting the loose fit clothing that hung off her wiry frame in folds of colorful fabric. Her sense of style was terrible and that bowl cut wasn't doing her any favors. "Hi?" he offered, waving a hand in hesitant greeting.

Siwoo's expression turned thoughtful when she grabbed her chin in her hands and squinted at him. It felt almost like she was trying to see through him. It made Kibum feel awkward and he glanced at Jinki who wasn't paying him any attention then. But he jumped once more as Siwoo talked, her voice high and young, her finger pointed at him firmly. "You can come in, but don't touch anything." The last part was said in a tone that indicated warning and Kibum struggled not to laugh. It would have been rude at the very least.

"Siwoo!" Jinki called with a grimace on his face. "I'll go to an extra practice with you if you help me with Daejung here," he bribed, flashing her a winning grin.

"I'll do it!" Doyun suddenly announced, bounding into the room as if she had been summoned, one hand already reaching for her younger brother's arms.

"No!" Siwoo wailed, turning on her heel and launching herself at the trio. Kibum looked at Jinki with suspicion and the second year quickly held up one finger with a brief shake of his head. At least he wasn't trying to pull a fast one on Kibum.

Together, Doyun and Siwoo pried Daejung off and hauled him into the back room, bickering over his head about whose practice Jinki should come to as a result. For his part, Daejung seemed pleased with himself, glancing between his two sisters in obvious satisfaction. Kibum would wager he was the real winner in all of this.

"Is it always like this?" he asked, glancing at the floor to make sure he wasn't about to step on something as he moved further into the interior of the home.

"Sorry," Jinki apologized, rushing over and offering a harried shrug in response. "They do this whenever we have a new guest. Middle child syndrome or something to that effect. And as for Daejung, weekends are sacred to him. It's the only time he really gets to rope me into playing with him." His smile was magic as it lit his face up in embarrassed joy, one hand rubbing the back of his neck at the same time.

"Far be it from me to interrupt." Kibum wasn't sure if he was welcome or not, despite Siwoo's announcement and Jinki's obvious warmth at his presence.

Jinki waved a hand in front of him. "It's fine. I'll play with him tomorrow for sure. No, I haven't forgotten about tonight," he added when Kibum opened his mouth like he was going to say something.

"Not what I was going to ask but good," he grinned, pleased by the admission.

"Oh." Jinki deflated slightly but then perked up again. "What *were* you going to ask?"

The swift recovery made Kibum smile, the corners of his mouth turning up just enough. “How many rooms do you have?” Hajoon had said their mother had her own room, soundproof to boot, and the thought was almost incomprehensible to Kibum. Growing up, privacy was not a word in his vocabulary and the reminder stung.

Jinki gave him a look, his smile softening as any number of thoughts ran through his mind. “Would you like a tour...?” he offered quietly, one hand gesturing to the space around them.

Kibum considered it but then gave up on the idea pretty quickly. “I’m good,” he promised instead, knowing it would only make him more envious. He had no desire to feel that way right now. Especially not after the sensation at just being in front of the house. “So?” His hand rose in front of him to offer an equally silent question, not sure where they were going to go for the purposes of studying.

He didn’t get an immediate answer to his question as Jinki asked, “You hungry? Did you eat breakfast?”

It would have been so simple to turn him down. Easy. Like he had done to countless people innumerable times before. But the lingering smells of whatever had been prepared previously hung in the air like a wafting cloud of savory goodness that teased at Kibum’s senses and prompted a very audible gurgle from his stomach. He shut his already open mouth and looked to the side with a pressed lip expression.

Jinki laughed, the smile returning in force as his eyes crinkled naturally. “Come on,” he encouraged, grasping Kibum’s wrist and pulling him along to the kitchen space first.

Kibum’s eyes wandered over the interior as they went, unintentional but utterly unable to look away at the same time. He knew the material was metal like in all the houses save for the very rich, but it *looked* wooden or at least like it was covered in a pastel beige wallpaper. Still pictures of Jinki and his siblings peppered most available spaces. A family photo hung on the wall just across from the stairs leading up to the second floor, all of them considerably younger than they were now. More startling, brown *carpet* – or at least the imitation of it – rasped under his sock covered feet, a pleasant but foreign sensation. He had to fight the impulse to pause and feel the fibers with his fingers...

Being hauled down the main entrance hallway and into the kitchen on his left, Kibum struggled to keep his jaw from hitting the floor. Space! There was so much of it! An actual island in the middle of the room where Hajoon was currently munching on some quick wrapped snack, her attention on a holovid that showed grav jumping players moving quickly across the screen. A half-wall divider separated the kitchen space with an obvious dining room, the table stationary and not retractable, though at least it seemed as if the chairs were. One overhead light was on but blessed sunlight streamed in through fully transparent windows, creating geometrical shapes of glowing illumination on the floors and walls.

He was dragged from his awe by Jinki’s question. “What do you want?”

Eyes wide and slightly dazed, Kibum turned to look at what Jinki was talking about and his eyelashes fluttered. The food processor was on with a plethora of options glowing softly on the screen. The selection was vastly more complete than what was available to him and he immediately blanched

with a shake of his head. "I can't afford that." He clapped his mouth shut with a nervous look at Hajoon, annoyed with himself for saying such a thing out loud.

Jinki immediately waved his hand in front of Kibum's face and gestured at it again. "We have *three* athletes in the house. If my parents didn't have more of an unlimited plan, at least one of us would go hungry at some point," he laughed, intentionally focusing on Hajoon in that moment.

Almost as if she felt his gaze, she looked up from the video and paused it to ask, "What?"

"Nothing," he waved off, quick to shake his head and return his focus to Kibum. "So?"

Kibum's stomach behaved in the sense that it didn't growl again, but he could feel it gently gnawing on his spine at being reminded it was empty. Swallowing around a mouth that seemed to be too wet all of a sudden, he glanced at Jinki to be sure it wasn't some trick. "You're sure?" He didn't mean for it to come out as suspicious as it did, but he was relieved when the second year simply smiled with an understanding chuckle.

"Positive," he affirmed, a single nod sending wavy brown locks into his eyes.

Kibum had a sudden impulse to brush them out of Jinki's face and his eyes widened slightly at the realization before he immediately turned to face the food processor. Food. Now. All he had to do now was figure out what he wanted versus what would be acceptable (see not desperate for something different) and choose accordingly. It was almost magic the way the food materialized in the space below the ordering screen. Almost. He was well aware it was pulling the proper chemical and nutritional elements and molecules together from a storage of waiting 'materials' with which to make said food items, but the science never seemed to diminish his wonder.

Spoils in hand, he hesitantly moved to the island and settled on a stool that had been summoned, apparently for him. Jinki had moved to his sister's side and was peering over her shoulder, tracing people and plays with her, talking in a low voice as they discussed strategy and technique. It was more than obvious he was keeping her distracted and pretending to be otherwise interested in something else himself, but Kibum was grateful all the same. He hadn't had such a full meal in... he couldn't recall.

He was certain that one of them at least would call him a slow eater. He savored the food and took his time, allowing it to settle bite by bite before he moved to the next. His fear was largely that his stomach couldn't handle the sudden influx of the wholeness of the meal, but Jinki didn't question it. When Hajoon looked at him curiously, her brother directed her attention back to the screen with some new perspective or question and she was distracted once more. Only when he was finished, a glass of water that had materialized nearby in hand, did Jinki take notice of Kibum's state.

"You good?" he asked, a simple question of confirmation.

Kibum took a breath and another sip of water before he nodded. "Yeah. I think I am."

"Okay!" The sudden cheer startled both him and Hajoon. "Be a good little sister and clean up for me, would you?" he prompted, pressing his lips to the side of Hajoon's head in a brotherly fashion before he hurried around to usher Kibum ahead of him. "Time to study!" he encouraged with unusually boisterous energy.

“Jinki!” the two complained at the same time, sharing a brief moment of camaraderie at the seeming betrayal.

“No and no,” he responded, pointing at both of them firmly. “We’ll be in dad’s study,” Jinki added on as he grasped Kibum’s wrist again, tugging him gently after. Hajoon made a complaining noise in his wake but didn’t say anything outright. Kibum kept his mouth carefully shut and simply followed along. It was why he’d come in the first place. Breakfast, or rather lunch at this point, was a bonus but... yeah. Terran biology.

Jinki’s father’s study was a spacious place complete with a large desk – crafted of fake wood and a padded chair of some kind, with more family still frames dotting the walls. Gray walls matched the almost black carpet and a single window continued to let the natural light of the sun stream in. Kibum positioned himself immediately in front of that beam of light and retrieved the files for his upcoming exam related to Terran biology.

“Alright,” Jinki mused, pulling up the stool on the other side, a quiet hiss of sound indicating it came from the floor. “Your homework shows you have a decent understanding of the topic. Your test scores... do not.”

It was hard not to roll his eyes at the general rundown of his performance in the class. “Let’s just say I don’t like this topic,” he grumbled, not looking at Jinki while he gazed down at the latest notes from the previous lesson.

“Great! That’s like me and physics,” Jinki beamed, happy to have some kind of better understanding of the issue. “It’s my worst subject but I still got passing marks in it. I’m sure you can too,” he promised, his habitual grin back in place.

This time, Kibum did roll his eyes, but he waved a hand as if giving permission for Jinki to offer whatever words of wisdom he intended. In all honesty, he had little trouble understanding Terran biology, but he loathed the subject. It... angered him in a way that was hard to put into words so most of whatever he learned he let slip through his fingers, having no desire to hold onto it whatsoever. No matter how much he learned about it, it wasn’t like it was going to change anything at all.

Chapter Eleven

When studying and helping others, Jinki was honestly in his element. That was not the case when he was in places like The Stars Align. As promised, when he was finished helping Kibum with his studies – and honestly he didn’t seem as abysmal as the first year led on – they killed time until Kibum had to go into work. Well, Daejung killed time by roping them both into playing games with him, which he soundly kicked their butts in, but that was typical – the kid practically lived in the VR world when he wasn’t doing other things. At least for Jinki. Kibum didn’t take the losses quite so well.

“Again!” Kibum shouted, affronted at having been bested yet again by the pint-sized terror.

Siwoo and Doyun giggled almost manically at the display but didn’t say anything outright at a look from Jinki. Hajoon poked her head in to watch a couple rounds, and their mother even appeared at one point, breaking up the game long enough to meet Kibum who seemed flustered by her presence.

“Don’t let him play all day,” she chided with a look at Jinki, her light brown eyes tired from sleep, crow’s feet crinkling noticeably at the edges. She brushed brunette curls out of her face and stifled a yawn, thin lips hiding behind a worn, age spotted hand. “But make yourself at home, Kibum honey,” she smiled, the expression the very essence of motherly. “Any friend of Jinki’s is a friend of ours.”

Jinki was afraid that Kibum might shatter into a thousand pieces at the assurance, his body language incomprehensibly tense and the expression on his face as fragile as blown glass. “Yes, ma’am,” was a mere whisper of a response followed by the ghost of a bow.

He stood up and placed a hand lightly against Kibum’s back, painfully aware of the way he inhaled sharply at the contact. “Thanks mom!” he said, focusing his attention on the aging woman who was all whipcord strength and concealed tiger fury when it came to her children. Almost coy, she waved her fingers back and stepped out of the doorway, giving them privacy once more. Jinki left his hand against Kibum’s back until the younger man moved of his own accord. There was more story there than he was willing to let on yet and while Jinki was determined to find out some day, this was not the one.

Of course, he might have pressed a little harder if he’d realized Kibum wanted to kill him with his performance that evening. It was bad enough when he didn’t know who Almighty Key was. The effect was exponentially worse when he did. Reconciling the angled planes and biting humor of Kim Kibum with the illustrious and lithe magnificence of Almighty Key was no easy thing. Worse was the unexpected and dark flash of irritation when he heard others whisper appreciation of said person in turn. Oh, the odd shout and call of support could literally apply to any of the dancers, but when he heard Kibum’s alter ego name, his back tensed and he felt a very unreasonable desire to whisk the younger man away from such comments.

It didn’t help that Psitassi showed up later with a full posse in tow, all excited to finally see Kibum perform. Not that they were a bad audience. Far from it. Their energy filled the room and really brought Ixo’s music to life, dancing and moving on the floor as the energy of the night sank into them. The upbeat tempo of the music got the performers and the audience moving, a living breathing organism that responded in tandem, but when the tempo shifted, becoming sultry and sensuous, so too did the atmosphere.

Jinki was mesmerized, completely caught up in Kibum’s almost inhuman grace. The way his slightly muscled arms pulled his body up the pole was nothing in comparison to the pair of incredible legs winding around it, creating stiff pauses and sharp plains, illustriously augmented by a variant of his traditional red attire. A sudden sharp whistle at odds with the performance yanked him from his appreciation. He saw Kibum falter for a split second – only because he was watching so close, and then turned to look for who had caused the disruption. Noises weren’t banned, but the wolf whistle was highly frowned upon. His eyes scanned the crowds and... there! He spotted a group of second or maybe third years that had clustered at a table near the stage. They were stationed in front of Passeri and they fell silent after the first whistle, but Jinki knew them now. He started moving closer just in case.

Another wolf whistle and a mocking jeer appeared, directed at Almighty Key. “Not bad, Kibum! Work it!” By itself, the words could have been a compliment, but the delivery was everything. Mockery and derision infused the tone and Almighty Key faltered just a touch. He slipped on the pole, sliding

further than intended. His otherwise flawless performance suffered the shame of having to make an adjustment, hands catching his fall to contort into a roll, breaking his momentum. Rising, he effortlessly launched back to his position on the pole, but it was clear his confidence was at least slightly shaken.

Jinki felt his anger rise and he started to move to confront the heckler. In his periphery, he thought he saw Psitassi's group moving to do the same, but everyone in the immediate audience froze when a mountain of a figure seemed to materialize next to the offender. Jinki had never seen the owner of the establishment, had never had cause to, but Kibum had described him once. A Varium with a physique not unlike an old Earth Viking and striking blue hair – including the beard and mustache. He was not a figure to be trifled with.

No. No he was not.

Corded barrel arms crossed as he glowered down at the Terran offender with all the ominous presence of an encroaching thunderstorm. Said student balked in outright fright, eyes wide and arms cradled close in his fear. Garum, the owner, jerked his head to the side once, an unspoken command to leave. And the Terran did. With his friends in tow, figurative tails tucked between their legs.

Almost comically, the vacated space was suddenly filled with Psitassi and her group who gave Garum an adoring look before they turned their energy towards the stage. From Jinki's vantage, it looked as if Garum was actually bemused by the response of the group swarming around him. He was wearing a most peculiar smile as he looked at Almighty Key and then at Passeri. She noticed his glance and nodded once.

Jinki was fascinated when Garum raised his hand to snap. It seemed an inconsequential and unnoticed sound, but shortly after, the music shifted. Passeri and Jackson retreated from the poles, backing up to the edges of the stage. A belated Almighty Key followed their example, elegantly frolicking off to join them when he realized what had happened. It was obvious he was confused, but Jinki was certain he'd never admit it outright.

The music changed again, something with a heavy bass beat and an overlying trill in a faster tempo. The Moladhi and older Terran bolted for the outer poles, flinging themselves at the secondary stages with professional verve and enthusiasm. For a split second, Jinki saw the panic in Kibum's eyes, the realization that he was supposed to take center stage. But just as quickly, his demeanor shifted and the performance took over, commanding him to do as the Muse of dance demanded. Almighty Key flung himself into the spotlight and soared in the half-gravity atmosphere. It took them a moment to find their rhythm, flailing limbs easily mistaken for erratic dance movements, mere precursors to their performance.

As Almighty Key took center stage, a low roar of sound erupted from Psitassi's group, their cries supportive and enamored but subdued in respect for the performers. Had it been his first viewing, Jinki might well have been caught watching them, but though he admired their appreciation, he was more interested in how the performers responded. Jackson preened, even though the cries of 'Almighty Key' were not meant for him. And Passeri had a particularly keen look on her face upon noticing the easily identifiable Moladhi in the group.

But as for Kibum – Almighty Key, he shined. Born to command attention, he was at his best in the limelight. Jinki felt an inexplicable pride welling in him as he watched the younger student

absolutely glow on stage, a feeling of secondhand accomplishment its own drug. He had no say in Kibum's success here, obviously, but as his mentor... some of the joy could be shared.

The rest of the evening passed in a sort of blur of amazement for Jinki. Tired from the day's exertions and his usual endeavors with his siblings, he sat down on one of the cushioned seats to rest and... eventually realized that he'd dozed off.

"Jinki." A warm voice sounded very far away, echoing in a dark, empty chamber. "Jinki!" Louder this time and accompanied with a jostle. There was a quiet sigh and then a firm grab at his side that jolted him into wakefulness with a startled yelp.

"I'm up!" he gasped, heart racing and eyes wide. The scene before him was a far cry from before. Oh, he was still in The Stars Align, but the room was almost entirely empty save for Almighty Key, no, Kibum standing directly in front of him and Passeri and Jackson cleaning up in the background.

"Finally," Kibum chuckled, a crooked smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

Jinki blinked hard and then it clicked that they were cleaning up. "Oh! You should have woken me earlier," he gasped, making an awkward effort to stand up. But Kibum caught his shoulder and pressed him back down.

"We're almost done. Getting ready to head home actually," he explained with a wink and a nod towards the door.

He frowned in brief confusion and looked towards the entryway before turning back to meet Kibum's gaze. "It's okay. I'll wait for you." A flash of surprise flickered over Kibum's face and he started to look back towards the other two but stopped himself.

"You've got a longer ways to go and you've had a long day," the performer reasoned, his tone trying to be convincing if Jinki was right.

A wave of his hand banished that idea. "So have you, and the school is basically on the way. I really don't mind." Honestly, he didn't, but Kibum was also trying to get rid of him for some reason and Jinki wanted to know if he could find out anything if he was stubborn enough about it.

"Chicklet." It was fascinating watching Kibum cringe at the name. "Why don't you let the nice man who escorted you here and couldn't take his eyes off you almost the entire performance walk you home?" Passeri sauntered over and paused to stand beside the younger Terran, glancing down at him as the skin at the corners of her beak tilted up.

Kibum blinked, a delightful furrow wrinkling the space between his brows, and then looked back at Jinki. "Almost the whole performance?" he practically purred, the question likely meant to be suggestive and possibly embarrassing.

It worked. Jinki forgot the vision ability of a Moladhi and how lights almost directly in their eyes didn't necessarily cause the blindness it did in Terrans. He floundered to think of a response and suddenly blurted, "It was the first time I'd seen him center stage!"

A dramatic sigh escaped said performer and he pretend fainted with the back of his hand to his forehead. "Likely a one and done scenario. Thanks for the heads up, by the way," he grumbled, tossing an annoyed glare at the Moladhi beside him.

"You did fine," she praised, actually patting him on the head, the natural silvery gray of her short feathers bright against his raven strands.

"Passeri," Kibum groaned, frantically pushing the hand away while he stepped to the side.

"Not so fast," the other Terran laughed, ruffling Kibum's hair almost like a mild punishment for escaping the Moladhi.

"Jackson!" The cry this time was more of a shout, complaining and put upon.

Jackson rolled his eyes in a mimicry of something Jinki had seen Kibum do dozens of times. "Go home, Kibum," he shoed, snatching the nano cloth from his hand and nudging him towards Jinki. "We can handle the rest. By the looks of it, you've had a longer day than either of us," he added, gesturing between him and Passeri with a sharp look at Kibum's face.

Reactively, Kibum raised his hands to touch his fingertips to the mostly clean skin, a slightly worried frown crinkling it. He pouted, bottom lip jutting out just a bit more than the top one, and turned to ask Jinki. "Do I look like I've had a long day, Jinki?"

He was not expecting such a reaction. By the looks in his periphery, neither had Passeri nor Jackson. But that didn't get him off the hook for trying to answer. The wheels in his head turned while he inspected Kibum's face, noticing the dark circles under his eyes that had gotten better but were still there; the paleness of his complexion that was no longer almost ghost-like but would benefit from the kiss of the sun more often; the look of his skin pulled just a little too taut over the sharp angles of prominent bones...

Kibum covered his face with both hands in the ensuing silence, a tiny grunt of complaint escaping from behind the shield. "You didn't say no so silence means yes," he explained, still keeping his face hidden while his shoulders rose and fell from the deep breath he took.

"That's not-" Jinki immediately tried to say before one hand flashed in front of him, an obvious silencing gesture.

For a second, it looked as if Kibum might not say anything. The trio around him exchanged quick, curious looks, and then flinched when he turned on his heels and started walking off. "I'm going home." Passeri and Jackson's heads turned at the same time to follow Kibum's progress before swinging back to Jinki. Again in sync, they gestured at him with their closest hands and shifted them to motion after Kibum, a mute 'What are you waiting for, go follow him,' command if he'd ever seen one.

Scrambling from the sofa, Jinki called out, "Wait up, Kibum!" For a wonder, he didn't suffer one of his clumsy moments but that could also have been because Passeri reached out to stop him briefly.

He looked up at her curiously and she leaned close to murmur, "Tell the Moladhi that came today that I'd like to meet her sometime."

"Huh?" both Jinki and Jackson grunted at the same time, sharing equally confused looks.

"Calm down," she laughed once, reaching out to brush her fingers against Jackson's cheek reassuringly.

"You mean Psitassi?" Jinki wondered, recalling seeing more than one Moladhi in the crowd but only one that had come from the school this evening. The second-year student that had left with the intimidated Terran didn't count.

"So that's her name," Passeri hummed to herself, nodding in understanding and confirmation. "Yes. Now off you go," she continued, giving Jinki a nudge to get him moving after Kibum again.

He stumbled forward, catching snippets of quiet words flowing between the pair behind him. He had no idea why Passeri wanted to meet Psitassi. Considering she was a friend of Kibum's and a worker at The Stars Align, he didn't see the harm in at least passing the message. But that was for another day as he still had to catch up to Kibum.

The establishment felt so very different when everyone was gone, quiet and almost hallow in its solitude. Ironically the backstage area had a similar atmosphere, muffled by layers of dark cloth and soft padding, but disconnected from the open vibrancy of the front. Whispers of sound escaped, fabric sliding with a hissing rustle. Jinki didn't think anything of it before he stuck his head into the back and noticed Kibum pulling his uniform shirt down over his head. "Sorry!" he yelped, automatically lurching back behind the curtain.

Kibum's startled inhale quieted quickly. When he spoke next, his voice was calm control and almost dismissive. "It's fine." Silence followed paired with the sound of clothes rustling again. "Aren't you going to come in?" came the curious question after a pause.

"Not until you say it's okay," Jinki answered playing with his fingers in front of him, a furrow knitting itself between his brows. "It's rude otherwise." He hadn't meant to walk in on him but now he couldn't ignore the way Kibum's ribs had pressed against his skin, gentle waves and valleys demarcating the space between each piece of bone instead of a single plane. No wonder he'd seemed so amazed in front of the food processor today...

There was a soft laugh at that and then the fabric beside Jinki shifted as a pale hand stuck through. Kibum's head followed immediately after, his habitual smirk in place. "I did."

Jinki was starting to recognize it as a mask and at that moment it bothered him. But there was a time and a place for everything. Once again, now was not it. "Ah," he grunted instead, mouth open with a single nod. "Shall we go?"

Kibum looked around and lifted his hand up once. "See you for the next shift!"

Passeri and Jackson whirled around, acting for all the world like they hadn't been leaning in to hear what the two were talking about. "Remember, Jackson won't be here and we'll have one of the other part-timers filling in for his spot," the Moladhi reminded him.

Jackson pouted, an expression that seemed wholly at odds with his muscular physique, when Kibum responded with little more than, "Yeah, yeah." The smirk on his face softened to something closer to an actual smile.

“Ungrateful brat!” Jackson scowled, shaking a loose fist in his direction. “I hope you sleep your grumpiness away,” he added for good measure, outrage breaking into a genuine laugh.

Jinki could see a response forming, the slight narrowing of Kibum’s eyes as he decided how to respond, and that was enough for him. “Sleep is a cure for many things!” he exclaimed, ever so gently pushing Kibum’s upper arm to get him to start moving towards the back. “Thank you for a great performance!” he added, waving to the two still in the main room as he guided a strangely agreeable Kibum along.

When they reached the outer area, Kibum gave a soft snort and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I wasn’t going to say much of anything.”

A raised brow was all Jinki could muster at first. Then he shook his head and laughed once. “Maybe not, but you looked like you were gearing up for an exchange and sleep really is a good idea. For *all* of us,” he added, pointing at himself intentionally.

“Fine,” the first year huffed, crossing his arms briefly and then loosing them to hang lightly in front of him. He looked slightly defeated, his shoulders a bit slumped and head tilted forward. Without a word, he began walking in the direction of the school.

Jinki fell into step beside him, casting quick glances like he was a puzzle to be figured out. The crowds at this hour – sometime after three in the morning – were thinning out as the patrons sought their beds or other establishments that had longer hours. All the streets were well lit, lighting glowing from the surface itself in tracks and dotted periodically with an overhead light to mark alleyways or intersections. “How was it to be the main performer tonight?” he finally asked, hoping that was a safe enough topic for now.

They were nearing the platform rise for the school now, heading into the heart of the city where the leaders and politicians mostly gathered and worked and deliberated. The university didn’t sit immediately over city center, but it was close. Those in power would have had a conniption fit if the shadow of such a building was perpetually cast over them. Needless to say, the businesses and rentals directly beneath the school were listed for cheaper prices.

“It was nice.” The answer was almost a whisper, soft and a little sad, his voice barely carrying through the distance between them.

Prodding just a little bit, Jinki spoke, “You don’t sound like it.”

Kibum’s lips thinned and he gave a familiar side-eyed look. “It was probably a one-time thing.” At Jinki’s confused look, he took a breath and added, “Garum explained it was basically a play to shove it in their faces.” When he didn’t elaborate on ‘their’, Jinki was forced to ask.

“As in...?”

A flash of frustration flickered over Kibum’s face but his voice remained free of it. “Crawven and friends?” he answered, posing the question like it should have been obvious.

“Ah... so, sort of like trying to make your outing... backfire?” he offered hesitantly while they slowed at the entrance. It was a large structure that had a levitating platform the size of a house which could be raised and lowered for the purposes of bringing in supplies or large groups of people. A series

of smaller individual platforms lined it on either side though and most students used them when returning at odd hours or leaving in general.

Shoulders shrugged in a fluid motion and Kibum snorted, "Maybe." They both glanced at the platforms and he spoke first. "Well, we're here. You should go on," Kibum encouraged, gesturing in the direction of Jinki's house.

"It's alright. It's no trouble to walk you to the dorms," Jinki responded, keeping his voice intentionally light. There he went again. Trying to get rid of him.

"Really. I insist," the first year stated firmly, his expression determinedly neutral.

"I couldn't come pick you up this morning so I should at least see you back safely." He would do the same for anybody else, but Jinki had to try and craft the sentence so it wouldn't come off as pushy or something like that.

Even so, Kibum's nose wrinkled and he sighed, a small, frustrated sound. "Just go home, Jinki!" he finally snapped, looking to the side so he wouldn't have to meet the other man's eyes.

The sharp words and tone made his gut twist uncomfortably. Jinki hated it when people were upset with him and that was certainly what this sounded like, but... he took a steadying breath and asked as gently as he could, "You don't actually live in the dorms, do you?"

A dismissive scoff answered him. "Where else would I live?" Jinki wasn't even sure if Kibum was aware of it, but his body tensed noticeably and those slender fingers tangled together in front of him, apparently trying to hold him together lest he fall apart.

"Yes or no?" Jinki pressed, staying exactly where he was but letting the full weight of his attention fall on Kibum. The first year ducked his head further, like he wanted to hide, but said nothing in response. Jinki winced and took a breath of his own before calling up his personal screen. Dark eyes flashed as Kibum glanced over to see what he was doing. "You didn't say yes so silence must mean no in this instance." He downloaded a virtual token with a decent amount of funds on it, the coin sized image materializing in front of him before he held it out to Kibum. "I won't ask you where you're staying, but," he paused looking up to make sure Kibum was looking at him. "*-it is late and you have had a long day so please. Take a cab home.*"

Kibum looked at the small coin on Jinki's palm, his expression unreadable. "I..."

"Take it," he repeated himself, more firmly this time.

One of Kibum's hands started to rise, getting stuck in the distance between them. "Jinki," he murmured, almost a whimper really.

Jinki sighed and carefully reached out to grab Kibum's hand with his free one. "No repayment needed or expected," he explained, pressing the coin into Kibum's palm and curling his fingers around it. "Just one friend helping another," he promised, a warm smile pulling at the corners of his mouth and crinkling his eyes.

That seemed to be the right thing to say. Kibum gave a tiny nod with the barest of sounds confirming he understood.

"Can I walk you to the cab station?" he asked then, brows pulled down and eyes slightly narrowed. Kibum held his hand up in mute objection and Jinki nodded. "Okay." He took a step back to give Kibum a bit more space. "You really did good tonight," he praised, relieved when the first year finally looked at him, an expression more than discomfort meeting his gaze. It was like he could breathe again and some of the tension bled away with the single nod he gave back. "Well. I hope you sleep well and... I'll see you on Monday?" he asked for confirmation.

"Yeah. You too," Kibum finally spoke, conjuring the barest hint of a smile to tug one side of his mouth up, the effects reaching to the very edges of his eyes.

Despite not being allowed to go with him, Jinki stayed where he was and watched Kibum take the lift to the cab station. They drove on the third layer of traffic with the other hovercars so it was just easier to go up to that shelf. He waited until the cab drove off with Kibum in tow – hopefully anyway. And only when it was finally out of sight did he start to make his own way home.

"Yikes!" he grimaced with a glance at his watch. It might almost be daylight by the time he got back... His siblings were going to kill him with questions. The thought alone was enough to make him facepalm and groan. Well, they'd have to wait for him to wake up first at least. So long as he got home soon anyway. "Let's go!" he encouraged himself, pausing just long enough to send Kibum a personal contact message. *Sleep well and good night.* 😊

Was it a little odd that he was sending daily and nightly messages to his mentee? Especially when he didn't do the same for some of his other mentees or students for tutoring. Maybe... Did he think Kibum needed them? Yes. Today had only reaffirmed that. The young man was a bevy of secrets that must have been weighing down on him and Jinki was determined to lighten that load any way he could. One secret at a time.

Chapter Twelve

Standing in the halls of the university on Monday morning, Kibum had to admit the whole situation was turning out better than he thought it would. He still marveled that the sky hadn't fallen and the ground hadn't opened up to swallow him whole. He blinked in surprise as another student waved and congratulated him on his performance over the weekend before passing by.

"Looks like you might have another fan," Jinki teased gently, a seemingly permanent smile tugging at his lips.

"Oh, shut it," Kibum snorted with a dismissive wave and a raised brow. Jinki was enjoying this entirely too much. Kibum had fully expected to have a far more severe reaction to his arrival on campus – either being swarmed or wholly ignored, but neither had happened. Having Jinki next to him might have helped with that, but life seemed... normal for all intents and purposes. Minus the additional waves he was getting, now that his identity was known.

"You're practically a low-key celebrity now," Henry laughed at lunch, his mouth full of grinning teeth as he glanced around to take note of all the surreptitious looks that were being sent their direction.

"You can thank Psitassi for that," Ercite barked a laugh, gesturing towards the approaching Moladhi. The Dawbn pitched their voice to make sure it would carry, "She got special permission from Garum to take pictures so she could post it on the fan page for the school."

"I did!" said Moladhi preened as she immediately knelt beside Kibum, completely oblivious to his surprised shock. It disappeared quickly when she looked at him, profoundly proud of herself as she pulled up the pictures she had taken for him to see. "Didn't they turn out so good!?" Her voice slid between tones excitedly, showing just how delighted she was.

Kibum had to gather himself quickly before he could force a response. Performing in the public sphere was one thing. Having pictures of him floating around the datasphere, albeit as Almighty Key, was not something he'd planned on happening. He was ready to say as much until he actually got a look at the pictures in question. "Oh," he exclaimed in thoughtful appreciation, brow furrowing as he finally got a glimpse of himself on the stage. He'd only ever seen himself in the mirror when preparing, a dolled-up creature ready for the show, but this...

"Careful. We wouldn't want you to turn into Narcissus," Henry teased when Kibum lost track of the time. "Hey!" he yelped as Larad swatted him on the head lightly.

"As a Varium, that," he stated with a definitive nod towards the picture, "is art and good art is worthy of being stared at."

"Isn't it?!" Psitassi grinned, an instant bond of camaraderie forming between her and the Varium. "I could stare at it all day," she sighed with a blissful expression on her face.

That at least was something Kibum could work with and he laughed once. "That's a little creepy, Psitassi."

She took it in stride and teased back, "I never said I would look at *you* all day." Her wink cemented it as a playful jab and brought a laugh from the table.

"Fair enough," he surrendered with raised hands. "Jackson and Passeri are well worth admiring too."

It was enough to turn the tide of the conversation and into more comfortable territory, but it gave Kibum plenty to think on. He would not argue he looked bold, sexy... beautiful. But next to Jackson, another Terran male, he looked almost wan in comparison. Striking but almost fragile. Shadows played harshly on his all too prominent angles and he felt an immediate love-hate relationship towards the image. He wasn't sure what to do with that feeling exactly.

He didn't have too much time to fixate on it though. The next morning, he went to one of Siwoo's practices at the community center. Bleary eyed and still half-asleep, he woke up immediately when he realized Jinki was wearing a body suit much like a standard low grav gymnast would wear. He always said he was a stickler for solidarity... It wasn't like Kibum was *intentionally* looking at the other man, but it was hard to miss the surprisingly toned physique typically hidden beneath layers of casual clothes.

They both would have noticed him staring if they weren't quite so focused on their practice efforts. As a low grav gymnast, Siwoo could practically fly over the floor with her flips and twirls and

vaulting jumps, especially with Jinki helping her. Kibum wouldn't have said she was at a professional level, but she certainly took after Hajoong in her dedication and fierce determination.

Winded but satisfied, she approached Kibum with Jinki at her side and took a drink of water before she spoke to him. "Have you ever tried?" she asked, wiping at her sweaty brow with the back of her wrist before she nodded towards the floor, another participant already taking the empty space.

"Can't say that I have," he admitted with a helpless shrug, glancing at Jinki.

She grinned and nodded once. "You'll have to give it a shot next time then. He doesn't really look it," she started to say, a teasing smirk pulling at the corner of her mouth, "but Jinki's a pretty good spotter."

"Brat," he chided with a laugh and a gentle tap on her head.

"What?" she snorted, mildly affronted. "You are. And he'd probably be pretty good," she added with a gesture at the still seated Kibum. For his part, it was likely better that he kept his mouth shut and work on not flushing at the thought.

It was an even greater challenge when Jinki agreed. "He probably would be." Kibum chose to look at the practice floor again because it was easier, but he could see Jinki looking at him in his periphery, soft certainty etched into his features. Not for the first time, he wondered why Jinki seemed to have such faith in him.

Kibum didn't work that evening but he did on the following day, heading out after one of Hajoong's practices. Despite his fan club and his persona's reveal, work itself didn't change in any life-altering manner either. He was still Almighty Key, but Garum decided to capitalize on Kibum's new following and encouraged him to try changing things up if he wanted to.

"It was going to happen sooner or later so you might as well run with it," the towering Varium explained, sitting on a stool in the main area but still far taller than Kibum. "Besides, we still have two other part-timers who can fill in that role and maybe you can develop a new attraction," he explained, clapping a slender shoulder with one intimidatingly large hand.

Kibum frowned at the suggestion but didn't say no. Passeri came over and hugged him from behind, perching her beaked chin on the top of his head as she sometimes did. "You have a literal fan club now, chicklet. I'll have you know, you can probably do no wrong in their eyes," she promised, giving a low and supportive croon that vibrated gently against his back.

"Exactly!" Jackson agreed, coming close to nudge Kibum in the side with a careful elbow. "Just don't try to upstage these guns," he laughed, stepping back to flex intentionally and show off his impressive arms.

Kibum snorted and rolled his eyes but didn't comment. Garum, however, held no such reservations. "You call those guns?" he chuckled, crossing his much larger and more defined arms over his chest.

"You don't count," Jackson scoffed, deflating anyway with a mild grimace.

"It's probably best that we're not all muscle heads," Passeri giggled, letting her arms tighten a touch around Kibum. He wished he could have taken a picture of their shocked faces when they looked at her in tandem, both speechless. "Come on, love. Let's go get ready," she urged with a playful laugh, pulling Kibum along and leaving Garum and Jackson to recover on their own. "Whatever you decide to do, I'm sure it'll be fine," she promised, shifting to hook her arm through his and hold him close so they could walk side by side.

"Maybe," he conceded with a nod, smiling as another thought occurred to him. "It doesn't hurt that Crawven and company probably have to eat crow every time they hear someone talk about it."

"Oh! An avian insult. I'm mildly offended but I like it," the Moladhi laughed, squeezing his arm harder in approval.

He wasn't averse to the idea of shaking things up and trying something new, but he honestly didn't know what to do... He was used to being Almighty Key. If he wasn't them, who was he? He didn't have an answer, but it did help that Jinki was wholly supportive.

He was tired after a long day and one of Doyun's practices but had insisted on staying until Kibum was finished. "Just do what makes you happy," he encouraged while helping with the cleanup after the show. Even though he had to have been running on empty, he conjured a brilliant smile for Kibum, his brown eyes lighting up with excitement for him.

"I'll try," he promised in response, though he had no idea what that meant exactly. He thought performing made him happy. Or at least it had. But what else made him happy...? For most of his first year at the university, he'd been surviving, like he had through high school. Yes, he slept in his apartment, but most every extra moment was spent outside of it. Doing what? Making money and studying to fulfill his goal of becoming a starship captain. He socialized of course, but not for fun or friends. That was just the best way of getting information to make sure you were always one step ahead.

Passeri and Jackson were different. He would consider them friends at least. Work friends but friends all the same. Most recently... there was Jinki. If he was honest with himself, Jinki made him happy. But it was probably just because he fed him and helped him more often than not. That had to be it. Even so, it was nice knowing someone had his back as opposed to finding ways to stab it.

Happiness had never really been a part of the equation. It was so easy to lose or have it taken away. But Kibum wanted to be happy. It was exhausting feeling like the world was always out to get you or would fail you entirely if you put too much faith and trust in it. Maybe though, he could try. At least a little bit.

It didn't change things overnight. He still felt like he needed to be on his guard, but Kibum started to notice some of the tension he always carried with him wasn't so bad anymore. Like he could take a breath and not worry about needing to brace for the next hurdle that came at him.

And though he still didn't have much money for anything extra, Jinki and company always managed to make sure he had enough to eat. A tiny part of Kibum was bothered by this fact, as he had almost no way of repaying, well, any of them. But whenever he tried to mention it, someone made a fuss and yanked the conversation in a different direction.

"How are you supposed to study effectively and remember anything if you don't have energy to think?" he chided, shoving another piece of food in Kibum's direction. "Did you finish the homework from yesterday's classes yet?"

"Yes," he grumbled back, taking the food reluctantly but still glaring at Jinki.

"You do know that paying friends back isn't like taking an eye for an eye, right?" Ercite asked, leaning forward to better see Kibum's face.

He frowned at their question with a frustrated sigh, but Larad leaned close and whispered, "What does that one mean?"

Ercite glanced up with craggy brows slightly raised. "You know. When someone takes your eye so you take one of theirs?"

"No. That is not a friend exchange," he agreed with a shake of his head. It turned into a nod when he looked at Kibum again as if to agree with Ercite.

Jinki laughed once and patted Kibum on the back. "If you *must* repay me, then pass your classes. Okay?" he grinned, unobtrusively pushing his tray closer to the first year just in case.

When faced with such group resistance, there wasn't much else Kibum could do. Short of being a total jerk about the whole thing, upholding his side of the deal seemed to be the best option. Well, that and perhaps join another practice or two during the week, though that wasn't entirely altruistic in nature. Jinki wasn't unpleasant to look at, and in a body suit with sweat making his hair stick to his forehead and his skin glisten...

Kibum didn't get much opportunity to just look at Jinki when they studied. With the semester more than halfway over, they'd started shifting to more group sessions with Henry, Larad, and Ercite, and they were quick to call him out if his attention "drifted" for too long. Especially Henry. If he didn't know better, he'd say the other man was jealous. On the contrary, he was almost certain Henry acted like he did so that Jinki could save Kibum from his antics. Furthermore, even when he was rescuing Kibum, Jinki himself chided him for his 'distraction' all too quickly, especially when they were studying alone. And he was a lovely distraction, but... that was also part of the newest problem Kibum was beginning to wrestle with.

Attraction had never been part of the plan either. He knew the signs enough to know that he actually liked Jinki for *more than* the food and help he always gave him. That wasn't something that was supposed to happen. Friendship, sure. You could stop and start a new one every day if you really tried. But anything closer than that meant really letting someone in. Trusting someone enough to know they wouldn't intentionally hurt you no matter what. And he remembered seeing how that worked up close enough to know he didn't want it.

His greatest concession to admitting how he felt was letting Jinki know what hover hub he used to get to and from his apartment so the other man could meet him there if he *really* wanted to. The more fool he was when Jinki *did* when his already busy schedule allowed. And despite Kibum's best efforts, it was always Jinki carefully chipping away at his walls with gentle nudges and persistently soft questions.

"I can walk you the rest of the way home if you'd like."

"You're doing well in all your other classes, but we're going to have to figure out something for Terran biology. You know you can tell me if there's a reason this is so challenging for you."

"You're welcome to join us for supper if you have time. Daejung has been saying he'd like a rematch."

"Study hard!" "You can do it!" "You're amazing!" Okay, so maybe the last was talking about his performances on stage, but still. It was all the little things together that made him feel valued, cared for... *wanted*, and not in any of the ways he was accustomed to being seen. And it wasn't just Jinki. It was annoying Henry, unflappable Ercite, understanding Larad, constantly curious Psitassi, and even a growing number of people around them. An expanding web of trembling threads he was afraid might snap at any moment but there all the same.

With finals approaching and all of his subjects mostly ready except for Terran biology, Kibum knew he had to do something different to make it work somehow. He did *not* want to disappoint Jinki in this. Or himself if he was being honest. But they'd tried everything Jinki knew to make it bearable, tolerable and nothing had changed for Kibum.

Staring at the digitext in a tucked away corner of the library, he sighed. Jinki had class so he was alone with his thoughts for the moment. He could have gotten up with any of their circle, or contacted Psitassi for some kind of company, but he didn't want it right now. He rested his chin in one palm while the other tapped at the edge of the tablet slowly. Even without scrolling through the pages, he could recite pretty much every topic of the book without fail. And he knew all the separate pieces by heart. General anatomy? Check! The various systems in the body? Check! What each part and each system was for? Check!

If he only had to regurgitate this, he'd be fine, but the test would cover how everything worked together and why and how sometimes, things didn't work and why. And that was where everything fell apart for him. There was something connected to that idea that his mind shied away from; that he didn't want to remember or understand. Every time he tried or Jinki asked about it in reference to Terran biology, he shut down or found something else to focus on. He was almost certain it had something to do with his mother, but...

Kibum winced and closed his eyes, pushing the digitext away. "Breathe," he reminded himself, clenching his hands tight. His heart raced as if his body remembered something his mind didn't and he forced several breaths in and out of his lungs before he opened his eyes again. "Okay," he whispered, reaching slender trembling fingers towards the digitext. He pulled it closer with an audible swallow and looked down at the current page. The letters blurred together the longer he stared before he shoved it away in disgust and... fear.

He was afraid to remember. Afraid of what he would feel if and when he did. Memories of his father generated anger more than anything but his mother... was far more complicated. And he didn't want to open that door. Kibum leaned forward and laid his head on the table, clenching his eyes shut tight. It was easier to forget; to avoid whatever it was he didn't want to face.

But that was also the coward's way. It was not how a captain would act. And though Jinki might forgive him this fear, Kibum did not think the other man would accept such fear in himself. "Jinki," he whispered, slowly forcing his eyes open so he could lift his head and stare at the digitext once more. He had helped him so much already. How could Kibum ask him to try and help once more? But if not him, who else could he ask? Doctors?

Nope. His gut twisted as his mind shied away from that possibility immediately. He'd forgotten his aversion to them. He liked Passeri but she was too... motherly, if that made any sense. And Jackson didn't seem like he'd understand enough if Kibum tried. The rest of their group were alright: Henry, Larad, Ercite... but he just didn't trust them in the same way. Certainly not Psitassi. She was a sweetheart but he wasn't sure he knew a bigger gossip.

"Ugh," he groaned, resting his head on the table again. "I guess it's Jinki or bust..."

Of course, it wasn't like making an active decision made it any easier to ask about. It simply added to the stress of any normal week, sitting on his shoulders or weighing him down like this oppressive burden he couldn't shake but didn't know how to share. Throughout the week, he looked and waited for an opportunity to ask but panicked when a moment came and shut down, pretending nothing was wrong.

It couldn't be on Wednesday – Jinki had to go home to prepare supper and Kibum had class anyway. Couldn't be Thursday – Doyun had practice and Jinki was always tired after that. Couldn't be Friday – Kibum had to work. Saturday too for that matter. In the evening but still... And it couldn't be on any night that Kibum worked. Realistically, he knew he could have asked on any day and that the only feasible day for them to really talk would be Sunday, but in actuality, making the ask was not so simple for him.

Kibum knew he could just send a message. He didn't have to ask in person, which was impossibly difficult for him. It should have been easy. But it wasn't. Every time he tried, his gut twisted into a nervous ball of snarling tension and his fingers froze over the message pad. Even trying to use a voice option failed since the words simply would not come out. And the distracted stalemate with himself started to bleed over into his regular interactions.

"You okay?" Henry asked at lunch on Wednesday, wincing with a small cry when Jinki stepped on his foot under the table.

Kibum forced a laugh that rang hollow, even in his ears. "Yeah. Just a little distracted," he waved off, looking down immediately.

On Thursday, Henry held his tongue but Larad didn't. "You look pale today. Are you feeling well?"

"Huh?" Kibum blinked in surprise, looking around with a sudden inability to focus. He closed his eyes and rubbed at the bridge of his nose to buy himself time. "Sorry. Didn't sleep well last night," he explained, brushing off the Varium's concern quickly. "Long night."

Friday came and went with their normal chatter but Ercite kept giving him curious glances while Larad practically stared, a concentrating frown etched into his forehead as if that would somehow help him discover what the problem was. And any time Henry opened his mouth to try and

ask, Jinki stuffed a piece of food in it or grabbed the conversation and kept it carefully away from Kibum. Kibum loved and hated that fact. It was a relief not to have to worry about finding an answer that wouldn't sound hollow or fake because galaxies knew he wasn't going to be able to tell them the truth. Not when he didn't even know it himself.

But he hated the fact he needed it. Hated that he was afraid of this horrible thing just sitting inside him, making him feel small and childish and angry. That ruined his focus even when he wasn't vibrating with tension amongst his friends because even when he wasn't around them, the fear of what would happen after was terrifying in a way he could hardly understand. It made no sense and yet, he couldn't shake it.

What if Jinki thought him stupid for it? What if he decided Kibum was just weak for not coming to terms and figuring it out on his own? What if it did something to make him leave in disgust? Okay, the last one seemed far-fetched, even for Kibum, but the not knowing was going to kill him long before anything else did, he was sure.

At last though, Kibum found an opening to ask on Friday night when they communicated by voice chat. Traditionally, they went to Jinki's house on Saturdays and barricaded themselves in his father's study. It was really the only defense they had to give them peace from the rest of his siblings. Sunday was typically used for any other obligations Jinki had to take care of and was more of a rest day for Kibum after his long evening shift. His weekend performance nights ran longer than usual after all.

"Same as usual?" The voice on the call was so carefree and warm, like golden honey in a warm cup of tea.

Kibum took a shallow breath, his stomach knotting again. "Actually..." he exhaled, voice trembling in a traitorous manner. He stopped talking immediately, grimacing at the slip.

"Kibum?" was the quick response, Jinki's tone changing to slight concern. "Are you-"

He absolutely could not let Jinki finish that question, it would only make the tremors in his voice worse, so he blurted in one burst of rapid words, "Can you come over on Sunday!?" Silence hung in the air for a split second too long and Kibum automatically started to panic. Had he said something wrong? What did he say? Why wasn't he answering? Why-?

"Yeah." It was a simple word that immediately halted all the questions in Kibum's mind so fast in nearly gave him whiplash. "And just to be sure, you did just invite me to your place on Sunday, right?" he asked with a careful laugh. Kibum could practically picture the corner of Jinki's mouth pulled up on one side and his eyes partially closed.

"Mm." Oh how he wished he could be more eloquent in that moment, but it was a victory for Kibum all the same. The simple sound of confirmation that brought a delighted and relieved laugh from the other end.

"Good. You spoke so fast, I wasn't entirely sure I'd heard correctly. If that's what you want, of course," he promised, all sincerity and subdued happiness. Why was he so happy?

"Mm." Again, it was the best Kibum could do, almost like giving any more words would somehow steal his ability to respond at all.

“Okay. I have to move my schedule around a bit but no problem. I’ll make it work.” His voice was normal. So frustratingly normal. “Did you have a time in mind...?” he asked, trailing off with some hesitation at last.

Kibum took a breath, still stuck on the fact that he’d said yes so easily. He couldn’t take it back now. He could *not* show him, *not* tell him anything... but he’d finally gotten the question out. Now he had to answer something and his brain just wasn’t working. What even was the meaning of time? “Uh...” he exhaled instead, a reflex sound more than anything else.

Abruptly, he felt a shift on the other end, as if Jinki suddenly realized something. “Why don’t we just stick to our usual time? Keep things simple,” he explained, an easy smile obvious in his voice.

“O-Okay,” Kibum stammered back, flushing at his sheer inability to talk. “Sunday.” He took a quick breath and forced an air of calmness to settle into his voice. “At our usual time.”

He was almost certain Jinki could hear the change as well. “Great. I’ll see you Sunday at the hover hub then.”

“See you.” For a brief moment, he wanted to add ‘then’ but the word got trapped behind his teeth and then it was too late.

“Have a good night.”

Even with the abrupt farewell, Jinki’s tone was light and cheerful. Kibum almost wished he would have sounded a little more annoyed. He knew he wasn’t responding in any way that a decent person would and some sort of frustration would feel justified or deserved. As it was, he just felt... lost and adrift. Part of him had hoped that making the decision would make things easier. No. It just muddled the waters even more. At least it was only a day away though. He could focus on homework tomorrow morning - lingering in the park, and then work in the evening and sleep through a fair chunk of the day after that. He wouldn’t have breakfast but that would be okay. He’d gone without for far longer.

Saturday came and went with Jinki’s habitual morning and evening messages. Psitassi sent him a link about an article she was working on to highlight his workplace, asking him if it would be alright to send it to the local media center. She had connections enough to make it happen and it would obviously help the establishment with clients. Maybe Passeri had been talking to her about it. That was the only reasonable explanation for why she was asking him, of all people.

Sure.

It wasn’t a difficult answer. Now that his secret was out and he could perform as he liked, the fear of losing something he loved was gone. The freedom to perform had simply transformed into a freedom to express himself, even if he did mostly play second fiddle. Though some nights Passeri allowed him and Jackson to take turns on center stage. It was nice.

Saturday night was not one such evening but that was probably a good thing. Kibum put his all into performing, as he usually did, but he wasn’t in the right frame of mind to really respect it if he’d been given the limelight. Maybe Passeri could tell, but neither she nor Jackson said anything. They did their performance and walked him home as usual. Jinki hadn’t been able to come but Kibum had seen

several schoolmates in the crowds. They'd likely be talking about it at school on Monday. Some students always were, but it was just like any weekend activity, like going to the movies or a game or something of the sort. There were no more hecklers to worry about either. Garum had made sure of that, and the guests in turn did wonders with policing each other.

All that was left now was to go to sleep and wake up on Sunday to face the reality of what he'd decided to come to terms with. Hopefully anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

Morning came all too quickly the next day, an alert chiming in Kibum's ear like an inescapable bell. Groggily, he looked around and tried to figure out what was waking him up on a Sunday morning. His fingers brushed the activator and he gasped as he heard Jinki's voice flow through. *I just wanted to let you know I was on my way to the hover hub. I'll see you when I get there.*

"Crap!" he flailed as he sat up in bed, looking at the time. 11:32. A full hour and a half past their usual meeting time. Another message was lined up too. He activated it and cringed.

I hope this doesn't wake you up. Or maybe you're on your way. But I'm here at the hover hub. Maybe you can send me a location pin and I can come to you if you prefer. No pressure though. Just let me know!

A thin wail escaped Kibum's mouth and he looked down at his clothes. He wasn't even remotely ready. It wasn't like he had to clean up much, just put up the bed really, but it would take more time than he wanted to make Jinki wait. The fact he woke up later than expected was already making him anxious and if he just had to sit in the hover tube, he knew he'd only be panicking anyway so...

He pulled up Jinki's call screen and tapped his indicator, pacing in the small confines of the room as he waited for the line to connect. "Hello?"

"Jinki! I'm sorry! I overslept and-" he started to blurt, the words rushing out of him haphazardly.

"It's okay."

"-I'm getting ready and-"

"Kibum."

"-I'll be there as soon-"

"Kibum!"

The last was sharp enough to break through the rush of words he couldn't seem to stop, for which Kibum was embarrassed and grateful at the same time. "Yeah?" he asked after a brief pause that allowed him to take a small breath.

"Take your time. There's no rush," Jinki promised sincerely, voice tender and careful. "If you're okay with it, you can just send me a location pin and I'll come to you."

Kibum nodded in automatic response until he realized Jinki couldn't see him. Then he was annoyed with himself and he smacked his face with both hands, stifling a groan. Why in the solar system was he being so weird about this?! "Okay," he stated in a firm tone, literally manhandling his voice to function like he wanted it to. He exhaled again and added, "It should take you about thirty minutes to get here." For a moment, he hesitated, not sure if he wanted to say the next part. He could still turn back... no! "Quit being a coward," he muttered under his breath.

"Huh?" Jinki chirped in confusion.

"Nothing!" Kibum blurted back, shaking his head at himself as he pulled his defenses back into place. "Just let Sunny know you're... here to see me. I'll give her permission to let you in."

"Sounds good. I'll see you soon."

Kibum wasn't sure if Jinki ended the call for brevity's sake or his own, but he was grateful instead of offended. It meant he didn't have to. He sent his address to Jinki as promised and then sat back down on the edge of his bed extending from the wall before casting a look around the room. This was it. He was going to let the first person in over six years into this space with him.

Technically, it had been empty for five years and he'd only recently started living in it for his first year of university, but still... At first glance, it was nothing special. Mostly empty walls and barren floors with minimal furniture and decorations. You could barely call it lived in, but when Kibum looked longer... the room started to take on a different life, a different image from another time.

With his eyes closed or not, if he thought about the history of this space, much of his early memories flowed back to him. Many of the conflicting connections he shared inhabited this place like ghosts in a haunted apartment. Physically, it was practically empty. And yet it was also full to the brim with what had once been and what had already come to pass. Kibum's first steps, his first words, his very early childhood of laughter and life and hugs and never enough space but it didn't matter because they were happy. In those days, he'd slept under the bed when his father was home from work and in the bed with his mother when he was away.

But then things started to change and his memories shifted with them. This place of so much sadness and so much pain, etched into every inch of the walls and the floors. His later childhood of overhearing arguments, unable to escape them as he tucked himself under the bed and tried to plug his ears. Sharp anger and burning sadness from his mother's stifled tears and his father's absence. His brow furrowed as the moment his father left came to mind, a faceless shade with hunched shoulders and coiled tension that disappeared out the door without a look back.

A shiver took him when he realized he was sitting where his mother had sat that day, utterly broken in that moment. Kibum raised his hands to rub along his arms, trying to chase away the sudden chill that accompanied it. She'd been sick. He knew that much. It was the crux of everything, but he couldn't remember why. Almost violently, his mind shied away from it as a tidal wave of *hurt* threatened to wash over him. He closed his eyes and hunched in on himself, trying to focus on something, anything else.

Ghosts of memories haunted this place, crowding so close together sometimes it was a wonder Kibum could exist in the same space at all. For years he hadn't had to think about it at all and for

months, he'd told himself he should leave to save electricity, to cut costs, to do anything to get out of the apartment for every other reason beyond the real one. He gripped his arms harder, fingernails digging into the covered skin harshly, and it hurt but the pain was welcome. It brought him back to the moment. Kibum took a shaky breath and rammed his fists into his thighs. More pain and more clarity. The swell of emotion that caught him pulled back just enough and he looked at the time again, desperately trying to direct his attention elsewhere. Surprise hit when it showed 11:53.

Kibum yelped and hopped up, yanking his shirt off and stumbling for the room panel to message Sunny and let her know that L- Jinki would be coming to see him shortly. If he gave her his last name, she'd just call him Mr. Lee and he knew how annoying that was. That task finished, he frantically splashed water on his face and changed into something... clean at the very least. A fresh t-shirt and soft pants, something comfortable and unrestricting. It felt fine but he thought it might be *too* informal and he debated on changing but then he heard his door chime and he yelped at the vaguely familiar but unexpected sound.

Sunny's voice floated over the com into his room. "Mr. Kim. Jinki is outside your door. Should I let him in?"

Slowly, Kibum turned his head towards the door, staring at the all too flimsy barrier separating him and Jinki. He could still back out now. Could just sit in this sterile, crowded, bare purgatory of a place and *be* as he had been. Except... he couldn't. Finally reaching his hand out, even just a little bit, had stirred up everything he'd kept stuffed inside, locked behind avoidance and lies he told himself and the promise of better later if only he could get out of here and yet the fear of later never coming weighed down on him. Crushing like gravity that never got any lighter if he stopped to think about it at all. Choking in its oppressiveness.

Everything that he didn't want and everything he needed to say crashed around inside him like a maelstrom, twisting his guts into painful knots and making it hard to breathe... to think. His shoulders drooped, suddenly letting go of the tension bunching them tight. A swallow of sticky saliva made its way down his throat and he sighed as a single word slipped past his trembling lips.

"Yes."

The door whispered open, sliding back and spilling light from the hallway into the room, silhouetting the man in front of it, holding a carry case of something in his arms. A t-shirt and loose pants covered his muscular frame and none of it mattered save for the genuine smile that curled his mouth into a welcome expression of pink lips and partially revealed white teeth. Rising cheeks pressed at his eyes and made them crinkle at the edges, becoming mere slits that hid most of the warmth pouring out of the shadowed brown orbs.

His smile slipped when he saw Kibum there. Something invisible but all too tangible about the way he was standing or the unspoken words howling around in his head. "Kibum?" he asked, voice feather soft as he took a small step inside, one hand rising to reach for him.

"Hi," Kibum choked out, blinking quickly as he turned and looked away, motioning with his hand for Jinki to come in. Jinki's presence had banished the oppressiveness but now he had absolutely no idea where to start... what to say... How could he? He'd never tried to put the thoughts into words

before and they all careened in his head in messy strands and bucking sounds he wasn't sure he knew how to tame.

"Are you okay?" He heard the sound of shoes slipping off, the habit engrained and familiar enough to follow almost unconsciously.

Yes. No. "I don't know," he admitted with an uncertain laugh, knowing both were correct and not.

Quiet steps padded close. Jinki touched the back of Kibum's shoulder, the barest of pressure with his fingertips. It felt like lightning, terrifying and grounding at the same time. Kibum gasped and the hand disappeared immediately with a murmured, "Sorry."

Pain again, this time his fingernails digging into his palms, gave him something else to focus on. He shook his head and forced a paper-thin laugh. "I'm sorry. Come in," he urged, prying one hand open to gesture at the space where the table and chairs should be. His fingers curled closed just as fast when he noticed the crescent imprints in his palm. Awkwardly, he moved to summon the table and chairs, his body feeling more like a marionette than his own. He risked a glance at Jinki and for once, the other man didn't seem to know entirely what to say or do himself. That was as comforting as it was frustrating. Kibum glanced at the carry case in his hands though and it seemed to prompt a response.

"Ah! I brought breakfast," he forced out, a weak smile curling his lips. "Mom insisted I-" he started to say before stopping himself with a clack of his teeth and pursing his lips hard.

Kibum tensed at the reminder. Of what he didn't have. Of *who* he didn't have. And he looked at the still frame beside the door.

Jinki set the carry case on the table, an uncertain frown on his face, and then followed Kibum's gaze. He stood up and shuffled over a single step. Fingertips rested on the wall just beneath the image and he looked at it before shifting his gaze back to Kibum. "Is this your mother?" Kibum nodded, a barely perceptible movement. Jinki's smile was gentle as he viewed the image again. "You look like her."

The words, as well meaning and beautiful as they were, stabbed Kibum, splitting him open. He *did* look like her. Same nose. Same eyes. Sharper cheekbones, but similar facial structure. Different hair color but the same wavy style when it got long enough. He only *looked* like his mother. The similarity ended there, though. She had been kindness and light incarnate. Her laugh like a symphony dancing in Kibum's ears and her smile his whole world, even when she had nothing left to give. She had been hope and love and wishes for happiness despite everything.

But he... Kibum was not like her. All half-truths and secrets and unspoken words. Walls to hide behind lined his existence and a different mask for every person hung on pegs in his mind. Because you couldn't trust people. Even when they promised. Even if they loved you.

"Kibum?" He flinched and looked up from where his gaze had dropped. Jinki was standing directly in front of him, searching his face as if he could find the source of his pain if he looked long enough.

"Sorry!" he apologized roughly, shaking his head in an attempt to step away from the direction his thoughts wanted to move in. He swallowed hard and waved at the front door. "How was the trip

here? Not too many people I hope?" he wondered, looking over and immediately glancing away when he saw that Jinki could tell he was avoiding something, the faint crease of his brow and worried eyes a dead giveaway.

"It was fine," he finally answered though, playing along for the time being. "I didn't realize you lived so far from the school. No wonder you never wanted me to walk you home." He laughed it off like it was a joke but there was sadness there too.

"Yeah," Kibum agreed, the same bitter undertone accompanying the word. Looking around, he noticed the carry case again and nodded towards it. "You said your mother sent it?"

"Mm," Jinki nodded, reluctantly turning to focus on the case himself. He moved over and opened it so Kibum could see, pulling out the tray of still steaming food and setting it back on the table while he put the outer case underneath. "She wanted to make sure you had food so you could study hard," he explained, an honest laugh and smile escaping him finally.

Kibum shared the expression, easily able to imagine Jinki's mother saying exactly that. "It looks good," he promised, the weight on his chest still pressing down heavily but his stomach was undeterred.

"I didn't know what you wanted so just brought a bit of most of the things you've had for breakfast at my place," he explained with a helpless shrug. "If you're hungry... please," he offered, gesturing at the table and the chair next to it.

"You know me so well," Kibum chuckled, the realization both frightening and wonderful at the same time. He sat down and surveyed the veritable banquet before him. Fresh mixed fruit, a pancake, some congee, a rolled egg dish, and lots of little sides that he could add to them or eat separately. "I guess you already ate earlier," he murmured, glancing up to see Jinki watching him.

"Yeah," he chuckled with a smile. "But you go ahead," he urged again, gesturing towards the food once more.

Kibum nodded and started to pick at the selection before him. Each bite was delicious but it was tainted by the shadow of why he had asked Jinki here in the first place. Eating gave him a chance to calm down enough to try and organize his thoughts, but it did nothing to lessen the carefully contained maelstrom locked inside.

"Your apartment reminds me of a first-year dorm," Jinki commented as he gestured to the interior, eyes traveling over the doorway to the washroom.

"I thought you didn't stay in the dorms," Kibum commented around a mouthful of food.

"I didn't but Henry did. I used to crash his room quite often," he grinned with that charming smile of his.

"I wanted to," Kibum admitted quietly, looking down at his food before he picked another piece and chewed on it with slow care.

"Why didn't you?" Jinki wondered after a moment when silence ensued.

"Didn't have a choice." His words were bitter and dark. "But the apartment's mine."

"You bought it?" the second year wondered curiously, brows rising to match his tone.

Kibum scoffed. "My father did." Biting anger rose and threatened to make him choke. "It's the only decent thing he left me."

"Ah." It was clear Jinki didn't know how to respond to that.

He wasn't finished with the food on the tray but it was starting to sit heavy in his belly and the taste was more like sand in his mouth now anyway. "I'm done," he sighed, pushing it away and pulling his hands back to lightly clasp them in front of him. "Thank you for the food," he murmured without looking up.

"Of course," Jinki answered immediately, no hesitation present at all.

"And... thank you for agreeing to come here today," he added in an even quieter whisper. It was a struggle trying to figure out how to make the words come. Kibum tensed slightly when he saw one of Jinki's hands appear to gently rest on top of his. When he looked up, he could see the other man's reassuring smile and Kibum faltered all over again. "I..." he whispered, continuing to look at the one person he wanted so desperately to trust, to prove to himself that maybe it was okay. But doubt and fear clung to him like a sickness, twisting his insides and keeping the words locked behind his teeth.

Jinki nodded once, a mute supportive gesture, but still no words passed between them. "Was there something you wanted to tell me?" he eventually asked, gently prompting as he was so good at.

Everything. And nothing. The maelstrom rose up again, words and fragments savagely crashing against each other, vying to be the first sounds to break free. Kibum grimaced, a pained expression. A nod conveyed his intent but still... where to start?

Like a lifeline, Jinki risked a more direct question. Looking over his shoulder, he glanced at the picture on the wall. "Want to tell me about your mother?"

Kibum's laugh was a mere breath of sound but the smile that pulled at his mouth, reluctantly curling the edges, was real. "She was amazing," he admitted, lifting his face to stare at her photo on the wall. "Patient, caring, full of light and love. She was everything I wanted. All I needed," he explained, easily falling into a well-worn train of thought. "Dad worked outside the dome. Sometimes on planet and sometimes off so it was mostly just me and mom. She taught me how to talk, how to walk, everything." He looked down with a laugh that turned bitter. "She was my world far more than my father ever was."

Jinki's hand tightened on Kibum's. "She does sound lovely."

"She was," Kibum agreed with a hard swallow. "Even when everything changed, she still tried to smile, to put on a brave face," he explained, his voice turning to a croak on the last word. He blinked and started when he saw a drop of water land on top of Jinki's hand. Sniffing once, he touched his cheek with his fingers and saw they came back wet.

"Kibum," Jinki whispered, standing up so that he could move closer and kneel in front of the other man, clasping one slender hand in both of his. "What happened?" he asked, eyes searching Kibum's face with care and concern. "What happened to your mother?" he asked again when silence stretched between them.

There was no doubt in his mind that Kibum's mom was dead. No question of that. Just 'what happened?' and a solid thread to grab so Kibum could finally free the words and break the dam holding them back. "She got sick. When I was four." He winced as the sharp memory of her sitting on the bed after receiving the news came back to him. He hadn't understood it then. He was too young to recognize the pained betrayal and hurt she must have felt, but he knew she was sad because she hadn't smiled. She had cried then. And he couldn't help her.

Kibum exhaled as more tears spilled over with each blink, words dripping from his tongue like a slow leaking faucet. "It was my father's fault. He made her sick," he explained, brow furrowing as if he was searching for the reason. It made him nauseous though and he had to swallow hard, still not ready to free that truth. "They argued all the time he was home. We weren't happy when he was here anymore," he explained in a flat tone, eyes staring at nothing as flashes of clearer memories resurfaced. "We weren't happy when he was gone either though," he added, more tears pooling in his eyes and blurring his vision as the weight on his chest grew and pressed suffocatingly upon him. He looked at Jinki and his voice trembled when it came out again. "I knew she was sick and not getting better. She still smiled but it was never the same as before. Forced. Tired. Hiding pain," he went on, sniffing and swallowing.

Jinki's hands were warm as he wiped Kibum's tears. Then he grabbed Kibum's hand again and cradled it close, mutely providing comfort and reassurance. 'I'm here. I've got you.'

"The last time I saw my father was when I was eight. He left and never came back. And things only got worse from there." Picking through the graveyard of his memories, his throat closed as a name finally surfaced, bubbling up from beneath years of avoidance. He saw it clearly on the data screen his mother was reading. His father had just walked out and she was sitting on the bed again, her back to the door. Everything about her posture signaled defeat and Kibum's heart broke anew. "Mors hominus feminae. Woman's Demise," he croaked, the name sour on his tongue as he looked down.

Jinki inhaled quietly. "Kibum..."

"I didn't know what it meant then, but we tried," he exhaled, reaching out to grab the front of Jinki's shirt in his free hand, holding firm. "Me and mom. We tried everything to save her."

"There is a cure," Jinki whispered, his voice soft but the words as good as poison.

Dark derision curled Kibum's lips into something hard and ugly, even as liquid pooled in his eyes once more. "If you have money," he smiled and laughed, the expressions at odds with the crying sounds that emerged instead. "We didn't. She was a single mother *abandoned* by the one person who was supposed to protect her and I was a child," he snarled, pain twisting his words into garbled sounds. Despite his harsh words, he pulled at Jinki's hand and shirt, desperate for something.

"No one would help us," he admitted through clenched teeth and closed eyes as the original wave of helplessness and fear crashed down on him. "My fa-" He could barely get the word out. "My father did this to her. He *lied*!" The word emerged as a growl and he twisted the shirt in his hand. "And because he lied," he gasped, his throat trying to close up on the memory, a fresh horror dug from its grave. "And *abandoned* us. His family!" He gripped Jinki's hand hard, fingers crooked into bony claws. "And ran away to some place off world where I *couldn't* follow..." Speaking was so hard, he had to choke the words out.

Kibum took a gasping breath and leaned forward like he was trying to curl in on himself. He felt like he was suffocating. "They let her die... *He* let her die!" he keened as he scrunched his eyes tight, salty droplets raining down in the space between them, spattering on skin and fabric alike. "And I couldn't do anything." It was a plaintive sob pried from out of his rigid throat. "No matter what I did, what I learned, what I tried... it was never enough and she still died!" The words rushed out in a croak, a sob bursting out as the last word broke free. "She left me too and it was my fault because I couldn't do *anything*!"

No longer supported by the stiff rage against his father, the injustice of his mother's death, Kibum's body turned to jelly and he sagged forward. Strong arms caught him, holding him close as Jinki cradled him in his embrace. One gentle hand braced the back of his neck and the other ran soothing strokes up and down his back as he rocked him in place. "I've got you. I'm here," he murmured, resting his cheek against the top of Kibum's head.

Suddenly that grief stricken twelve-year-old boy once more, Kibum curled up against Jinki's body and wrapped his arms around him tight, holding on like he was the only thing keeping him from floating away. Inconsolable, he sobbed between gritted teeth, body shaking with wracking bursts of intermittent breaths and coughs.

He cried until there were no more tears.

Until he felt empty and hollow and bereft of anything else.

Until he felt sick, his stomach so twisted and abused.

He had no idea how long he cried for. Even less awareness of how long strong arms cradled him close, just rocking back and forth as he sniffled and slowly regained control of his breathing and his thoughts.

Eventually, he became aware enough to feel embarrassment creeping in. Acting like a child weeping and clinging to Jinki. He swallowed and took a breath. "Umm..." he hesitated, finally loosening his hold.

Jinki paused and did the same, though he didn't let go entirely. "How are you feeling?" he asked, letting his hand droop to rub small circles at the top of Kibum's back.

"Like a child," he answered with a weak snort, his head carefully tucked against Jinki's chest so he wouldn't see.

"That's not what I asked," he laughed back, a soft, amused sound tinged with relief.

Kibum wrinkled his nose but nodded once. "Tired. Empty." Embarrassed. But he didn't say that out loud at least.

"Better?"

"A little," he conceded with another tiny nod.

"Good." Only then did Jinki relinquish his hold and push Kibum back to get a clear look at his face. He wanted to keep hiding but Jinki was having none of it. "Kibum. Look at me." It wasn't a forceful command but it worked all the same. Kibum lifted his head up, following the movement of his

eyes. "There you are," he smiled, laughing once as he used his thumbs to wipe at the tear tracks on the other man's face.

Kibum flinched away with a complaining groan before he wiped at his face himself and leaned back, forcing another swallow around the lump in his throat. He sniffed and mumbled, "You must think I'm--"

"No," Jinki stated sharply, interrupting Kibum with a finger in front of his face. He jerked in surprise and just looked at the other man then, not expecting the rebuttal. "Whatever you think I think right now is probably wrong," he promised in a gentler tone of voice. He moved his hand up to place it on top of Kibum's head in a brotherly fashion and smiled. "Right now, I'm just glad you decided to talk to me."

He didn't entirely believe it, but Kibum didn't have the strength to argue. He snorted once and rolled his eyes, the ghost of his usual self shining through. "Sure," he agreed for the sake of saying something before wiping at his cheeks again and looking away.

Jinki didn't press the matter and moved his hand back so he could rise to his feet after awkwardly freeing his legs from under and around Kibum. By the way he moved, he was stiff and maybe suffering from some degree of pins and needles. "Can you stand?" he asked, offering his hands while leaning over slightly.

Speaking of pins and needles... Kibum accepted and nearly fell again when his legs and feet announced they did not appreciate being folded up for so long. "Ow..." he whined with a pained and embarrassed snort, stumbling to the table with Jinki's help.

"Careful," Jinki urged, staying close until Kibum was seated. Only then did he move his hands away.

"I'm okay," Kibum murmured, looking down at the clasped hands in his lap. But even as he said the words, he had to wonder if they were true. He felt alright but it was rather like the calm after the storm and it didn't feel real to him just yet.

Jinki sighed quietly and then placed his hand on Kibum's nearest shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. "Thank you."

Pulled from his thoughts, Kibum looked up in confusion and blurted, "For what?" Shouldn't he be the one thanking Jinki instead?

"For trusting me," the other man answered, the tone sincere and honest. So much so it almost hurt.

Kibum dropped his gaze again and shifted his hand to scratch at his wrist, slightly uncomfortable. "You..." he started and stopped, chewing on his bottom lip again. Jinki squeezed his shoulder reassuringly and Kibum looked back up to meet the encouraging nod. "You don't think I'm... stupid, do you?" Jinki sighed softly and he had to add, "For what I said."

"No, Kibum. I don't." Jinki simply affirmed what he'd told the first year in the beginning. "I'm just glad you decided to talk to me. Really."

Kibum shifted his gaze to watch Jinki's thumb run little soothing strokes on his shoulder. "It feels... strange. To have finally said it. Especially here," he added, mouth twisting in thought as he frowned while a general sense of numbness began to suffuse him.

Jinki's thumb stilled and he took a quiet breath. "Why?"

Sort of floating and no longer feeling much of anything that had assailed him earlier, Kibum looked up and around. "Because this is the only thing my father left us. The last place I saw him. The last place I saw my mother." He stopped talking to point at the bed he hadn't put up like he'd intended. "Right over there." When he looked back at Jinki, he blinked at the stunned expression on his face.

Chapter Fourteen

A chill washed over him. That... hurt. Everything else he'd heard was bad enough, but to hear that... Jinki opened his mouth and took a small breath, blinking quickly. He wasn't even sure how to process it, to respond. Especially since Kibum didn't seem to think anything was wrong. Choosing his words carefully, he bit his bottom lip and winced. "You... sleep... in the place where your mother died?" His heart twisted at the thought and his stomach sank.

Kibum nodded as if he was just confirming a simple fact. He was unphased at first. But Jinki watched the words slowly seep into the other man's skin, the uncertainty flicker in his eyes. His brow creased, a wrinkled line of confusion marring his forehead. Suddenly stiff again, Kibum glanced at the bed in the corner of his eyes, head tilted forward as if a weight had suddenly appeared.

Jinki could practically hear the wheels of Kibum's mind turning and he hardly dared breathe for fear of breaking the tension that had risen between them. Kibum looked like a porcelain statue sitting on his chair, thin pale skin suddenly too bright – no, vulnerable – in the enclosed space. "Kibum?" Jinki dared to whisper, one hand reaching towards him.

He flinched when Kibum inhaled sharply, jerking back around. "Wrong..." he hissed between a mostly closed mouth. His eyes landed on Jinki but there was no recognition in them. He looked right through him before he slid his palms up his arms to his shoulders so he could grip his shirt and curl up on the chair, making himself as small as possible. He was like a child, bottom and heels of his feet perched precariously on the edge of the seat, looking for all the world like he might fall over if even a whisper of wind brushed against him.

It was a startling and haunting change. Jinki pursed his lips and clenched his fists on the table between them. "Kibum," Jinki whispered, looking at the hunched shoulders and the crown of his head. There was no answer as the other man just sat there, looking all too eerily like he'd stopped breathing. When he looked closely, he could see the barest rise and fall of the slender shoulders. Taking an audible breath himself, Jinki forced his hands open and laid them flat on the table. He had suspected this would be a difficult conversation, had tried to mentally prepare himself for it ahead of time, grateful for the notice. But even with that, he had no idea how to respond to *this*. This was so out of the realm of anything he had expected.

But Kibum had trusted him enough to let him in and rip off the scab of memory in his presence. Of course the wounds he'd exposed would probably be raw. If he'd been blocking it out for six years

now, it was likely he didn't even know how to handle it himself. And Jinki was no healer, but he had to do or say something at least. The smart thing would probably be to call one of the healers on call in the system but... Looking at Kibum again, Jinki didn't think he'd appreciate such a step. As much as he felt he was in over his head, it wasn't really his call to make at just this moment.

With a mental pep talk, he nodded to himself and stood up awkwardly. His feet scuffed quietly on the floor when he shuffled in front of the first year and knelt beside him. "Kibum," he called, touching his back with light fingers. It took a second but eventually, unfocused dark eyes slid sideways to glance at him as Kibum remained hidden behind his hands and shoulder. "Why are you staying here?" It was the only question Jinki knew to ask. It was certainly safer than 'Why are you sleeping in your mother's deathbed?'

There was no answer for a long moment. No movement at all save the slow blinks and tiny breaths that moved Kibum's body.

"Why... can't you stay in the dorms?" Jinki waited for a response, practically holding his breath, but all he got was that damn dead stare. He licked his lips, brow furrowed, and risked a different question. "Why aren't you staying with your guardian?"

Kibum flinched and his head rose slightly so his eyes peered just above his shoulder. It wasn't the movement Jinki wanted but at least he shifted.

Dammit though. Crying would have been preferable to this painful silence. Jinki at least knew how to deal with tears. Standing up, he inched forward a little bit more and carefully slid his hand around Kibum's back, a half-embrace. Mutely, the younger man leaned towards him, shoulder pressing into Jinki's lower abdomen. Out of reflex, he reached to cradle the dark crowned head close with his free hand, hair soft under his palm. "I'm here," he whispered, statuesque in his pose.

Eventually, a thin whisper of sound disrupted the stillness, so quiet Jinki had to lean closer to hear. "All I had." He took a breath. "Didn't think about it when I came." His body shook with a hiccup and he *whimpered*. The sound nearly broke Jinki. "Oh stars, what is wrong with me?!" he choked, trying to curl up even more.

"Hey, hey. Shh," Jinki soothed, holding him tighter. Like somehow his arms could hold the other man together and keep him from falling to pieces. "I don't-" he stopped, not wholly sure of what he wanted to say. "I don't know the whole story, but I'm certain you were just doing the best you could," he reasoned, nodding to himself as if to reassure them both.

A bitter laugh hissed between what had to be clenched teeth but Kibum didn't say anything. He just sat and rested against Jinki taking one shallow breath after the next.

Jinki looked around the room and bit his lip again, the wheels in his head turning while he came up with a tentative plan. He couldn't let Kibum stay here. Not today at least. He wasn't sure about long term, but for now, he could have the first year stay at his place. He had space in his room. Kibum could have the bed and he'd sleep on the floor. Maybe Daejung wouldn't mind sharing his room if it got to that point. They didn't have a guest room but he could make it work. Henry had stayed over a few times. As had Larad. And Ercite, though they didn't count. They could sleep anywhere.

"Hey," he called softly, determined to make this happen if nothing else. Kibum grunted, a muted guttural sound that at least reached Jinki's ears. "Pack your stuff. At least enough for one night. You're staying with me today, okay?" he asked, though it was hardly a question. Shoulders shrugged, a noncommittal gesture at best. It made Jinki frown but it wasn't a no. Easier to work around. "Alright," he sighed, patting Kibum's head gently. "Just sit here for a minute. I'll pack your bag for you."

Another noncommittal grunt broke free, without the shoulder shrug this time. Stepping back carefully, Jinki made sure Kibum wasn't going to tip over before he turned his attention to finding a bag to pack what little belongings were in the small apartment. For good measure, he immediately put the bed up and that seemed to at least wake Kibum from his stupor.

He uncurled from the chair and moved around the apartment like a shade, all cold energy and in utter silence. Jinki shadowed him, watching the younger man retrieve a bag to stuff with clothes. He was unusually messy in shoving them into the empty space, not a care for the wadded-up fabric. Not that he had much to begin with. Clinking sounds emerged from the washroom, the containers of hygiene products settling haphazardly.

When he seemed to be finished, he stood in the entryway, staring at the still frame of his mother's picture. One hand reached as if to take the image down but then stopped, hanging in the space between them. He pulled his hand back and looked away, staring at the door before glancing towards Jinki, lost empty eyes settling on him.

"Ready?" he asked, grabbing the container with the tray inside and moving closer. There was a delayed response, the question taking a moment longer to register. But then Kibum nodded once and Jinki gestured for him to lead the way, making sure the table and stools were down and the lights went out as they exited the room. Outside, he reached to take Kibum's bag but the younger man moved it away, holding fast. He didn't look at Jinki though he did stay close. "Okay," Jinki agreed, putting a light hand against Kibum's back, offering silent support and... guidance as they moved towards the front of the building.

Sunny's bright face popped up on the screen when they reached her. "Have a good day Mr.- oh! Are you alright?" she asked, the smile fading into a look of concern, utterly sentient in her response.

"He's just not feeling very well right now," Jinki promised with a hand motioning for understanding in her direction.

"Should I call a cab?" she wondered immediately, frowning when Kibum shook his head in answer to the question.

"Yes please," Jinki countered without a second thought. It was a long ride but it would be well worth the money spent. He was sure. It hurt that Kibum's shoulders slumped though, like he was defeated by the answer. Likely worried about the cost.

Sunny looked between them again, obviously conflicted in her programming. "Mr. Kim?"

"Please, Sunny. A cab," Jinki encouraged, wondering what the protocol was for a guest trying to order a cab ride for a resident under these circumstances. He was certain the optics didn't look the best at the moment.

She glanced at Jinki and then at the man beside him with a concerned frown. "Mr. Kim?" she asked again, still hesitating. When Kibum sighed and waved a hand at her in dismissive acceptance, she looked at him sideways, mouth quirking in mild suspicion. Her brown eyes shifted back to Jinki. He gave her a bright smile, trying for innocence. He really was trying to help. Her lips pursed but she hmped and nodded. "Okay."

It didn't take a cab long to arrive. They waited inside, Kibum huddled close to Jinki's side, until Sunny announced it was outside. "Thank you, Sunny," Jinki waved before he turned his attention to help Kibum get settled in the cab. When the destination screen popped up, he typed in the address and sighed into the ensuing silence when it took off. Jinki wondered what to tell his parents – his siblings... It didn't matter right now. He could get by with a vague explanation for the time being, but he needed to figure out what would be safe to say from Kibum himself. A sidelong look at the younger man did not engender confidence in that possibility at the moment. Jinki wished he had a blanket to put around his thin shoulders. Kibum looked lost, his head tilting down, white knuckled hands gripping his bag tightly, silence incarnate. His only noticeable movements were the periodic slow blinks that made him look sleepy or under the influence of something...

Jinki winced and carefully laid his hand atop Kibum's, ready to pull back at the slightest warning. Kibum inhaled once, a soft, sharp sound, his eyes blinking faster as he focused on the hand before him. Haunted eyes rose up to meet Jinki's worried gaze. For a moment, he really saw Jinki, but then his face clouded with what looked like worry and guilt before he shuttered himself again, looking down once more.

"I'm here," Jinki whispered, so quiet the words barely made it past his lips. He stopped looking at Kibum, worried it might cause him more discomfort, but he left his hand where it was, a silent reminder he was still by the other man's side.

It would be easy enough to say that Kibum was sick. His mother would accept that, especially if she saw him now. Harder though to keep it running if it went on for more than a day since modern medicine could work wonders for physical ailments and illnesses. Not so much for matters of the heart and mind though... Still, if he talked to his mom, she'd probably help think of an explanation good enough for the time being. His father usually went along with whatever she said anyway and the only one he was really worried about, in that nagging sibling sense, was Hajoong. Old enough to think she knew everything and young enough to not be able to read the room effectively - sometimes, she could push for an answer harder than was needed if she wasn't convinced.

Stifling a scoff, he did roll his eyes at the thought and sighed quietly. It didn't matter. He'd deal with it when a problem arose. For now... he let his gaze slide back over to see Kibum once more. His concern was figuring out how to take care of this one currently. Not for the first time since meeting Kibum, he wondered what in the galaxies he'd gotten himself into.

The cab price made him wince when they finally got to his home, but he hid the expression from Kibum so it wouldn't worry him. Not that he really needed to bother since he was only looking down anyway. "Let's go," he encouraged, forcing a smile he didn't feel as he placed a light hand against Kibum's back and walked beside him like he was some sort of invalid. It was disturbing how pliant he was when Jinki led him inside; like a living doll.

He was apparently doomed to have no luck that day as his mother stuck her head out from the kitchen when she heard them come in. "You're back early," she started to say before her eyebrows rose curiously upon seeing Kibum, a silent inquiry etched upon her face.

Jinki forced a grimacing smile and responded, "We decided it would be better to come back here for now." He tried to explain with his facial expressions the situation but he wasn't sure how successful he was.

His mother tilted her head at him with a tiny frown and he almost tried to add something else before they both heard, "Is Jinki back?" Crap! That was Doyun. Not the worst-case scenario but still bad enough.

"Perfect timing!" Mrs. Lee grinned, abruptly smoothing her facial expression as she caught Doyun's attention from her vantage.

"Huh?" Doyun chirped in surprise, coming to a halt in the hallway across from the kitchen.

"Come help me decide what we should have for supper," their mother continued, reaching across the hallway and playfully dragging her into the kitchen with her.

"Mom!" came the expected groan of complaint.

Jinki sighed in relief and then quickly urged Kibum up the stairs in case anyone else decided they wanted to show up randomly. "Careful," he cautioned, still hovering close as Kibum plodded along with listless steps.

It was a relief when they made it to the safety of his room without anyone else appearing. And as he looked around, there were few moments where he was more grateful that he was generally clean by nature. Nothing to trip over or otherwise need to hide was in easy sight. "You can set your bag down anywhere," he promised, gesturing at the expanse of the room. Larger than a dorm room, it was still a bit cozy with all the more 'permanent' fixtures a house often afforded. Oh, everything was still retractable, including his bed, the clothes drawers, display shelves, and desk with a chair, but he had space enough to keep them out without too much trouble.

"Mm," Kibum grunted in understanding, literally dropping it with a thud where he was standing. Without saying a word, he turned a slow circle, appraising what he saw with eyes that glossed over everything. He paused when he saw the bed though and tottered over to it as if entranced. Jinki watched him carefully, hovering within arm's reach in case he needed to help him somehow. But Kibum simply stopped when he was close and leaned over to trace his fingertips over the blanket on top. "Tired," he sighed, a single whisper escaping from his pale lips. All of a sudden, he collapsed beside the bed as if a switch had been flipped, legs collapsing under him and arms clinging to the top weakly.

"Kibum!" Jinki gasped, lurching close to catch the other man before he fell backwards completely. Limp deadweight settled into his arms as Kibum's head lolled to the side, his eyes closed. "Kibum?" he tried again, a worried frown etched into his face. He placed his hand on Kibum's forehead – no temperature, and then carefully jostled his cheek to try and wake him. There was no response, but he was breathing fine and a quick check of his pulse showed nothing amiss either. "I guess you *were* tired," Jinki sighed uncertainly, his gaze softening at the utterly vulnerable man in his arms. He

was still thinner than he should be but the sharp angles had been blunted slightly, and in his rest, he seemed almost innocently childlike.

"Alright," he murmured, reaching over to throw the covers back on his bed. "Please bear with me for a minute," he urged, gathering Kibum in his arms and lifting him up. He was both heavier and lighter than Jinki expected: a strange combination of toned muscles and slightly sunken flesh. Taking the utmost care, he set Kibum's unconscious body on the bed and pulled the blanket back into place. Tentatively, he settled on the edge of the bed and looked over the sleeping man. His gentle hands smoothed the fabric and traced stray strands of hair from Kibum's forehead. "You're safe here," Jinki promised as he pet Kibum's hair, letting his hand linger while he leaned over him. His thumb gave tiny strokes as he tried to think ahead about what should happen next but he didn't know.

He had done well in getting here, but now he had a chance to replay what Kibum had told him in the apartment and it just made him feel even more out of his depth. "No wonder you hate lies so much," he whispered, recalling all the times Kibum found ways to avoid telling them. It explained all the half-truths and silences he chose when he didn't want to say something; all the ways he'd change the subject when something got too close to his heart; how he would literally flee if nothing else worked. It also explained the biting honesty... utterly untempered but wholly sincere.

Jinki sighed and pet Kibum's hair again. "I knew there was a reason you acted out so much." It was impossible to ignore with how often he put on a front, forcing a laugh or a smile to hide what he was really feeling, the tension in his body giving him away if you looked too closely. How he turned overly dramatic about unexpected things like not wanting to learn Terran biology. Oh stars...

"I get it now," he laughed, a bitter and forlorn sound. He couldn't imagine losing his mother to something like that... In layman's terms, it was effectively a minor Moladhi STD. He didn't know the details as he'd never needed to look it up, but he knew it affected males and females equally and was easily treatable. In Terrans though, only the women showed symptoms.

Jinki could only imagine the powerlessness that Kibum might have felt in facing the decline of his mother after his father deserted them. He could picture a young Kibum poring over articles and digitexts, searching for an answer, but not being able to connect the dots because a lot just wouldn't make sense to him. Not at that age... It was no wonder his Terran anatomy and biology grades throughout high school were his worst scores. That tidbit of information had taken Jinki forever to pry free from Kibum's guarded trove of secrets. But the way he'd watched the first year's eyes glaze over when he tried to study seemed a lot more understandable.

It also made a lot more sense about why Kibum spent so much time away from his apartment. Maybe he had been able to literally suppress that particular memory, but any place that's been lived in has memories... By all standards, Kibum's apartment had been practically bare, probably intentionally so, but that didn't mean he could just erase the ghosts of what he'd experienced in it. Jinki was pretty sure that finances could have something to do with it too, but it felt more likely that the real reason was... the memories of the place. He would not soon forget the way Kibum had looked when the doors opened after he'd arrived.

Even with a forced smile, as weak as it was, he'd just looked so... lost. Flustered. Like there was so much running around in his head and he didn't know how to let it out. He'd seen a much-reduced

reaction in Siwoo sometimes, where she bottled everything up and then didn't know what to say when things were bothering her, but Kibum was on another level.

Jinki took a breath and moved his hand to smooth the covers again, watching Kibum's brows twitch in his sleep. Admittedly, this was a little bit more than he'd bargained for when he signed up to try and make sure Kibum succeeded, but... he'd come this far already. It was heavy, what he'd learned today, but it felt like a major victory all the same. If he could just get past it now, Jinki wondered how many more victories they could make happen. Completing the semester. Graduation. Becoming a spacefarer – no, captain. All normal enough things, but for someone like Kibum, Jinki could only imagine they would have special significance.

Especially that last one. It brought a genuine smile to Jinki's face. So far as he knew, he was the only one Kibum had told that secret to. Captain. His dream was to become the captain of a starship someday. Any starship would do, but he had to become the captain to decide where he went and how he got there. Honestly, it fit. Jinki couldn't see Kibum being much of anything else. He did have a bit of an engineer's spirit – you could always fix something mechanical, but his heart was probably that of a captain.

"You'll get there," he promised in a quiet whisper, his hand shifting up to brush at the odd strand of hair trailing over Kibum's forehead and eyes. "I'll make sure of it."

Almost as if he was agreeing in his sleep, Kibum hummed softly, the corners of his mouth turning up into a tiny smile.

Seeing even that tiny response helped unwind the terrible knot in Jinki's gut. He breathed a sigh of relief, even as his thoughts turned to the rest of the day and beyond. Now that he was relatively sure Kibum would probably sleep for a while, Jinki nodded to himself and stood up, brushing at the wrinkles on his pants from sitting too long. Now was as good a time as any to try and... tactfully explain the situation to his mom. If he was lucky, it would just be her. She could be quite scary when she wanted to be, but she was surprisingly easy to talk to about tough issues like this one.

Jinki was out of luck again when he carefully made his way down to the kitchen. Doyun had seemed to take up residence and their father had joined them, easily talking with his wife and daughter. Bolstering his resolve, Jinki forced a smile and stepped in, focusing his attention on his mother. "Mom. Where do we keep the med kit again?" he asked, trying to keep his voice as normal as possible.

He watched his parents turn curiously surprised looks at him while Doyun scoffed. "It's in the storage panel under the stairs like it always is." But as soon as she finished, her eyes got really wide and she audibly gasped, "Is Kibum sick?!"

"Mm," Jinki nodded in quick agreement as he looked at his sister before he focused on his mother again. "He's not feeling well and I'm not really sure what to give him," he admitted with a shrug.

"That's different," Mr. Lee hummed thoughtfully, glancing at his wife.

"It's fine, dear," Mrs. Lee shook her head with a smile and pat her husband on the arm. "I'll go take a look with him," she added, moving closer to loop her arm through Jinki's and guide him out of

the kitchen deftly. They paused to grab the aforementioned med kit and then headed upstairs to his room so she could see for herself.

In the safe privacy of his room, Jinki tried to start an explanation of what the situation was, but she stopped him from talking first to take a personal look at Kibum. Like Jinki had done, she settled herself on the edge of the bed and tested his temperature with the back of her hand. "He's a little warm," she murmured, opening the med kit to take out a temperature reader. It came back as 37.4 and she sighed. "He's so pale," she added in mild concern with a shake of her head.

"Mom?" Jinki asked softly, hovering nearby with nothing but anxiousness roiling in his gut.

She glanced over her shoulder and looked at him once, a quiet laugh escaping. "You look like how your father used to look whenever I got sick," she commented dryly before glancing down at Kibum again. In so doing, she missed the slight flush that crossed Jinki's cheeks before he could school his expression. Her fingers danced over the med kit replicator and she ordered two meds. "When he wakes up, give him this for the oncoming fever," she handed him one tablet, "and this one for a general boost to his system." She gave him the other tablet and then shifted to settle the full weight of her attention on him. "Okay. Now you can tell me what's really going on." It wasn't a question.

Jinki held the tablets close to his chest and took a quick breath. His mother raised one brow but didn't say anything. "Right. I can't tell you everything," he murmured cautiously, already bracing for whatever reaction she might give.

"Okay," she simply said after a brief pause, looking between them as if she could try to solve the mystery herself. "I trust you, son. I know you wouldn't bring him here like this without good reason. And I will help if I can."

Swallowing, he took another breath and did his best to explain in a vague roundabout way. He stuck the tablets in his pocket so he could better gesture with his hands while he talked. "As you know, I've been trying to get him to let me in and... he did. But... it's painful and has to do at least a little bit with where he lives right now." His mother listened with tiny nods to confirm she heard him. "I can't let him stay there because of it and he doesn't really have anywhere else to go. I know he has- had?" he murmured, not entirely sure himself, "a guardian but I don't know who or where they are. And right now... he's more head and heart sick than anything else," he explained, touching his head and chest to accompany the words.

"Which can make some people physically sick too," she murmured in response, gently chewing on the inside of her bottom lip while she crossed her arms and frowned, a thoughtful expression on her face. Jinki nodded with a hum of agreement. Mrs. Lee glanced down at Kibum again. "What's your plan then?"

The question caught Jinki a little off-guard. He hadn't really expected her to be so immediately on board with it. "Uh..." he trailed off, trying to marshal his thoughts.

The sound made Mrs. Lee look at him and she laughed at his expression when she did. "Oh honey," she chuckled sympathetically. "It doesn't take a detective to see that someone like Kibum might have a lot going on under the surface."

Jinki didn't feel attacked exactly but a fairly strong protective surge rose up and he blurted, "He's getting things figured out!"

Mrs. Lee kindly did not laugh at him this time. "Love," she sighed, standing up to place her hands on his shoulders and look him straight in the face, almost at his eye level. "I mean no offense. You've brought many a mentee home, but this is the first one that has ended up in your bed," she commented, deadpan in her delivery as she tilted her head slightly to the side.

"Mom..." Jinki groaned, suppressing the urge to face palm.

A soft and careful smile appeared on her face before she placed her warm hands on Jinki's cheeks. "I only mean that this could get complicated. He's not your typical mentee and you *obviously* care for him. As your mother, I need to know you have a plan before I can agree to whatever you're thinking," she explained, nodding at him once while she searched his eyes.

Jinki ducked his head just enough to look down but not dislodge her hands. "I know," he grumbled, his knotted stomach proof enough of that. Kibum's situation was different in so many ways, but he did have a tentative plan. He just wasn't sure how it would play out in actuality. Looking back up, he met his mother's gaze. "As long as it's more or less manageable, I'd like to let him stay here for now. If he wants to anyway," he added, glancing at Kibum quickly and then back again.

"For how long?" his mother asked.

"I don't know." Jinki looked down, troubled by the admission.

"And if it gets to be too much?" she wondered softly, her tone making him meet her gaze.

Jinki frowned, his lips pursed and brow furrowed. "If it gets to be too much... I'll try to convince him to see a healer."

His mother's resultant smile was bittersweet. She tilted his head down and rose up on her toes to kiss him on the forehead before pressing hers against his. "Even as a child, you were always three going on thirty. You're so good at taking care of others, I just worry about you taking care of yourself," she admitted with a quiet sigh.

"I know, mom," he murmured back, reaching up to grab her hands in his to cradle them under his chin. "Thanks for worrying about me."

"It's what a mother does," she sighed with a hint of amusement in her voice and leaned back to look at him clearly, a brighter smile on her face this time. She tugged on their joined hands to lower them between them, still gently clasped. "I'll talk to your father and your siblings today. You can stay here tonight as by now, everyone will already know that Kibum is sick," she winked. Doyun would never let that opportunity slip by.

"No doubt," he laughed once, allowing the normalcy of the moment to wash over him. It was a breath of fresh air from their previous conversation.

Mrs. Lee freed her right hand so she could cup Jinki's cheek again. "Do you want to come downstairs for supper or should I bring you something later?"

Jinki hesitated with a glance at Kibum. "Bring it to me later?" he carefully asked, expression cautious.

His mother chuckled as her lips curled up slightly. "Alright, love. I'll leave the med kit with you in case his situation changes." She nodded at the sleeper on Jinki's bed. "If you need help, let me know. And if you just need someone to talk to..." she trailed off, looking at him from under intentionally raised brows.

"I know, mom," Jinki mumbled, smiling embarrassedly.

"Okay. I'm gonna go now, but you take care of yourself," she commanded, pointing her finger in his face, very much a protective mom in that moment.

"I will," he promised with a nod before catching her hand to lower it so he could wave with the other, a gentle nudge to get her moving.

She clucked her tongue at him and huffed a laugh. But she didn't say anything else as she departed, letting the door slide shut behind her without a glance back.

Sudden eerie silence descended and Jinki found himself alone once more with nothing but the sleeping Kibum and his own tumultuous thoughts. A little at a loss now that the first hurdle had been cleared, he cast about for something to do. The bag Kibum had brought was still lying in the middle of the floor so he moved it to the top of his dresser for the time being. But that was all that needed to be done. "Okay," he hummed with a shrug. A glance at Kibum showed him sleeping soundly. "Now... we wait," he added, shuffling over to the bed and sitting down on the floor beside it.

Obviously, he had time to kill so he opened his personal screen and started flipping through tabs to catch up on anything he might have missed. When he was finished with that, Kibum was still sleeping, but Jinki had a new thought. Pulling up the search bar, he typed in: Woman's Demise. He didn't know nearly enough about it to really understand what Kibum had gone through. And now was as good a time as any to start figuring it out.

Chapter Fifteen

The first night was hard. Jinki roused Kibum enough to eat and take the tablets his mother had given him, but it was a struggle. While Kibum woke up, he hid under the covers for a long time, purposefully not looking at Jinki.

"You should eat something," Jinki coaxed, staring at the trembling lump on his bed with twisted feelings of hurt and concern.

"I'm not hungry," came the delayed muffled reply, followed by a quiet sniff.

"Please, Kibum," he urged earnestly. "At least a couple bites." There was no immediate response other than more quiet snuffles, but eventually, a pale hand reached out from under the covers and felt around. Jinki pushed the tray into range, making sure the mela was in easy reach, and then sat back. To his satisfaction, Kibum's hand closed around the red fruit and quickly pulled it under the blanket with him. Jinki listened until he heard the sound of the first bite and allowed a tiny smile to curl

his lips. "There are a couple tablets there too. You should take them since you're starting to get a fever. And my mother suggested-" he stopped when he saw the hidden figure jerk as if struck.

Jinki frowned and thought about what he'd said before he cringed. 'Mother' most likely. He mutely smacked his lips as if in punishment and sighed. "You should take them both since they'll help give you energy for later." Waiting was agonizing. But it did pay off. The mela was returned – two bites missing, and the hand felt around again. Jinki carefully pushed the tablets into its path and nudged the water container close at the same time. Once more, the items disappeared under the blanket and only the water container came back, still mostly full.

"Do you think you can take a shower?" he asked when Kibum continued to stay under the blankets. The response was a vague shifting motion under the blanket and Jinki didn't know what he meant. "Are you shaking your head or nodding?"

"No," Kibum answered directly, literally curling up further into a ball under the covers.

It made Jinki feel helpless and at a loss. "Okay," he murmured in response, frowning in uncertainty. "Would you mind if I go take a shower?" he asked, not sure if he should leave the other man alone right now.

Another delay extended between them, but Kibum eventually hummed, "Mm."

Not the most direct answer, but it sounded like agreement. Hopefully. "Okay. I'm stepping out now then. If you can, try to eat a little bit more, alright?" There was no answer this time and Jinki grimaced again. Before he left, he rummaged about in his drawers for a change of clothes and hurried off. He didn't want to leave Kibum alone any longer than he needed to right now.

When he came back, he knocked on his door to let Kibum know he'd returned. He didn't hear a response but that could have been because Kibum hadn't said anything loudly enough to carry. Carefully, he opened the door and peeked inside to make sure it was alright. The other man was lying on the bed more normally this time, face uncovered by the blanket and the food tray on the floor. It was otherwise untouched.

Jinki exhaled again and retrieved the tray, setting it up out of the way for now. Then he turned back to check on Kibum. He felt a little warmer than last time. Retrieving the temperature reader, he checked it again. 37.6. "Well that's not good." Looking closer, Kibum was starting to appear a little flushed. Jinki deliberated on asking his mom, but it was only a small change and maybe the medicine hadn't had a chance to kick in yet. He had taken the medicine, right?

He wanted to believe that Kibum had but... Wincing at the thought, Jinki carefully lifted up the covers enough to check around without actually touching Kibum. Nothing there. Unless he was laying on them. Or had put them under the pillow. Neither were places he could easily check right now. So he looked around the room instead. There was nothing in obvious sight and if he'd put them in the wastebin, he'd never know. It was set for auto-decomposition. There was nothing left to say whether he actually did or not, but there was no denying his fever had gone up. Jinki defaulted to the only other thing he knew to do: cold compresses.

It kept Kibum's temperature stable, but that was only the beginning of Jinki's night. Before too long, Kibum's sleep turned fitful. His body moved in small, jerking motions and he made whimpering noises periodically. It was sad but manageable until he cried out, "Come back!"

Jinki fell off the edge of the bed in startled surprise and missed being smacked by the flailing hand that shot out from under the blanket. "Kibum?" he called, sitting up to kneel beside the bed.

"She'll die if you leave," he whimpered then, fingers twisting the sheets roughly. His soft cries suddenly turned harsh and he growled, "Liar!" nearly choking in the process.

"Kibum!" Jinki called, rising up to shake the sleeper, trying to wake him from his nightmare.

Kibum came to with a gasping inhale, panic strong hands scratching Jinki through his clothes as they grabbed at him blindly. His breath came fast, like he'd just finished a race, and his eyes stared blindly until recognition flashed and all his strength suddenly fled. "Jinki," he whispered in a trembling voice, eyes shining too brightly. "He left us and she died," he cried, searching Jinki's face as if he had some kind of answer. "I couldn't..." he started to say before his quivering voice failed him.

"Shh," Jinki soothed, settling on the edge of the bed to pull Kibum close and into his arms. "You were having a nightmare," he promised, wincing when the other man clung to him too tightly, claw-like fingertips digging into his back. "I've got you. I'm here," he added, gently rocking the other man as he pet his hair soothingly until he fell back into an uneasy sleep. And so passed the first of many such nights to come with Jinki sleeping against the side of the bed on the floor holding Kibum's hand.

Even though they were both exhausted in the morning, they did attempt to get ready for class. Kibum's fever had broken sometime in the early morning hours, though neither had slept well. On their way out, Mrs. Lee noticed them trying to leave and stopped them. For all intents and purposes, it looked like she'd been waiting for them, since all of Jinki's siblings had already left for school. Jinki tried to marshal some sort of explanation or defense but then saw the way his mother was looking at Kibum: concerned was a nice way of putting it. He looked over to see for himself and noticed that Kibum had that look like he was a hair's breadth from falling apart.

Quickly, Jinki stepped in front of him to break his view of his mother. "We have to go to class," he explained, though every part of him denied that reality.

"Hah," Mrs. Lee barked a laugh and mutely pointed towards the stairs.

"Mom. We... he has to," Jinki tried to reason, feeling panic well up at the thought of everything falling apart now because he wasn't able to uphold his promise.

Mrs. Lee sighed and crossed her arms. "Who do I have to call?"

The question took a second to register and Jinki blinked dumbly. "Uh..." When she raised her brow, he shook his head to try and clear his sleep deprived thoughts. He'd never had to give her that information before. "Provost Adeleke," he finally blurted when the name eventually came to his tongue.

"Contact number?" she questioned, opening her personal screen in preparation.

Again, Jinki found himself dumbfounded. The thought clicked a heartbeat later and he opened his own personal screen to access the Provost's number. It would likely go to the secretary first, but it would be enough for his mother. Of that he was sure. "Here you go," he mumbled, transferring the number to her personal screen.

When she had it saved, she shifted her focus back to them again and pointed up the stairs once more. "Now."

"Yes, ma'am," Jinki said in a low tone, turning on the spot and then urging Kibum to go before him. Kibum seemed in a bit of a daze, staring at Jinki's mother for a moment longer, but then he blinked and turned, following the gentle nudging that guided him back upstairs.

Jinki didn't know what magic his mother worked, and he was reluctant to ask, but somehow they got permission to 'study at home' for at least a week. Psitassi practically volunteered to bring Kibum all his homework when Jinki messaged to ask if she would be willing. Nor did he have a shortage of volunteers amongst his group in case he needed a helping hand in turn.

In the evening, Kibum tried to put up a front and say that he needed to go to work, but a quick call to Garum nixed that with no trouble. He was given the same week break to get himself sorted out. Though Jinki did get several concerned messages from Passeri and Jackson when it became apparent that Kibum was not answering them.

Jinki also found himself bearing the brunt of his siblings' frustration and disappointment when he was in no condition to help with their practices as usual. Hajoon took it in stride – an upcoming professional for sure, Doyun seemed to understand given the situation, and Siwoo appeared most offended by the lapse, but no one argued outright. Especially if they happened to see Kibum in Jinki's company, which was rare, to be fair.

Kibum mostly stayed in Jinki's room, effectively hiding. He was skittish and unusually shy, even ducking away from Jinki when he tried to help him study or do his homework. Revealing his past had apparently rocked him to his core and the man Jinki was spending most of his time around was vastly different from the one he'd first met. What confidence he managed to muster was nothing more than a thin façade and he was prone to jumping at any unexpected sound, up to and including Jinki reentering the room.

What was worse were Kibum's sleep habits. At night, his sleep was fitful and often full of feverish nightmares that usually broke before the morning. During the day, his concentration was spotty at best. Even more troubling was that Jinki had to figure out what possible trigger words he needed to avoid to prevent an episode of sorts; one wrong phrase and Kibum would shut down, either mentally or physically or both. It was exhausting. And when it came to Terran biology... the subject was still a shit show, though Jinki had found a foothold at last.

He now knew enough about what Woman's Demise was, and how it affected the body, to keep from drawing direct comparisons, but it still made tutoring Kibum challenging. Frustrated with another tumultuous study session, he exhaled forcefully. "Okay!" Kibum startled and jerked back, blinking wide eyes at Jinki. "Sorry, but hear me out," the second year insisted, chopping his hand between them as if it might stop any objection. "This picture," he stated, pointing firmly at the digitext. It was some diagram of the internal workings of the human body. "Imagine it's you or me," he instructed, watching

Kibum's features to see what effect it might have. When nothing but a conflicted cloud appeared, Jinki stifled his desire to groan and refocused his attention. "Me," he amended. "Imagine it's me, alright?" he asked for confirmation, looking at Kibum to make sure he understood.

"You," he echoed in response, turning new eyes on the image.

"Right. And this one..." he trailed off, flipping through images to get to a female version, but he stalled because there weren't many female Terrans that Kibum knew he was on good terms with. Fans, yes, but friends? Not so much. But an idea occurred to him at the last second and he blurted, "...is Sunny! Just imagine her as a living Terran, alright?"

"Sunny," Kibum nodded, a frown of intense concentration on his face. "Right." But then a look of confusion crossed his face and he turned to Jinki, "But she's not alive."

"You're right," Jinki nodded, again fighting a surge of frustration. He really could nitpick anything lately. "But pretend. What *if* Sunny was a living Terran. Yeah?"

"Imagine. Okay," he nodded after a delayed thought response. "If she was a living Terran."

"Yes!" Jinki cheered, beaming at the seemingly inconsequential but significant connection. "Now, pay attention to this part and this part. In females, it..." he explained, doing his best to contextualize everything in a more specific setting so that it might not trigger a response like before.

It wasn't nearly as much as Jinki had hoped it would allow for, but the week they'd been granted gave them enough time to lay a foundation to work from. And in the days that followed, Jinki's persistence, attentiveness, and determination started to pay off. In public and with Jinki nearby, Kibum could mostly maintain his fragile façade and go back to classes. Work was still off the table – the one time he tried had ended in a spiraling panic attack that had scared everybody and disrupted the evening's entertainment. Afternoon practices were also out for Kibum, though he could handle first thing in the morning, when he was still fresh and there weren't as many people around.

At school, Psitassi seemed to have made it her personal mission to run interference for Kibum to help alleviate the possibility of too much attention being put upon him. "Of course I'm doing this for you," she preened with a wink, threading her fingers together in front of her happily. "But it's also a mission from Passeri," she added, leaning close like she was delivering a very important secret so that Jinki and Kibum could hear her lowered voice. "She says I should learn to 'harness the crowds more effectively'," she imitated, copying the other Moladhi almost to perfection. "I've no idea why. She hasn't told me yet, but it's Passeri," she grinned, twirling in place in giddy excitement.

She was also responsible for rallying the fan club to continue sending Kibum support as well as putting out any fires that might have cropped up in the meantime. The Moladhi would not suffer someone speaking ill of Kibum in her presence. In the grand scheme of things, they weren't many, all things considered, but they were vocal: a small legion of dedicated students who were hoping for Kibum to succeed.

Another week later, when the wounds weren't quite so fresh anymore, Kibum started talking about other parts of his life. Maybe it was because he was tired of keeping it bottled up or perhaps it was because he thought Jinki was a good and safe listener, but in the quiet privacy of Jinki's bedroom, one story after another emerged bit by bit as the semester marched on.

The first story was fragmented and choppy. Rather like he was struggling to thread everything together in a cohesive manner, patching it into a whole piece by piece as the words came one after another. "I do have a guardian. Had," Kibum corrected, looking down. "Maybe he still thinks I'm his charge. I don't know. He's a Varium though. Eric Munn. Mom and... dad knew him before I was born. They were friends. For a long time." He sighed then, a deep and heavy sound. "Mom asked him to look after me. No other family wanted me. Planets away and no interest in accepting me. Mom knew she was dying. Would probably die soon. I hated him for saying yes. He wasn't her. Could never be. And I didn't know how to be around his kids. Two of them," he laughed once, a sound bereft of amusement. "Young and Moon. Generic names. He wanted them to be able to choose freely. I hated them for that too. Choice," he scoffed, mouth twisting like he had tasted something bitter.

Another night, another continuation of the story. "Thank the universe Eric didn't look like my dad. Bastard." The usual vitriol seeped through, a colorful array of mixed emotions in a single word. "He looked Terran. Probably still does. Taller than average. Handsome I guess. He liked to smile," Kibum explained, a confused expression on his face. "I never got it. I didn't want to see it. Couldn't see what there was to be happy about. He paid so much money to take care of most of mom's funeral debt. Take care of me. What in the stars was there to be happy about? A trip to the incinerator and she was gone. Ash to be scattered across the planet. She's gone but her debt remains. In my father's name of course, but he's not here. So it's mine now. Thanks dad." That had been the end of that conversation.

"Eric did try," Kibum admitted, a guilty air permeating the space around him. "Young and Moon did too. But they couldn't understand. I was angry. I think I still am." Jinki had to laugh at that, earning the barest smile in response to the admission. "Angry he left. Angry she died. Angry that I was alone. Only I wasn't but it felt like it because they weren't them. Then I had to go to school and that was a whole other issue. No one there could understand. It's hard to connect with the angry home-schooled kid who doesn't like anybody," he admitted in a dejected tone. "Everything was so hard then. Life. School. Home. I got into so many fights," he laughed, shaking his head at himself.

The stories were intermittent most days, spoken in a distracted and detached manner as Kibum was studying. Or at least appeared like he was studying. Jinki never pried, but he would be lying if he said he wasn't curious for the continuation of the tale. There were more days of success and failure at school before another tidbit was forthcoming though. Gradually, Kibum started going to afternoon practices. A little bit here and a little bit there. If it got to be too much, Jinki had to bow out. The coaches understood, but the players were harder to convince. Universe bless Hajoon for her protectiveness of Jinki on those days. Doyun was a different story, though...

Fortunately, Jinki had backup. Henry wasn't nearly as gifted in grav jumping as Jinki, but it was no secret Doyun had a crush on him. For that alone, she was willing to overlook any lack of skill when the other man jumped in to help fill the gap as needed. And Larad managed to strike fear into the heart of the teams when he assisted, curse the inhumanly talented Varium. And Ercite, with their plethora of stored knowledge, was able to assist in Jinki's habitual tutoring and mentoring activities, a position they rather enjoyed actually.

When things calmed down a bit in the second half of the semester, the stories continued again with a lessening of nightmares to boot. "I made it through junior high on sheer grit and stubbornness alone. But high school was a different story," he cringed, remembering something particularly painful. "Different classes. Different students. And no Young and Moon to surreptitiously watch my back. Oh, I

know now that Eric had them looking out for me then,” he explained with a dramatic head nod. “You think I got into fights before...? Oof,” he snorted, rolling his eyes. “I can’t even tell you how many times Eric had to come to the school to smooth things out. I never made friends so I was an easy target. Everyone was an enemy. No one could be trusted.”

“Kibum,” Jinki exhaled, aching to embrace the younger man and offer what comfort he could, but he knew better. Doing so would break the fount of words and end the tale. It was better to let the story end in its own time, no matter how much he desired otherwise.

Kibum shrugged and looked away. “You know, Eric probably had something to do with it in the end, but Young and Moon started... training me not long after I began high school. I didn’t see it that way at the time,” he admitted, sighing heavily again. “They would always come at me from behind.” He winced, shoulders unconsciously bunching at the memory. “You know how young Varium are. Far more flexible than a standard Terran. I had to learn real quick how to be creative in escaping their... surprises,” he explained, tempering the word he likely wanted to use. “I still hate it when anybody’s behind me. Makes my skin crawl,” he admitted with a shiver.

At some point in the semester, he was able to rejoin ‘family’ life in the Lee household. Oh, everyone knew he was a regular in Jinki’s room, but seeing him at meals was not par for the course.

“How’s the food?” Mrs. Lee questioned, pointing at the barely touched tray in front of Kibum. She wore the same smile Jinki often did, her brown eyes crinkled at the corners.

The rest of the chatter around the table died down as they listened in, making Kibum more self-conscious for the fact he had hardly tried anything. Panic flickered across his face while he looked down until Jinki brushed his arm with careful fingertips. It was hardly a touch at all and yet it seemed to help ground him, giving him something to focus on. “Good,” Kibum managed to choke out, looking up quickly to offer a weak smile in response.

“I’m glad,” Mrs. Lee nodded, her eyes drifting to Jinki before settling on Kibum once more. “Eat as much as you’d like,” she encouraged, one hand gesturing at him as if to give permanent permission. And then her attention shifted, swinging to the rest of the table with practiced ease. “How’s practice going, Hajoon?”

“Huh?” she inhaled in surprise, clearly caught off guard by the question. “Fine,” she added quickly, recovering as fast as if she was on the field.

“Jinki reminded us you have a match coming up,” Mr. Lee commented, food deftly clasped between his chopsticks as he waited for her response.

Hajoon huffed with a dramatic roll of her eyes. “Don’t tell me you forgot the first match of the quarter finals are coming up after exams?!” Mr. Lee laughed, a dry but bemused sound that rumbled in his middle-aged chest.

“As if,” Doyun snorted, wrinkling her nose at her older sister. “You’ve been dropping reminder hints for weeks now.” She yelped when Hajoon raised a hand like she wanted to smack her younger sister. “Mom!”

“So noisy...” Siwoo grumbled with a frustrated sigh before she stuffed another bite of food into her mouth. “Mm!” came her muffled cry when one of the siblings kicked her under the table. It was impossible to tell who, but her glare was laser sharp.

“Doyun,” Mrs. Lee chided, a baleful glare settling on her daughter.

“Sorry,” she mumbled immediately, hunching down in her chair to take another bite in silence.

“Can I go play games now?” Daejung asked into the quiet that followed. “What?” he wondered when most eyes looked at him.

Mr. and Mrs. Lee shared equally tired sighs. “Did you finish your food?” Jinki piped up, pointing at the half-eaten food.

“Yeah,” was the quick response, an eager nod accompanying it.

Jinki raised a brow and cast a quick glance at Kibum. “Did you finish your homework?” he asked, turning back to focus on his youngest sibling. Daejung fell quiet with a pout and took another bite of food with about as much enthusiasm as one would while eating dirt.

“Three more bites,” Mr. Lee instructed, holding up his fingers accordingly.

“Then finish your homework first,” Mrs. Lee added right after, in perfect sync with her husband.

“Ugh...” Daejung groaned, playing dramatics again.

“Told you,” Siwoo shrugged, pointing her chopsticks at him and snorting once.

And that was a relatively quiet meal. Kibum almost didn’t know how to respond. Lunch at the canteen was nothing in comparison and their sheer vibrancy was almost overwhelming. But Jinki had refused to let him stay cooped up in the room by himself and it was his one delayed condition for sharing his living space – ‘You must eat meals with me and the family.’

And the stories continued from there, as if given new life by the exposure to a ‘normal’ day in the Lee household. “I mean, look at me,” Kibum snorted, gesturing at himself disparagingly. “It’s not like I was ever going to be anything sizable in high school. Even with Varium... siblings,” he added with some hesitation. “I would never be one to win fights. Not with people who were larger and stronger and faster than... this,” he explained, gesturing at himself again. “After so many losses, one learns or gives up.” When Jinki looked at him with a hesitant smile, Kibum added, “You can guess which path I chose.” Stretching hugely, he laughed once. “Words can be a far more effective weapon when used correctly. I taught myself how to confuse my antagonizers and charm with backhanded compliments and hidden insults which worked much better than these,” he explained, holding up his hands like they were some useless part of him.

Another night and another story followed, the hint of longing in his voice. “I think that’s why I get along with Passeri as well as I do. The Moladhi can use words like a sword and it’s beautiful,” he exhaled, a wan smile pulling at his mouth. “You know, the minute you stop talking and start listening, you begin winning the war. People are founts of information if you give them the chance.” His expression darkened slightly, the hint of insecurity present. “And the more you know about them, the easier they are to manipulate too.” He scratched at his face, clearly uncomfortable. “The lines start to

blur when you use people like that," he admitted, chewing on his bottom lip. "Are they really your friend or just a tool or are they trying to use you too?" he wondered, dark eyes drifting up to look at Jinki directly, a challenge or a question. It was hard to say.

Jinki took his time to answer, mulling his words with care. "If you've already come to a decision about me, I don't think I'll be able to change your mind," he admitted after a significant pause. "But you should also know that, if nothing else, I keep my word." He had promised he'd help him to see this semester through. That much was indisputably true. If he had questions about anything outside of that, well... Jinki might have to consider them at length as well.

That had been the end of that night's tale, neither completely satisfied with the ending. But it did not preempt the continuation of the story in the days to come. "My choice of university would likely determine the direction of my life. I could have stayed in the other dome. I didn't want to though. Eric offered to help. Young and Moon tried to be friends. I know that now. But none of it was enough." Kibum sighed and looked at his open palms hovering over the digitext he was trying to study. "I needed to know I could do it on my own. Without help. Without depending on anyone else to make it happen," he explained, folding his fingers slowly to clench his fists. "I wasn't given student housing but I did have the apartment," he murmured, shivering at the reminder. He hadn't been back since Jinki had brought him to his house. "I don't know how well I've succeeded," he admitted, letting his eyes trail over to meet Jinki's in that moment.

"Hey. No man is an island," Jinki shot back, holding up his hand with one finger hovering in the air between them.

It was enough to make Kibum laugh once with a smile. "No, he is not," he agreed, nodding slowly and looking down at the confirmation. "But..." he continued, looking up again and making eye contact with Jinki. "At some point, I will need to find my father. He needs to know the pain he caused. He needs to *pay* for the hurt he left behind. And someday, I will be the one to make him see it."

Slightly taken aback by the vehemence that infused Kibum's words, Jinki blinked and took a breath, exhaling noisily. "I have no doubt of that. There's just one tiny little problem right now," he continued, holding up his fingers to indicate the small issue.

"What?" Kibum questioned, his expression clearly indicating he had a pretty good idea of what Jinki was talking about.

"End of semester tests are coming up and you still have to pass those before you can really consider the next step..." he explained, a worried grimace on his face.

Kibum sighed in exasperation. "I know. My grades are subpar. For now. But if I pass the exams..." he trailed off, his hand lingering in the air in the space between them.

"You can stay at the university, you'll become eligible for university housing, and you'll progress to the next level!" Jinki cheered, a voluntary cheerleader in the dark moments of Kibum's psyche.

"Exactly!" Kibum agreed after a brief delay. It was obvious he wasn't sure how to respond himself. But that was the long and short of it.

“Okay!” Jinki grinned, the personification of enthusiasm. “We have a few weeks left before finals. We can do this!” he promised, extending his hand so as to give Kibum the option to take it.

For a long moment, Kibum just looked at it uncertainly, his hand curled loosely into a fist in front of his chest. Oh so slowly, his fingers curled open and extended in front of him before he carefully reached out to place his hand atop Jinki’s. Fingers curled beneath his, gripping lightly, a silent promise. “Okay,” Kibum whispered, staring at their joined hands with all the hope his battered heart could muster.

Chapter Sixteen

At some point, Kibum came to the realization that change had slowly taken place within him. He couldn’t pinpoint when or how it had happened exactly, but he started to wake up more often feeling like he wasn’t burdened with the weight of nightmarish memories that haunted him in his sleep. Little by little, his heart felt lighter and the smile that crept upon his lips, though faint and cautious, was genuine. Maybe it was just because life in Jinki’s house had started to feel... normal. He wasn’t the person he’d been when the academic year started, but he did resemble that figure again, at least a little bit.

Though utterly embarrassing at first, divulging his stories with Jinki had started to calm the torrent of his thoughts. And as overwhelming as they could be, living with and being around the rest of Jinki’s family stopped stinging quite so much when he couldn’t help but lament what he no longer had. He wasn’t what he would consider ‘fixed’ exactly, but life stopped seeming so treacherous at a point, and he knew Jinki had a large part to do with that. He was not blind to just how much the other man put into making him feel comfortable and safe. From his silent stalwart presence to all the ways he ran interference when they were around other people, especially at home.

Living with Jinki’s family was life in a way Kibum had never experienced and it was both amazing and frightening at the same time. He vaguely remembered a time when it was just him and his parents, but in Jinki’s family, there was never any silence or privacy outside of one’s given room. Sound and attention and questions intruded at every possible interval and made it impossible to predict what might happen next when there were five bodies vying for attention, not including the parents.

Jinki’s siblings had innumerable questions most of the time, but when they were about Kibum, they kept them mostly in check or asked out of earshot, though he could see them, unspoken words bubbling beneath the surface. At the increasing number of practices Kibum could convince himself to attend, Jinki kept the focus centered on himself and training. Well, when Kibum didn’t have a relapse anyway. But even then, Jinki’s priority was him. Never would Kibum have thought Jinki would simply abandon another priority for... or was it because of? – him.

School was an easier arena because he had his dedicated fan club. Even though he hadn’t been working for the past several weeks, Psitassi had been very busy with maintaining his group. He was going to have to thank her for that at some point. It was there that he was actually able to start acting like his old self again, putting on some of the masks he usually wore around the student body at large. They helped him ‘pretend’ like things were back to normal. And they allowed him the minimal confidence to start using words like the poetical tools they’d always been to him before. Friendly

banter and gentle barbs began to grace his tongue once more, and it extended from school to Jinki's home life as well.

He still needed Jinki to play moderator if things hit a little too close to home, or risk shutting down when he didn't know how to respond to a particularly direct question – usually from Siwoo no less. And though Daejung liked to play the fool, he wasn't half as silly as he pretended, even if his head was mostly stuck on games lately.

Interestingly enough, the cautious sense of normalcy was double edged for Kibum. Before, all he could focus on was not falling apart, not feeling worthless, and protecting himself as best he could while still trying to move forward. Now that he was finding his footing again, the rest of the world was beginning to intrude once more. And it was starting to make Kibum feel conflicted. For weeks, his only thoughts about Jinki had been of necessity: he was safe to be around, he was safe to think about in terms of studying Terran biology, and he was the one that could chase Kibum's nightmares off and offer solace from his bouts of madness.

Now... Kibum was starting to notice both older and new thoughts again. Jinki had always been gentle with him, but the little touches and constant bouts of intermittent contact sometimes made his skin tingle and his stomach flutter. It was occasionally hard not to stare at the way he focused when he was trying to teach Kibum something new. Harder still to pry his eyes away from him when Jinki was helping with practices. Though to be fair, that one was twofold. Of course he didn't mind watching Jinki when he was supposed to be studying, but he found himself experiencing a renewed appreciation for the sport of grav jumping as well. He'd never participated in it before but he had to admit that it did look... interesting to say the least.

"I could teach you if you wanted?" Hajoon suggested, a far too mischievous gleam in her eyes after one of her practices.

"Galaxies no," Jinki scoffed immediately at the idea. "You'd kill him without meaning to," he explained, giving his sister a once over as he stood semi-protectively in front of Kibum.

It was adorable. "Really?" Kibum laughed in mild disbelief.

"See? He doesn't mind," she reasoned, an equally mischievous grin matching the glint in her eyes.

Jinki saw it and looked at Kibum. "If anyone's gonna teach him, it'll be me," he promised firmly, giving his sister a dry look when she cackled – yes, it was a cackle – and roughed his hair up in a playful manner. "Don't trust anything she tells you," he whispered behind his hand while he leaned closer to Kibum, utterly unaffected by her gesture. "Her definition of playing nice is *not* kicking you out of the playing field *intentionally*."

Kibum blinked and looked between the two, trying to see if they were kidding. But... given what he'd seen of Hajoon so far, he wouldn't put it past her. The unrepentant shrug wasn't helping any either. "Noted," he responded instead, giving Hajoon a quick once over himself before they went on their way. Though he was pleased by the prospect of Jinki teaching him how to play. And yet, it was one more thing that would simply have to wait until later if anything was going to come of it.

Between not working, studying as much as humanly possible, navigating the nuances of morning and afternoon practices, and attempting to attend all regular classes otherwise, Kibum had his hands full. It was enough to simply take it one day at a time until he abruptly realized that time was growing short and exams were right around the corner. Come what may, he needed to be ready for them if at all possible.

One week to the day before the start of their final exams, he woke up and felt like he was... more or less himself. At last. At least for a temporary time anyway. It was the first such occurrence since he'd fallen into the quagmire of his memories. But his head was clear for a wonder – free from the shadow of any nightmares; his heart was calmer and more settled than it had been in a while; and it felt like he could take a breath without feeling the need to hold it in preemptive worry. For the moment anyway.

The room was dark so it was probably early morning still, yet he was wide awake and ready for the day. But Jinki was asleep on the floor and Kibum didn't want to risk waking him up. Carefully turning onto his side, he looked over the edge of the bed and regarded Jinki's sleeping features. His straight hair with that slight curl at the very tips sprawled across his face in a messy fashion, moving minutely with each breath that passed his lips. Kibum wanted to reach out and brush it away but he stayed still, tucking his hands under his chin instead.

In all the times that Jinki had been taking care of him, he'd never once made a move to bring them closer. He was effectively the perfect gentleman and while that was a beautiful thing, it was also quite confusing for Kibum. Even before he'd started spilling his secrets to the other man, he knew he'd liked him. Of course those thoughts had been put on the back burner during the heart of his madness, but now that he was making progress, they'd returned. Jinki was good in a way that Kibum could never be, but that goodness and honesty and genuine sense of self called to him in a way few others had.

Oh, he'd crushed on plenty of people in the past. Most recently it had been Jackson and Passeri. They were probably how he ended up working at The Stars Align in the first place, but it didn't take long to notice they were hopelessly devoted to each other. And before that, there had been passing attractions in school, but none were trustworthy enough to try and get close to. In his world, attraction and actually liking someone did not often go hand in hand.

It didn't help that he couldn't read Jinki either. He was an open book and almost without guile, but Kibum couldn't tell if there was anything more beneath the surface than what Jinki showed him. For all his beautiful warmth and appearance, Jinki just seemed so out of reach for Kibum. The man literally treated him like a younger sibling. Well, technically like a mentee, but he had the same caring air he used to deal with his siblings so same difference really. It was impossible to tell if it was a one-sided thing or not.

Hajoon and Doyun had both told him, on more than one occasion, they thought something might be there, but neither were particularly helpful otherwise. They weren't even at liberty to give him any info on people Jinki had previously dated or gotten close to, though they assured him men weren't a problem. And even though Kibum's condition hadn't been the best lately, it wasn't like he'd been able to get anything useful out of Larad or Ercite either. Galaxies help him, but those two seemed dead set on frustrating him to death with their vague hints and long stares that gave absolutely no clear idea as to what they were thinking. Adding to that, Henry was simply a lost cause when it came to

getting information, jealous friend that he was. Hah! Kibum knew it was mostly an act, but he was aware enough of the very real fear of losing someone you cared about, so he tried to cut him some slack. Some days anyway.

Still though... the past couple weeks had gone by in a sort of fever dream feeling but he did think, sometimes, that there *might* have been something there. Maybe. In the way Jinki held his hand or stroked his forehead or gently sang him to sleep with a low croon every now and then. His voice was delightful to listen to. That was the case in general but when singing, some lullaby that he'd professed to using on his siblings, it was warm and soft and soothing like a heated blanket that wrapped around Kibum while he held a bowl of warm soup cupped between his hands, sipping on it slowly.

He wanted there to be more between them, but he... liked and respected him enough to be okay if there wasn't. This was enough. Hopefully. If this was all Jinki was willing to give him, to be the anchor to his madness and the harbor of his peace as a friend and nothing more, it would have to be enough. But that didn't stop him from looking down at the other man with wistful hope as he slept. "It doesn't feel fair to ask more of you at this point," he admitted, biting his bottom lip with a sigh. He'd literally mostly untangled the worst of the emotions he'd been carrying around for years already, kept him on course to graduate with decent grades (other than Terran biology but that was understandable – passing was acceptable at this point), and given him a place to belong. Not to mention his bed these past few weeks... It didn't seem even remotely possible that more could be in the offing. And yet... it didn't stop him from wanting. From hoping.

Staring in contentment, he inhaled and blinked in surprise when Jinki stirred, suddenly opening his eyes and blinking sleepily. It was the most endearing sight and Kibum had to fight to not look like he was staring when he absolutely was. "Morning," he pretended to yawn in a falsely tired voice.

Jinki's sleepy smile was practically the sun. "Morning," he responded, no feigning necessary. He rubbed at his eyes with his hands and stifled a yawn before looking up again, his gaze a little fuzzy from just waking up. "Did you sleep well?" he asked, rubbing at messy locks before letting his hand rest on his forehead.

"I did," Kibum responded, huddled near the edge of the bed, knees tucked up close to his chest under the covers. "You?" he asked, almost afraid to. Jinki never complained about sleeping on the floor but it seemed an uncomfortable place to be. He always felt a little bad about it. He'd offered to switch places on numerous occasions but that hadn't worked. If he hadn't been so embarrassed by the thought, he would have suggested they just share the bed. He had a pretty strong feeling Jinki would have shot that suggestion down too though.

"Quite," was the easy response. It was impossible to tell if it was a lie because it sounded like the absolute truth. Kibum knew from experience the floor *could* be just fine, but it didn't assuage the guilt all the same. "Have you been up long?" he wondered, rubbing at his eyes again and flailing haphazardly for a time indicator somewhere.

"Not really," Kibum answered quickly, the response a truth this time. He really hadn't been awake that long *this* morning.

Jinki squinted at the clock on his personal screen and wrinkled his nose. Clearly, he wasn't ready to wake up either, not that it stopped him from asking. "You ready to get up?" he wondered, already sitting up to start rolling his sleeping mat into a neat, folded pile for storage purposes.

"No," Kibum grumbled, burrowing under the blankets like he could hide from Jinki. He knew it wouldn't work. Experience had taught him the other man would simply persist in pestering him until he *did* get up. But even if it wasn't real, he *wanted* that moment this morning. And so Kibum waited, curled tight and huddled under the blanket. He listened to the sounds of Jinki's routine. His usual laughing sigh at such a display. The noises of folding and putting up the sleeping mat and covers. Feet sliding softly over the carpeted surface.

"Kibum," he called, the tone playful and soft. Fingertips danced over the fabric, tapping away at the empty spaces over his body before playing a tattooed melody on his arms and hips and sides. "Ki-bum!" he hummed again, palms flattening on Kibum's side, fingers splaying over his ribs and just above his hip bone.

Kibum giggled at the sensation, the gently firm touch tickling him. "Jinki..." he groaned, flopping onto his other side under the covers. The call and sensation repeated itself once more so he flipped again, assuming a huddled position with his knees tucked under and his head pressed into his pillow, hands cradled close to his face.

Ever so gentle hands traced up his sides and to his shoulders to peel away the covers over his head. "Kibummie," came the call that sent a shiver up his spine before soft fingertips pet the back of his neck and hair.

It was a tender gesture. Nothing romantically intimate about it. He'd seen Jinki make similar gestures towards his siblings when he was comforting or soothing them for something. It shouldn't have affected him as much as it did. And though he craved the contact, he was never really ready for that moment. To him, it *felt* intimate and close and he had to fight the visible shiver that would give him away at the touch. "I'm awake," he complained, rising up on the bed so he could sit back on his knees and pout at Jinki, squashing his feelings down as hard as he could.

"There you are," Jinki grinned, smoothing Kibum's hair down with his hand before resting it on the edge of his shoulder. "Come on. Time to get ready. You've got class first thing," he reminded the younger man before reaching up to ruffle Kibum's hair and then stand up in the process. It was an act of self-preservation as he retreated quickly after Kibum's outraged yelp.

It didn't matter that Jinki also had class soon after Kibum's started. His was apparently the priority. And while he had time to finish getting ready, if he didn't get his butt up soon, he wouldn't have time for a shower before the other siblings started to rouse. "Fine," he grumbled, throwing the covers off and trudging towards the second-floor bathing room.

By the time he was finished, one of Jinki's siblings had taken the bottom floor washroom and Daejung was waiting for the second-floor room after him. He looked very much like a zombie as they passed each other, the younger boy not even offering a word of greeting as he stumbled into the bathing space. Kibum had become used to it after a couple days, though the first time had been quite surprising...

They went through their usual rush of morning preparations and then headed for the university together. Henry typically greeted them at the gates, though sometimes it was Larad too – often with Ercite on his shoulder. Those two were practically inseparable. Today, it was everyone. Granted, the university in general seemed to have that view as more students than average appeared to be clustered around. The last week of the semester was always crunch time, no matter what year you were in. In his circle, they were more or less ready for their finals but Kibum still needed to brush up on Terran biology, so that was the topic they harangued him about at every opportunity.

The subject still made him uncomfortable, his mind shying away from a lot of the easy stuff without him thinking about it, but it wasn't like he didn't know it. He'd studied it extensively when he was younger. It just hadn't made sense. Still didn't entirely, but at least this time it was easier to remember. More or less. It was terrible but it helped if he thought about the human body as Jinki's, as he'd been instructed to. And Sunny's for the female side of things. The rhetorical 'What if...?' always helped to frame things in a way that could stick. At least for a time.

Of course, he didn't say as much to Jinki and merely took in the encouragement and praise when he got something right that he should have, but yeah... Even with that mentality, a week was not much time to really cement the necessary information for his final exam. Kibum worried over it excessively, especially because Garum still wasn't letting him come back to work yet. Something about education being more important in this scenario than anything else.

Kibum felt betrayed, but also grateful. It gave him time to study but also time to be closer to Jinki, which was becoming a special hell unto itself. No matter how many subtle hints he dropped, Jinki never responded in anything more than a professional manner. Sometimes with a scarlet blush on his cheeks or blazing red ears, but his tone was as cool as he could manage, even if his voice did tremble from time to time.

But then it was time for finals and there wasn't much thought for anything else. All of their classes were challenging and they needed to focus accordingly. Kibum couldn't recall being under such pressure before. He'd been stressed in previous exams, obviously, but none had had the potential for such an impact in the past. It terrified him. He was ready for his other lessons but when it came time for his Terran biology exam, the only saving grace he had at all was imagining Jinki in the questions. And even then... he was hardly sure of himself, twisted into knots and uncertainties.

When the exams were over, he was almost certain he'd failed, that he was worthless, and that there was no chance he'd passed. He huddled in Jinki's room, actively hiding from the outside world on the first day after that exam in fact, much to Henry's amusement – though it didn't hurt he had no idea the stakes that were riding on the results. He tried doing the same thing on the second day, but the rest of the group came over to crash Jinki's room as they waited for results to start coming out, refreshing their personal pages every hour or so and cheering or making fun of marks that were higher or lower than they should have been.

They did a similar thing on the third day as well, coming out to pester Daejung and tease the sisters about their grades when they started to get results back too. But when Kibum's grade finally came out on the third day after an interminable amount of waiting, one would have thought a C+ was the best score in the universe.

"I passed!" Kibum shouted, bouncing around Jinki's room like a kid on his birthday. "I passed!" he yelled again for good measure, buzzing with a euphoric high as he looked at the overall mark from his semester. His class performance was mediocre, marred by his earlier attendance record and lack of homework, but his test was satisfactory, leading to his proud C+. For anyone else, it might well have been a disgrace, a grade to frown upon and be sad about, but for Kibum, it was above passing!

That was all that mattered.

"You did it!" Kibum would never forget the way that Jinki hugged him after he announced his results. Arms thrown enthusiastically around his waist, lifting him up high with a blinding smile and a delighted laugh that could banish the very heart of darkness.

"I did!" Kibum beamed back, arms clinging desperately around Jinki's shoulders and neck as he was spun around. He threw his head back to laugh, cheeks grinning so hard it hurt. It had felt so impossible just a few weeks ago and now... Looking down, he couldn't deny it was almost entirely thanks to the man still holding him up. His touch was like lightning where they pressed together, even through the fabric of their clothes. Kibum's wrists rested lightly against Jinki's neck, the connection faint but electric. And the way Jinki looked at him... Breath caught in Kibum's throat and it took everything in him not to lower his head to kiss him.

For a moment, he actually forgot anyone else was there too. At least until they decided to remind him. "Oooooohhh!" Henry teased creeping into view in Kibum's periphery as he looked between them with a mischievous grin on his face.

Larad cleared his throat and Ercite commented, "I almost feel like we shouldn't be here." They winked up at the Varium and then laughed in the Terrans' direction.

"Sorry!" Jinki apologized quickly, though he was slow to let Kibum down, lowering him with care and making sure he was steady before turning his attention to the group at large.

"Congratulations, Kibum," he grinned, letting one hand reach out to rest against Kibum's lower back, his eyes smiling as hard as his mouth. "You did it."

"Um, we did it!" Henry promptly reminded him, swinging close enough to rest his arm on Kibum's shoulder.

"This coming from the Terran who got a similar score as Kibum did last year," Ercite snorted, needling gently as they often did.

"Hey! I couldn't give him my luck but I gave him energy, okay!" he defended himself, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pair of heart fingers to float in front of Kibum. "See?"

Kibum looked at the heart then slow blinked to look at Henry, one brow raised as he snorted. "I guess I should be grateful when someone gives all they have to offer," he teased, the corners of his mouth raised up to lessen any sting.

Henry's jaw dropped open and he clasped his heart with both hands, feigning severe pain. "You heartless fiend," he complained, turning a sad look on Jinki. "He's so mean to me..." he wailed, trudging over to bodily thump into the other man, pretending to cry.

"There, there," Jinki soothed, chuckling at the display while he comforted Henry with his other hand. "What Kibum *means* to say is thank you for your help. Isn't that right, Kibum?" he asked, turning a side-eyed look on the first-year student.

It was rare that such a serious expression was turned upon him and Kibum sighed, rolling his eyes gently. "Fine, fine," he gestured, reaching out to pat Henry on the shoulder in consolation. "Thank you for your... energy," he hesitated, stumbling over the word with a laugh. Henry looked over his shoulder to make a face at him before he went back to clinging to Jinki. "And your help," Kibum finally added, taking a breath as he looked around the room. Larad nodded, Ercite gave a thumbs up, and Jinki wore a wondrously warm smile. "Thank you. All of you," he added, offering a small bow to the group at large.

Almost like everything had been an act up until that point, Henry suddenly lurched off Jinki's shoulder and stuck his finger in his ear, wagging it like he was trying to clear it of something. "What was that, Kibum? I don't think I heard you," he grinned, leaning close and cupping his ear.

Jinki winced and gave a pained smile as he shook his head, almost like he was silently pleading for Kibum not to do whatever he was thinking about doing. Kibum ignored the look and leaned close. "Henry," he said in a very normal tone, watching the other man nod along in satisfaction. "THANK YOU!" he shouted a second later, not as loud as he could but certainly loud enough to startle Henry into falling backward with a frantic cry.

Jinki and Larad reached to catch him before Henry was bounding back up anyway, pelting after Kibum in the confined space. "Kibum!" he yelled in response, chasing his target until he caught hold, surprised for a second like the dog that caught the car. Kibum froze, a statue of momentary panic and uncertainty. Henry paused, seeming to sense that. But then neither had a chance to respond as Larad enveloped both of them in his arms, prompting an unplanned tussle. For a brief moment, anxiety crept over Kibum as stronger arms and hands playfully restrained him, but then Jinki was there, worming his way between the worst of it and Kibum, protective and determined at the same time.

"I'm here," he whispered, flinching when hands and bodies pressed awkwardly close. Panic receded just enough and Kibum laughed once, clinging to Jinki like the lifeline he was.

In the end, neither Kibum nor Jinki won the dog pile, but there were worse places to be stuck with Jinki on top of him, actively protecting him from the worst of it. Honestly, he didn't know whether to curse or thank Henry for the predicament. Not that Henry had gotten off that easy anyway. He had managed to get himself wedged right in the middle with Larad above him, long limbs bracing himself to keep most of his weight off the trio. And on top of him was a very satisfied Ercite. They patted Larad on the shoulder and then raised their hands in the air. "I win!"

It was all very silly and that was the last comment that undid them as they collapsed and fell apart into a loose pile of tired giggles. Kibum couldn't actually remember a 'fight' he didn't mind losing before. This had to be a first. And honestly, it wasn't half as bad as he thought it would be, especially because he was still partially in the circle of Jinki's protective embrace. All in all, it was a great way to cap his semester.

Having proven himself and fulfilled his promise and his end of the bargain, Provost Kamari confirmed that Kibum's academic probation would be lifted. Upon further examination, it was also

confirmed that Kibum would be granted permission to obtain residence on campus for the duration of his second year at the university, provided he maintained his grades and kept a mostly perfect attendance record. After the past couple months, that seemed almost easy in comparison.

Given how everything had managed to work out in the end, there was only one thing left to do now.

Celebrate!

Chapter Seventeen

Jinki was all for enjoying a win, but it kind of frightened him how into the idea Passeri and Jackson became when they got wind of Kibum's success. He was there when Kibum made the call to let them know and even though he couldn't hear their response, Kibum's body language was enough to know what they were thinking. The elated first year couldn't stand still to save his life, pacing and bouncing on the balls of his feet and stopping to grin at Jinki every other step. It would have been maddening if it wasn't so endearingly entertaining at the same time.

"I don't know when I can promise yet. Hajoong's got matches coming up soon for the grav jumping competitions and Siwoo has low grav gymnast trials around the corner and Doyun's got something too, but—" He paused when they interrupted him on the other side and wrinkled his nose. In the next instance, his brows rose in thoughtful contemplation and his jaw fell open shortly after.

Jinki would have been slightly nervous anyway except he noticed Kibum's eyes dart towards him in the barest hints of movement. That was trouble. Wary, he continued to observe, watching Kibum's sharp flawless features school into an otherwise unreadable mask. Double trouble. The tells were still there: the too firm set to his jaw; the way in which it was impossible for him to fully control his all too expressive eyebrows; how his free hand clung gently to his clothes to keep from moving about; in the way he expressly looked at every place *but* Jinki. Oh, he'd mastered the art of looking in the direction of someone, but that didn't mean he was looking *at* them.

He'd used it many times, to very good effect, on students like Kieran and Crawven especially. Having it used on him though, was not an experience Jinki relished. Despite that, he patiently waited for Kibum to finish so he could tell him what he wanted, probably in as little detail as he could get away with.

With an excited yip, Kibum ended the call and threw himself onto the bed beside Jinki. "Garum wants me to come back!" he grinned, hands flailing in front of him in his excitement.

"That's good," Jinki encouraged, knowing more would be following that announcement. He wasn't wrong.

"He also wants to help me... us celebrate." His smile was elated, straight white teeth gleaming in the softly curved spaces left open by his lips. "It'll take him a little time to organize a semi-reserved night. Or a private one if he can manage it!" he gasped, hands falling to rest on the top of his thigh, fingers curled like it was the only way to keep them from wandering closer.

Jinki reached out a hand to bridge the distance between them, placing his palm against Kibum's back. "When you say semi-reserved or private...?" he trailed off, leaving the open-ended question hanging in the air.

"Eh... maybe some valued regulars and whoever else we want to invite," he winked back, brimming with preemptive energy. "Come on though!" he couldn't help but add, grabbing Jinki's wrist and yanking him up.

"Whoa!" Jinki yelped, stumbling along in the other man's wake. "Where we going?"

"To talk to your sisters."

"Now?"

"Now!" Kibum announced, drawing Jinki along for the ride.

And that was how Jinki found himself sitting amidst his siblings, Daejung included though that was mostly by happenstance, coordinating schedules with a bargaining intensity that was slightly intimidating. Kibum had a calendar pulled up on his personal screen so everyone could see and he was pointing to days in the week for possibilities.

"That's a practice match day," Hajoon said for one of the days.

"Can't do that weekend. Effectively boot camp training," Doyun commented with a shake of her head.

"That's a competition day!" Hajoon grumbled, raising her hand like she wanted to smack Kibum for 'forgetting,' even though they all knew well and good he wouldn't have.

"Jinki already booked the room for that day. It's just before the solo trials," Siwoo huffed, arms crossed as she looked at her brother, daring him to say something about not going.

He held his hands up in instant surrender and then looked at Kibum with a helpless shrug. "I go where they tell me," he admitted, lips curling into his usual smile.

Kibum made a face at him and exhaled loudly before glaring at the calendar of x's. "I swear," he grumbled plenty loudly. "When do you have time for *you*?! " He didn't look at anybody but Jinki knew the comment was for all of them. Him specifically, of course, but he noticed his siblings exchange uncertain looks in his periphery.

Jinki took a small breath and stood up, moving close enough to place a hand on Kibum's shoulder while he looked over the calendar up close. It was a little surprising to see how claimed his time was so clearly. Usually, he just did what he said he would and made it work somehow. It wasn't like he minded, so long as he managed to fit everything in. And he did but... this... was a lot. Biting his bottom lip and nodding, he shrugged. "Looks like this day, this day, and this day are okay in the shorter term," he pointed out, glancing at Kibum from the corner of his eye.

By his response, it was obvious Kibum didn't like the days he chose. His nose wrinkled and he frowned in Jinki's direction. "Those are hardly busy days for work," he grumbled before pressing his lips together, the corners of his mouth still turning down.

The comment made Jinki laugh. "Isn't that a good thing though?" At Kibum's curiously raised brow, he explained, "Since Garum is going to make it an invitation only day, less normal clientele would be a good thing, wouldn't it? Fewer people to potentially offend and it could still be a day event for us while he opens at night if he wants to."

Kibum's frown lessened and he exhaled with a soft sigh. "That's not bad logic," he admitted after a pause, looking him up and down once. "It would give you time to go to bed early too. You do need your beauty sleep," he teased, leaning closer with a playful gleam in his eyes.

"I do, don't I?" Jinki asked back, nodding along in agreement with an unphased slow blink.

It was not the answer Kibum had been expecting and his silent, open-mouthed gasp proved it. "Jinki is perfect!" Daejung spoke up for the first time, pointing an accusatory finger at Kibum while he stationed himself beside his older brother in defense.

Siwoo was quick to shadow her younger brother, building on his defense while she pointed at Kibum too, much to the other man's surprise. "And if he looks like he needs more sleep, you should give him back his bed. Bed stealer," she mumbled, her tone sounding very much like there was something else she was frustrated about.

"Okay, okay," Jinki crooned, turning around and placing a hand on both Daejung and Siwoo's heads before ruffling their hair.

"Hey!" they yelped in unison, brushing at his hands in new offense.

"What would I do without such strong defenders?" he questioned, making sure he placed himself between them and Kibum. The other man looked a little taken aback by the combined offense against him and Jinki couldn't blame him. Those two could get quite jealous under the right circumstances. "And besides, I'll get my bed back soon," he promised, nudging Siwoo under the chin with his finger while he winked at her.

"Right," Hajoong nodded along to the comment, shaking her finger in their direction. "Kibum will be moving to the university dorms soon."

"Aw! Why?" Doyun complained, turning to pout at Kibum, her bottom lip sticking out and her brown eyes wide and innocent. "Now Jinki'll be sad!"

In Jinki's periphery, Kibum flinched in surprise, eyes darting in his direction for just a second. But then Hajoong snorted and threw her arm around Doyun's shoulders. "Are you sure *you* won't be the sad one? Maybe I should tell Henry you have a new crush," she teased, whispering behind her hand in a voice that was clearly meant to carry.

"You're one to talk!" Doyun shot back, an all-too-knowing grin on her face. "I could tell him about- Ah!" she yelped, suddenly interrupted when Hajoong yanked her into a headlock.

"Hajoong!" Jinki called, reaching out like he wanted to stop her. But Doyun slipped free with relative ease, years of sibling rivalry and grav jumping making it look far simpler than it was. She fled behind Kibum, using him as a shield. Jinki watched the tension in his body skyrocket as she slipped into his blind spot. "Doyun!" he called out, unsure how to stop the situation.

"Nyah!" Doyun spit her tongue at her older sister, giggling all the while.

"You little-" Hajoong grumbled, lunging after her.

Jinki grabbed Kibum's arm and yanked him close, leaving Doyun stranded. She yelped in panicked surprise and then backpedaled quickly, fleeing from her older sister's attack. "Go make sure your sisters don't kill each other," Jinki murmured to Siwoo and Daejung as he leaned close, giving them little nudges to start moving.

"On it!" Siwoo said with a raised hand. Daejung nodded with a grunt of agreement and they both raced off after the other two.

"You okay?" he asked, straightening up to make sure Kibum wasn't too overwhelmed by the whole situation.

For his part, Kibum had one hand pressed against his chest and a furrow between his brows that clearly said he wasn't, but he quickly schooled his features to better reflect a calmer composure. "I don't know how you do it," he spoke, forcing a quick laugh that didn't ring true in Jinki's ears.

"Years of practice," he explained, patting Kibum's shoulder with a calming hand before he rested his palm against his upper arm, letting it stay as an anchor if he needed. "But seriously. Sorry about all that."

Kibum shook his head, letting the mask slip a bit as he suddenly seemed a little more tired than usual. "I think I brought that mostly on myself," he admitted, a weak laugh escaping that at least sounded more natural this time.

Jinki tilted his head in mute agreement, but softened it by adding, "Siblings are... complicated. I'm sure you know about that," he chuckled, recalling some of the stories about Moon and Young. Kibum nodded without a word. "And Doyun *has* been crushing on you recently," he confirmed, curious how Kibum would react to the statement.

The first year pursed his lips and fought a smile before a single breathy laugh escaped through his nose. "And you?" It was a flippant question tossed out too freely and Jinki saw the blank look on Kibum's face when he realized what he'd asked. "Have you been crushing on anyone lately?" he asked, scrambling to shift the direction while he looked down. And then back up furtively. And down once more when Jinki was still looking at him.

He'd be lying if he said his heart didn't skip a beat at the flustered display. "I have," he offered with a noncommittal smile.

Kibum's head shot up with a surprised gasp as he looked at Jinki, a confusing mix of emotions flashing across his face in the blink of an eye. At least until he schooled his expression again, smoothing over the knee-jerk reactions with a cool smirk Jinki knew he often used to hide his true thoughts. "Oh?" he teased, leaning close with a keenly interested look. "Who?"

"Guess," Jinki smiled back, drawing his hand back since it seemed he was in control of his emotions once more.

"Tsk. It's more fun if you just tell me," Kibum whined, wriggling in place not unlike a child.

"Maybe next time," he laughed, nudging at Kibum's arm to nod at the calendar that was still hanging in the air nearby, waiting for the final confirmation.

"Ugh! You're no fun at all," he scowled, subdued outrage the most obvious sound in his voice.

"So you say," Jinki snorted, pointing at a date on the calendar. "This one?" he wondered aloud, glancing at the rising second year.

Kibum gave him an annoyed grimace and sighed noisily. "Fine!" he conceded, tossing his hands up in defeat and circling the date quickly. "I'll let Garum know so he can set it up accordingly," he mumbled, settling down quickly enough, though it was more subdued than Jinki expected.

The date was far enough out that it would give them plenty of time to prepare. Whatever trick Kibum had up his sleeve, or surprise considering he was obviously planning something with Passeri and Jackson, Jinki would have to try and be ready for. In the meantime though, he really did have plenty to keep him distracted. Just because his exams were over didn't mean he was off the hook. As his siblings had adequately demonstrated, they were very much engaged in their activities and as their big brother, he was practically mandated to be there for them.

It didn't hurt that their parents weren't usually able to attend. Their mother worked nights as a local maintenance tech, making sure the machinery that took care of the city was clean and ran smoothly. She did her best to take time off for the big events for her kids and she did have a day or two off in a week, but she took as many shifts as she could and needed the downtime to rest and run errands otherwise. Their father worked at the scrap yard during most days. It was typically easier for him to stay in the out of dome housing and then come home on the weekends for family time and supper when he could.

Jinki didn't know if they relied on him to help take care of his siblings or if they worked the jobs they did *because they knew* he would take care of his siblings, but as the eldest... he'd long since accepted his role. As Kibum had pointed out though, it did not give him much time to himself. Especially since his helpful tendencies bled over into school. It almost felt wrong not to help when asked. Or he sometimes felt guilty if he wasn't doing something to help someone else... It wasn't like he did things in half measures either, as his stint with Kibum had proven yet again.

Though he felt slightly guilty about it, he was glad that Kibum would be moving into the second-year dorms soon. It would give Jinki the perfect opportunity to grab some time with Henry. He needed... a sounding board. Badly. And as one of his oldest friends, Henry was his usual go-to when things were a little more confusing than he wanted them to be. Finding time to hang out with him was significantly easier though, even if he was worn out by the barrage of his sibling's schedule demands on him.

"Wow. Nice room," Jinki complimented, checking out the third-year dorm room with keen eyes.

"Yeah. Bigger than the last one, with better food options and a nicer bed!" Henry grinned, running around the space and gesturing wildly with his hands at each point he described. "Not a bad thing considering our little group seems to have developed a likely permanent plus one for the time being," he laughed, propping his arm on Jinki's shoulder and looking at him knowingly.

"Jealous much?" Jinki teased, though he patted Henry's head in a friendly gesture.

Henry sighed and snagged Jinki's arm to yank him around to the bed. "Sit down before you make me feel guilty for standing."

"Yes sir!" he responded, gladly taking a load off as he laid back on Henry's bed, arms splayed out wide.

The surface dipped slightly when Henry settled into place, leaning over to look at Jinki with a baleful eye. "You never take care of yourself like you should. Hungry? Thirsty? Should I give you a massage for any impossible to reach knots you've probably gained from any number of your sisters' practices?" he asked, only half-joking.

"If you're offering..." Jinki chuckled with an easy grin, feeling every bit of tension he typically carried just start to bleed out. Henry had almost zero expectations from him beyond being friends and that was far more freeing than it had any right to be for something so simple.

Henry snorted and smacked him on the chest. "What do you want?" he asked, hopping up and heading for the food processor.

"The usual," he laughed in response, taking a deep breath as he threaded his fingers together over his stomach and just stared at the ceiling in the room. It was lighter than the previous one had been. Newer probably. These ones had more constant renovations and nanotech come through to scrub them clean.

"Only you would come here and ask for the usual *every single time*," Henry scoffed, typing in the food order and returning when the processor spit out the request. Henry plopped back down on the bed and tossed the warm, wrapped goodie on Jinki's stomach.

"Ah hah!" he beamed, sitting up to hold the synthesized chicken leg in his hands. "You know this is the only place I can safely eat this," he reminded Henry as he carefully opened the dissipating wrapper. Once exposed to oxygen, it would rapidly age and decompose, becoming little more than microparticles in a matter of minutes. But the chicken on the other hand... He happily took a bite and savored the slightly greasy and a little heavy taste on his tongue. "My sisters would kill me if they saw me eating this," he added, sighing in contentment when the delectably crisp skin crunched in such a satisfying manner.

"At least I know I'll always have blackmail material," Henry laughed, setting a bottle of water next to Jinki and opening his own junk food snack: the equivalent of dried lychees.

"I could just not help you with homework anymore," Jinki laughed with a shrug, knowing it was an empty threat.

"Well, I could go to Ercite..." he hinted, cheek rounding out from the piece of fruit in his mouth when he smiled.

"You know Larad wouldn't mind feeding me chicken either." His grin was pure amusement when their eyes met, as if sharing an open secret between them.

"Except it's almost impossible to find those two alone."

"And Ercite really *would* keep it as blackmail material to hold against me," Jinki laughed, taking another bite while looking at the rest of it wistfully.

Henry made a face and nodded in silent agreement. "Finish that, then drink your water, and then I can play doctor to whatever ails you today," he winked, threading his fingers together and stretching them out in front of him.

"Oh come on. I'm not that bad," Jinki groaned as he stifled a laugh.

"Oh, but you are sir," his friend shrugged, the conclusion foregone already. Jinki leaned over and nudged him with his shoulder but didn't say anything after the fact. Henry returned the favor, chuckling when they started leaning harder like it was some sort of wrestling match. But then Jinki was basically finished and Henry suddenly shifted, allowing the other Terran to fall into his lap with a surprised yelp.

Shuffling onto his back lazily, Jinki looked up with a dry expression. "You said to drink my water first."

"Eh," Henry shrugged, wrinkling his nose before tapping on Jinki's forehead with one finger. "You can drink after. For now... the doctor is in!"

"Dummy," Jinki chuckled, reaching up to pretend like he was going to smack Henry in the face, but he stopped several centimeters short and made an empty flicking gesture instead.

"Seriously though. Talk. You don't really come here by yourself unless you've got something going on," he explained, tapping on Jinki's head lightly with a moderately serious expression on his face.

Jinki grimaced at the expression. "When you put it that way, it sounds like I'm just using you."

A gentle shake of his head made Jinki flinch. "I'll let you know if it becomes a problem," Henry promised, the accompanying wink taking any sting out of the words.

"You better," he grumbled, closing his eyes and taking another breath as the sated feel of eating settled in. "I'm tired," he finally admitted after a short delay.

Fingertips traced through the edges of his short locks and Henry took a noticeable breath. "When are you not?" Jinki cracked one eye to look up and Henry's mouth pulled up into a closed smile, though it was slightly sad.

He closed his eyes again. "More than usual. I think it's probably because of Kibum," he hesitantly offered without beating around the bush too long.

"You think?" Again, Jinki cracked an eye and he saw a raised brow on the other man's face. It was a very clear 'Duh' statement. "When you become a mentor, you put your everything into it." Jinki nodded in silent agreement. "I know you haven't told me everything, but the fact that Kibum has been *staying* in your room this whole time means he's definitely different. Or the situation is different. Or both." Jinki nodded again, not even bothering to hide it. That could be the understatement of the year. "Is this the part where I demand the full story?" Henry teased, poking Jinki in the cheek.

"Nope," Jinki responded with a shake of his head, swatting Henry's hand lightly.

"Okay. So usual problem but more complicated then, right?" he continued, unbothered by the slap and the denial of further answers. As before, Jinki nodded to confirm. "You like him." Nod. "As more than a mentee." Nod again. "But you're worried he'll be like most of the others." Nod once more but then he opened his eyes to look up at Henry. "Use you for help when they need it and then move on to someone else when they're back on track."

"Yeah..." he admitted with a heavy sigh, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a slight grimace. That had been especially true in high school, and he'd been better about it at the university level, but it still stung.

"Ah," Henry exhaled, patting Jinki on the head playfully, almost condescending but not quite. "You goody-goodies are always such easy targets."

"Henry..." Jinki pouted, looking up at the other man with forlorn eyes.

"Ack! And brutal with the pitiful expressions," he wailed, clutching his chest with one hand and leaning backwards.

Jinki's response was slightly bitter. "Lots of source material to pull from."

"Hey. None of that," Henry chided, turning serious again as he sat up straighter and looked down at Jinki directly. "Just do what you've been doing. It's pretty clear he likes you," he explained, smiling when Jinki narrowed his eyes at him, "so if this pattern holds after the celebration party... who knows?"

"If it holds..." Jinki trailed off, trepidatious about what that probably meant.

"Then be happy, dummy," Henry snorted, grabbing both sides of Jinki's head and pretending like he was going to shake it. "If you like him and he legitimately likes you, then give it a try and see what happens," he explained, letting go to gesture with one hand above Jinki.

"Ugh..." he groaned, leaning his head back and scrunching up his face. "This would be so much simpler if I could just date you. You always understand me," he grumbled, wagging a finger at his best friend.

"Yeah. We tried that," Henry reminded him with an equally scrunched up face. "Jinki. I love you, but dudes just don't do it for me," he laughed, shaking his head.

Jinki reached up like he was going to grab Henry's face. "We should probably try it again, just in case," he teased, letting his friend bat his hands away with ease.

"No," Henry stated firmly, pointing his finger at Jinki. "One kiss was enough for me to know." There was no denying his certainty in that statement.

"I know," Jinki responded with a quiet exhale. Groaning softly, he levered himself up and reached for the bottle of water. He took a sip before he swung around to better face Henry, crossing his legs on the bed. "And what about you? Any relationship news on the horizon I should dash Doyun's hopes with?"

"Doyun?" Henry asked incredulously, giving Jinki a side-eyed look. "Come on." It made Jinki laugh. "Now Hajoong..." he trailed off with a suggestive tone.

“Don’t,” Jinki warned with laughter in his tone.

Henry fell apart at the single word, giggling in amusement. He waved his hands in front of him and looked down. “Not really. Though there might be this Varium...” he offered hesitantly.

“Oh?” Jinki beamed, leaning forward attentively. With Henry’s words, his head and heart were mostly settled, and now that the other man might have an interest on the horizon as well, he was all ears. “Do I know her?”

The look Henry gave him said it all. “You know everybody.”

“Almost.”

“Whatever.”

In their usual fashion they bickered back and forth, trading tidbits of info like cards in a game. There was no winner. It was just a fun way to exchange stories. And by the time Jinki left, he felt better than he had in ages. By mutual agreement, they figured he should wait until after the celebration at The Stars Align to really make any firm decisions, and by then, Henry could possibly make a better introduction of the female Varium he was interested in and who might be interested in him too.

Chapter Eighteen

Of course, before that Jinki would have to survive the various demands his siblings had put upon him for their multitudinous activities. Even though school was out, that just meant Daejung could claim more of his time during the week. Mostly games of course but he was starting to show interest in hoverboarding, a sport Jinki knew nothing about. He could see many bruises in his future if he started trying to get into that too.

And his three sisters were terrible about demanding he come to *all* practice sessions now. Because he had more time of course. If he went to one more for Hajoon, he had to go to Doyun’s as well, and that also meant Siwoo’s and vice versa. And all of them were more keyed up than usual with their various competitions coming up. Hajoon had her practice match – they were always super intense, and not too long after that, the first competition match for the global final’s tournament. Doyun had boot camp training coming up and Jinki usually helped with it extensively. And Siwoo was about to have a meltdown because she claimed she was not ready at all for her solo trial event.

Making matters even more confusing, Kibum had moved out almost as soon as his housing option became available. Jinki had gone with him to help clean out his apartment and move what few belongings he had into the new space. Kibum’s face had held such wonder in that moment when he first stepped into his dorm room. Wide eyes took in the space that was as large as his apartment with more permanent fixtures. The bed especially had been a point of interest and Jinki had watched him move to it, one hand running over the top of the blanket with a slow motion.

He’d straightened then and whispered with a supremely relieved smile, “There’s nothing here.”

Kibum didn’t need to explain. Jinki already knew what he meant and it had been a very satisfying moment for him. But even so, it still meant that he was no longer staying with him anymore.

And he was more inaccessible in the evenings since he'd started going back to work too, getting back into the swing of things once again. Honestly, Jinki had gotten used to having him around the majority of the time so the... separation felt strange. It was good for him. And probably Kibum too, but it didn't help immediately.

And of course he had to hang out with Henry, Larad, and Eric when he could too. Never mind even thinking about what he was going to do in the next semester. He still had no clue what he wanted to focus on and he was going to have to choose something soon. He'd gone to the university with no overall expectation of what he wanted to do with his life, thinking he'd figure out when he got here. Two years in, not much had changed...

At the very least though, everything did keep him quite distracted until Kibum reminded him of the upcoming party at The Stars Align. According to the younger man, there were going to be a decent handful of regulars and a large number of invitees from the school. Kibum had happily told the Almighty Key fan club about it and they'd circulated a list for people interested to sign up on, subject to Kibum's approval.

Jinki'd gotten a glimpse of it, just to make sure there wasn't anybody there that maybe shouldn't be and was quite surprised to see Kibum's trio of nemeses listed. "Are you sure?" he asked upon calling the younger man.

"Of course I'm sure," Kibum answered with a rather smug note in his voice.

Jinki didn't entirely trust it. "You're not just inviting them to block them from coming in or kicking them out preemptively, are you?"

Kibum gasped in feigned shock on the other end. He broke character immediately after with a breathy sigh. "I'd be hurt if the same thoughts hadn't already crossed my mind too." Jinki hummed in unsurprised satisfaction but didn't say anything yet. "I don't really expect them to come, but if they do, it would be delightful to rub my success in their faces," he laughed, utterly unabashed.

"No. That makes sense," Jinki nodded as if he was talking to himself.

"Hey. I probably wouldn't even have a fan club if not for them. And I'm back to work now and The Stars Align is doing better than ever and I really have them to thank for it, don't I?" he giggled, a falsely high sound like he was acting coy.

"When you put it that way," Jinki laughed, delighted by the response. This was more akin to the old Kibum he'd first started to get to know and it was a good sign of positive progress.

"I know, right?!" Kibum's excitement was palpable. "Oh! I forgot to check the results. How did Hajoong's competition go?"

Jinki grinned, both at the question and for the response. "She likes to worry overmuch but their team won the match and will be progressing to the semi-finals next."

"Yes!" Kibum cheered on his side. "When's the next match?"

"Two days after the party," Jinki snorted, shaking his head.

He heard Kibum hiss through his teeth. "Well, at least you'll have a day to rest up before you have to go."

"Will I though?" he wondered instead, already making note of the practice he would likely have to squeeze in to help allay any nerves Hajoon had about the match.

Kibum's sniff on the other end was thoughtful and Jinki was all ears to see what he was thinking. "If I..." he trailed off, suddenly unsure. Jinki blinked in confusion as this Kibum was not one he'd heard for a little while. The shift was swift though, and his confident voice returned with passion, "I should just tell her I need your help with something and you won't be available that day."

It was enough to make Jinki laugh. "You'd probably have to fight her for priority."

"Feh," he scoffed in dismissiveness. "I may not be a grav jumper but I have my ways."

"Hmm." Jinki didn't trust it entirely, but he was intrigued enough not to argue too hard. "Okay. I'll not try to stop you. Besides, I'm more curious about this party surprise you've been planning..."

"Who said there was a surprise?" Kibum demanded quickly, an evasive tactic if Jinki had ever seen one. "Whether there is or not, you'll just have to see in two days." The wink was obvious even without being able to see him.

Jinki knew that tone. There was almost no hope of prying out any further information from the younger man. "Fine. How's the dorm feeling now?" he asked instead, changing topics.

Kibum's silence was heavy. "It's okay," he answered eventually, the words drawn reluctantly from quiet lips.

"Kibum?" the rising third year hummed, one brow raised.

"It's fine. Just... empty," he explained after a moment.

Jinki wasn't entirely sure if that was supposed to be a good thing or not. Or maybe that had changed since he'd first stepped foot in it. No ghosts to haunt the space had to be a positive, but it was pretty bare. There was another possibility but Jinki didn't want to think too hard on that one, so he mentioned instead, "If you need decorations or stuff, I can help you get some."

He could practically envision Kibum wrinkling his nose at the response. "That's okay," he sighed, clearly not voicing whatever was really on his mind. But before Jinki could pry, the younger man perked up. "But anyway! I have to go now and help get The Stars Align ready for the upcoming show. See you soon!" he chattered away, quick to end the call before Jinki could get a word in edgewise.

It made him sigh as well. "What are you thinking?" he wondered, tapping on his bottom lip with a single finger.

He didn't have to wait long. Two days went by rather quickly with the rest of his usual practices, friend time, and generally just trying to get by. He was more tired than he would have preferred heading towards The Stars Align, but there was an unmistakable ball of tense excitement sitting in his belly as he approached. Henry, Larad, and Ercite would be coming later, as would Hajoon and Doyun. Siwoo had made herself sick with worry over her upcoming competition and was staying home while Daejung wasn't really interested in the whole scene. Jinki had promised to arrive early to help Kibum

and the rest of the staff though, so that was how he found himself standing in front of the service entrance calling for Kibum to open the door for him.

The last thing he expected was for the door to open with Jackson and Passeri reaching out to yank him inside. "You're finally here!" "We've got something to talk to you about!" Bright mischievous grins were plastered on their faces as they shut the door behind him.

It was suspicious to Kibum that Passeri and Jackson were missing along with Jinki and none of them were answering their communicators. Garum was present and Ixo had been helping as much as they could to get the music setup for the event and the decorations in place. Two of their other part time regulars had also offered to come in, though Kibum wasn't as familiar with Alexander, a male Terran whose claim to fame here was lightheartedness and flexibility, and Senna, a female Varium that leaned towards the smaller than average side of the spectrum.

Henry and company had shown up not long after Kibum himself had been here and they'd also done their fair share of the work in helping get things ready. When Psitassi arrived, she brought a sizeable chunk of fans that took care of pretty much everything else and now things were just starting to warm up but a particular trio was still missing. Leaning on the side of the bar where Garum was currently keeping a watchful eye, Kibum wasn't quite settled enough to wade into the fray just yet. And he was distracted by Jinki's absence which didn't help either.

A touch on his shoulder made him startle though and Hajoon flinched in amused surprise when he whipped around to see her. "Sorry!" she giggled, one hand rising to cover her mouth. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Awkwardly, Kibum cleared his throat and then straightened his shoulders, not missing the bemused smirk on Garum's face in his periphery. "It's fine," he assured her, taking a small breath and focusing the full of his attention on the younger woman. "What's up?"

Hajoon looked around in mild confusion while she traced a stray strand of hair away from her forehead. "I don't suppose you've seen Jinki have you? I haven't been able to reach him," she admitted, glancing behind her to nod at the slightly shorter Doyun who was hiding in her shadow.

"He said he'd be here," she piped up quickly, moving to stand beside Hajoon. "He left before we did too," she grumbled, clearly offended by his absence as well.

Kibum chewed on his bottom lip and eyed the room once more, catching Psitassi's gaze once before nodding in acknowledgement at her and then gesturing for her to stay where she was. He'd learned eye contact was an open invite with the Moladhi and right now, he would not be the best company for her. "Have you asked Henry?"

Hajoon snorted as if that was obvious. "Of course. But they haven't seen him either."

All of that was doubly suspicious. Kibum narrowed his eyes and then leaned closer to Garum at the bar. "I don't suppose you've heard anything about Passeri and Jackson have you?"

"Hmm?" the giant Varium hummed in surprise as he glanced down, blue hair vibrant under the overhead lighting above the bar.

“Passeri and Jackson,” he stated firmly, pitching his voice to carry this time.

“Ah,” Garum nodded in understanding. “They’re around here somewhere. I wouldn’t worry about it,” he assured them, waving one large hand in a dismissive gesture before he grinned as a guest approached the bar for a drink.

“That’s not suspicious at all,” Doyun grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest while she stepped into the gap space between Kibum and Hajoon.

“Very,” Hajoon nodded, but a slight gasp made them look at her before the pair next to her turned to the stage.

The part timers were standing at the main dancing position, fully decked out in their work attire, and they were looking up waiting for Ixo to start the music. As the first tremulous notes emerged, they stepped apart with a grin and eased into a fluid but slow contortionist routine using nothing but each other and the pole as props in the low grav field. Alexander was more flexible but Senna was a Varium and thereby able to manipulate her body and joints in ways that regular Terrans couldn’t. She was also just as strong as Alexander, despite their size differences.

“Wow, he’s flexible,” Hajoon murmured in surprise, blinking at the way he could virtually fold himself in half backwards.

“Completely natural. No mods or anything either,” Garum explained as he leaned over the bar to inform them.

“Whoa,” Doyun breathed, her eyes wide as she watched.

Nor was she the only one mesmerized by him. There were plenty of oohs and aahs coming from the appreciative crowd as well. Kibum felt a sliver of jealousy worm its way in at the praise but then shrugged. They all had their own strengths... When the duo started to wind down, a gentle applause rose, following the pair as they shifted to the secondary poles on the stage. And then the atmosphere really changed. Ixo played a new track that wasn’t a usual song exactly, but Kibum thought it sounded familiar. He knew he wasn’t crazy when he saw similar expressions of confused recognition on Hajoon and Doyun’s faces.

Then the lights on stage dimmed and three shadows emerged from the back. The music started to rise in a slow building crescendo, accompanied by blooming illuminations. On either side, Passeri and Jackson were revealed at last, the latter in his typical half naked fashion and the former bedecked in fluttery layers of colorful fabric. The figure in the center was wearing a colorful sequined and feathered full face mask and a curious array of loose dark layers atop a skintight base of fabric.

“There they are,” Kibum frowned, glaring at Passeri and Jackson, though he couldn’t quite help but wonder who the masked figure was.

“Who is that?” Doyun asked, leaning close to look between Kibum and Hajoon. “And why are they using Siwoo’s performance music?” she added, glancing up at the Dawbn music master suspiciously.

Kibum’s eyes grew wide and he looked at Hajoon to see a similar expression on her face. “Jinki?” she mouthed, pointing at the stage in disbelief.

Slowly, Kibum turned to look back at the mysterious figure himself and started making his way to the stage. He felt Hajoan and Doyun in his wake but was fixated on the masked figure as they began to move, initially leading the performance but then fading back as Jackson and Passeri took center stage. It seemed to be a hiccup though, since the pair looked back in brief confusion when they did. The masked person waved them on though, and they shrugged and fell into a duet on the same pole, rotating opposite each other or launching into aerobics above or below each other in the low grav atmosphere.

Behind them, the masked figure followed along to their own rhythm. Theirs was more of a tumbling performance than anything else, happening in the shadow of the main performers, and yet... Kibum was unable to look away. He'd seen Jackson and Passeri dozens of times at this point. The new figure was... a curious familiarity. He flinched when he felt someone else come close to brush against his shoulder.

"That one looks vaguely familiar," Henry murmured into Kibum's ear, pointing at the masked figure with a concentrating frown on his face. Considering Kibum felt the same way but didn't have anything else to add, he shrugged and nodded once, an answer that didn't seem to satisfy the other man. "You work here. Are you sure you don't know them?"

"Your guess is as good as mine right now," he mumbled, annoyed by the insinuation. Normally he did know everyone, but this was new. And he wasn't sure if it was an intentional newcomer or something special for today. He was leaning towards the latter, with a vague nervous sensation in regards to who it *might* be, but he had nothing to clarify it otherwise.

At one point in the song, Jackson and Passeri ran back to pull the newcomer to the front so they could improvise something, but it was clearly unplanned and awkward as a result. The crowd was pleasantly forgiving though, cheering on the newbie despite their floundering uncertainty. They attempted a pole spin that was adorably failed, the spin stopping halfway and ending with them essentially lying on the ground, but they threw their arms out wide like it was intended and it brought plenty of laughs and cheers in the end.

Passeri and Jackson moved to help them up and then the audience quieted as the music silenced and Garum made an announcement from the bar. "Thank you for being so kind to our guest performer. Yes, they're new and this is their first time," he grinned, gesturing at the masked figure who gave a stiff bow in response. It generated soft laughter, likely as it was intended, and Garum continued. "They would like to try something a little different today and we hope that you'll bear with our performers as they find their footing," he encouraged, gesturing towards the stage so that they could do what they needed to do.

The audience responded with general cheers and applause to encourage the newcomer and bolster the regulars. Kibum shared looks with Jinki's siblings and then his friends, but they all seemed to be in the same boat so they turned their attention back to the stage and waited impatiently for whatever was supposed to happen.

Alexander and Senna made their way over and they joined Passeri to make a trio before Jackson wandered off to the side and the masked figure moved in the opposite direction, setting the

stage. A new song came on, something playful and melodic as opposed to the usual heavy beat that drove most of their performances and dance opportunities.

The trio approached Jackson and he slid to either side, avoiding them neatly. But they stayed close and he eventually had to make a break for it. The trio followed, hot on his heels, and then the masked figure stumbled into their path, holding them up as they awkwardly flailed, pretending in their poor coordination.

Jackson escaped and Mr. Mask lowered himself on the stage, framing his face with his palms like they were a flower as they knelt down. The trio passed by and the audience applauded, giving laughs and gentle encouragement at the shift. One of Mr. Mask's hands drifted to their ear, or maybe it was for their personal communicator, but Kibum couldn't see if they were talking because of the mask they wore. But it didn't take long for Passeri to return, Alexander and Senna no longer in her wake. She approached Mr. Mask and allowed her fingers to trail along his shoulder and then up their neck before cupping their chin and drawing them to their feet in one smooth move.

Quiet oohs permeated the audience, paired with amused chuckles, but Kibum was silent. The scene felt oddly familiar and it kept his voice behind his teeth effectively. The sensation intensified when Jackson suddenly appeared, grabbing Passeri's hand and pushing her away gracefully with a coy smile. She feigned laughter and Mr. Mask bowed towards Jackson. Passeri looked away, 'offended,' and waltzed off, fading into the wings of the illuminated stage.

Kibum looked on either side of him, almost desperately wanting to share his thoughts, but Jinki's sisters and friends were not the people he wanted to voice his opinions to in that moment so he remained silent. But it made him think Mr. Mask might be Jinki himself even more, especially because he had spent far more hours than he should have studying that muscled body hidden beneath the skin-tight bottom layer they currently wore.

Jackson watched Passeri leave with narrowed eyes and then pivoted to offer his hand to Mr. Mask. The guest performer took it and moved into the center of the stage, standing suddenly stiff as Jackson used him as a supplemental prop to dance around. A gentle shove pushed Mr. Mask back towards the rear of the stage and then Jackson launched himself onto the pole, stealing the spotlight once more.

Okay. This was eerily familiar... Kibum didn't want to label it yet, but if that was Jinki performing on stage, then this was a painfully similar reenactment of their first meetings. Without too much trouble, he broke away from Jinki's friends and family and made his way through the crowd until he found himself at the very edge of the stage, staring at the masked figure, a strange nervous tension brewing in his belly.

Through sheer strength of muscle alone, Jackson managed to pull himself up, hand over hand on the pole, to the great delight and cheers of the crowd. The cries intensified when Passeri launched herself from the wings and landed on the pole beneath him, apparently reaching for him as they spun in counterclockwise directions, her fingertips just missing on every rotation. Only at one point, she did manage to clip him and Jackson made a great show of losing his balance before 'falling' off the pole.

Gasps and surprised shouts followed until Mr. Mask caught Jackson in his arms, staggering briefly under the weight but straightening quickly. Passeri wound down from the pole and then drifted

close to 'glare' at the pair before prancing off. Mr. Mask set Jackson down and they parted awkwardly, sharing uncertain looks back as they did so.

The stage quieted and the lights darkened as the music shifted again, less playful now and more determined with a steady underlying beat. This time, the performers returned with Jackson taking the center stage, performing as usual, but Mr. Mask hovered in the periphery, keeping Passeri, Alexander, and Senna from getting close. They ebbed and flowed, allowing Mr. Mask to get close until they had to chase off the intruders once again. In one of the final rounds, they used one of their outer layers of clothes to send the trio off, flailing after them and then tossing the garment in their direction before they dusted their hands in satisfaction. Kibum found himself rubbing his chest as his heart thumped harshly against his breastbone. This was almost too familiar for him...

When it appeared that Passeri and company had finally given up, Mr. Mask moved closer to the performing Jackson, observing from afar until he was almost directly under him. Only then did Jackson come down from his pole and start dancing on the level stage. From there, step by step, Mr. Mask shadowed Jackson with tumbling antics, following his lead or trying to mirror the other performer as needed. Another layer was lost to 'cover' Jackson at one point, a protective measure when he suddenly seemed cold, paired beautifully with a sudden but temporary lull in the music.

Sometimes they got too far apart and Passeri would suddenly reappear, pushing or spinning Jackson and Mr. Mask back towards each other so they were never separated for long. And near the end, she orchestrated a 'fall' wherein Jackson stumbled and collapsed against the pole, gradually sliding down like a stiff board. Haunting, tremulous notes hung over the scene as Mr. Mask used the last of his loose layers to cover Jackson's head protectively, hiding him from sight and blocking out the audience.

Kibum would have sworn he was the only person in that room at that moment. He hardly dared to breathe for fear of breaking the magic of the spell.

Mr. Mask helped Jackson stand up, guiding him around the pole, one hand holding Jackson's and the other against his back. Their steps matched the beat of the music perfectly before it transitioned again. It thrummed like the beating of a heart and pushed them both towards the back of the stage, staggering this way and that until they stopped near the curtains. The music petered out to give the hint of a slowly building crescendo and they turned around to face the audience. Passeri returned to move in front of them, a mesmerizing display of flowing layers and fluid limbs that perfectly hid the two behind her.

The music rose. She did a final spin and plucked the coverings from both Jackson and Mr. Mask, tossing them aside before she turned and ran to vault onto the pole, drawing the eyes of the audience for just a second in a glittery, fluttery array of elegance and athleticism. There was a collective gasp as she twirled in place which was quickly followed by another as Jackson ran in front of the other man, obscuring him from sight for a moment longer. Hands gripped Jackson's waist and gave him a boost in the low grav atmosphere, sending him to land just beneath Passeri, spinning at the same pace but in direct opposition to her.

And finally, Kibum had an unobstructed view of Mr. Mask in his well-toned, body suited glory. "Jinki?" "Isn't that Jinki?" "What's Jinki doing there?" "Is Jinki the guy in the mask?" Whispers

abounded and then faded in Kibum's ears as his world suddenly became nothing but the sight of Jinki. The rising third year's face was flushed and slightly sweaty; his hair messy from being under a mask, but Passeri – or Jackson – had obviously put makeup on him and the black rimmed eyes, shimmery eyelids, and glossy lips made Kibum's stomach flip. With the light directly in his beautiful brown eyes, he knew Jinki wouldn't be able to see him, but his smile was magical, almost like he could.

"Straight ahead," he thought he heard from somewhere above. A glance up showed Passeri looking down at Kibum, a delighted smile curling the corners of her mouth.

Jinki moved forward in the direction she'd indicated and approached the edge carefully, his gaze searching through slightly narrowed eyes. When he was close, he kneeled down and extended his hand, finally sighting on Kibum with a joyful recognition that made his heart thump. "Wanna join me?" he asked. Not 'us.' 'Me.'

Kibum wasn't entirely sure this wasn't a dream and he was slow to move. One hand lifted as if to take Jinki's and then he was nudged from behind with a girlish giggle. He grabbed Jinki's hand hard to keep from stumbling and gasped as he was all too easily pulled on stage amidst a chorus of excited cheers from his fans especially.

"Almighty Key!"

"Kibum!"

"Jinki!"

The cacophony was almost loud enough to drown out the music. But Ixo had them covered. They chose something powerful and energetic that he could feel as much as hear, and established instincts kicked in. With a whistle, he called Passeri and Jackson down and then flung himself on the main pole with gusto, falling into his stage persona with ease. He was not in his usual performance attire but attitude and the crowd's response more than made up for it.

By unspoken agreement, Alexander and Senna paired off while Passeri and Jackson did the same, performing as a duo. With a glance at Jinki, Kibum could see that he wasn't sure what to do now, awkwardly trying to look like he belonged, but there was an easy fix. Kibum abandoned the pole and moved close to Jinki, claiming him for a partner and semi-using him as a prop, not unlike their first time together on stage. But this time, Jinki acted more like an active and willing partner, his touch light, his hands firm, and his gaze steady.

This was right. This was the way their performance was supposed to be. And though he hadn't expected it at all, Kibum didn't think his heart could be more full than it was in this moment right now. Because everyone he cared about was here, cheering them – him – on, and the one person he valued most was with him, side by side, in a place he probably never should have been, doing the last thing Kibum would have expected him to do.

That was also the moment he knew he was well and truly in trouble. He hadn't really been certain before, but that was exactly when he undeniably fell for Jinki. Dancing together on the stage of The Stars Align and utterly surrounded by fans and friends, the only person he could see was Lee Jinki.

Chapter Nineteen:

The rest of the party passed by in a virtual blur. By the end of the gathering, Kibum had no definite recollections of anything they specifically talked about, save one of the earlier conversations immediately after their performance, or even of particular events that happened throughout. He knew they had taken pictures and there had been several fans and friends that wanted to try dancing on the stage as well, with Garum's permission of course. He was also aware the drinks they had been sipping on in the later half might have had something to do with that. But really, he figured it had more to do with the fact that he was riding a literal high because of Jinki.

Due to his performance, a lot of the attention Kibum might have been subjected to was otherwise shunted to Jinki instead. He'd gained a fair few fans that day himself, though he could get no relief from his circle of friends and his sisters especially. And while Psitassi admired Jinki's debut, she was still very firmly in Kibum's camp when it came to support and preference.

"Don't take it to heart," Passeri soothed upon stepping into their circle when she caught wind of that bit of the conversation. "It's a Moladhi preference really," she explained with a gentle laugh, one hand rising to partially cover her beaked mouth. Psitassi nodded in emphatic agreement, but Passeri was obliged to explain why when she received confused looks from the rest of the group. "As far as Terrans go, they're both diamonds," she explained, gesturing at both men with her hands. "Jinki is uncut and Kibum is polished."

"Hah!" Hajoan barked a laugh, quickly clapping her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound, though her mirth was not easily banished.

Henry flicked her in the forehead and she yelped in complaint. "Traitorous cretin," he mock-scowled at her, the expression drifting to Doyun when she was starting to giggle too.

"From a Varium perspective, Jinki is the polished one," Larad countered, crossing his arms and glancing down at said Terran who was currently ducking his head in flushed embarrassment.

"Yeah, but you're biased," Jinki mumbled, looking at the space directly in front of his boot covered toes.

"So is she," Ercite pointed out, gesturing towards Passeri who simply nodded in agreement. "Though I will say Jinki looks more polished than usual with the makeup you applied," they added. "From a probable Moladhi perspective anyway."

Kibum kept his mouth shut but couldn't quite hide the smile at seeing Jinki's ears burn bright red. He was saved from having to respond though when Jackson nudged himself into the group with a loud, "Hey, hey, hey now!" It made Jinki look up and all eyes turn to him while he handed a colorful drink to Passeri. "My lady," he grinned, a toothy expression with nothing but adoration in his gaze.

"Thank you," she preened, accepting it gracefully.

"Also," he added, holding up his now free hand, another drink in the other one. "If anyone is polished here, it's me," he boasted, standing up straight and flexing one of his arms. Of course, no one could see the muscles as he was fully clothed this time around, but his physique was well-known to the audience at large.

"Of course," Passeri purred. "*The* most polished," she winked before settling her free hand on his shoulder and shuffling close, slightly possessive but proud all the same.

Then it was Kibum's turn to blush as he glanced at Jinki out of the corner of his eye and saw the other man was looking at him too. They both looked away quickly while the rest of the group made exaggerated groaning sounds at the obvious display of solidarity and bias between the two primary performers. But then they had started breaking off into smaller groups and pairs, entertaining guests, being pulled into pictures, grabbing congratulatory drinks and otherwise celebrating as the event was intended.

Garum let them stay a bit longer than scheduled but had to usher them out eventually as he needed time to clean up so he could open for the regulars with a special compensatory show. Passeri and Jackson were staying, as were Alexander and Senna, but the majority of guests otherwise had to exit the establishment bit by bit.

The sun was just starting to go down when Kibum and company made their way onto the streets and started to walk back in the direction of the university. Several fans were still in the vicinity and they followed along too but peeled off when it became clear they should probably head out by the looks they were getting from Kibum and Jinki's friends. Kibum noticed one of the bemused smiles paired with a raised brow coming from Larad and saw a couple stragglers think better of their distance. It made him smile, but he doubted much of anything could dent his mood just then.

"I still can't believe you had nothing to do with that performance!" Henry suddenly blurted, pointing an accusatory finger at Jinki.

Everyone laughed at Jinki's confounded look while he glanced at Kibum at his side, one arm around the younger man's waist and the other holding his wrist over his shoulder. "Ask him," he defended himself, nodding at Kibum instead.

Suddenly put on the spot, Kibum's eyes widened and he shook his head. "That was not my idea!" He turned a brief glare at Jinki who only smiled back at him in response.

"From what I heard, it was actually Passeri and Jackson," Ercite commented from their perch on Larad's shoulder. They shrugged noncommittally when everyone looked their way. "Garum was in on it and I had a *lovely* conversation with the owner before we left." Their wink was maddeningly playful, likely as intended.

"Though it was *originally* part of Kibum's plan to get Jinki on stage," Larad added to Kibum's acute embarrassment. He looked down so as to avoid the looks that would likely travel his way.

"Hey. I tried to stop them, but they were determined," Jinki reminded everybody, recalling how the pair had literally pulled him into it and badgered him into practicing just enough to put on a show.

"Not that you weren't good or anything, but I still don't know whether to be impressed or grossed out that I watched my *brother* perform on stage," Doyun laughed with an overexaggerated shudder.

"He was beautiful," Henry defended immediately, a slight slur to his voice as he pointed a finger at Doyun like he was daring her to say something else.

Hajoon snorted, her arms crossed over her chest. "If I didn't know you two have been friends for forever and already tried the dating thing, I would be inclined to think you have a crush on my brother." Predictably, Henry's incoherent sputtering as he fought to defend himself drew everyone's attention, thereby keeping Kibum's curious look at Jinki otherwise unnoticed. Well, except for Jinki himself. This close, it was kind of hard to miss seeing a direct glance in his direction. Jinki's quick wink made Kibum flush and duck his head, hiding away from the crowd again.

The conversation continued without him though. "No. He has a crush on Aanya," Ercite corrected deftly, earning a smitten smile from Henry as his attention was immediately centered on their words.

"She's amazing," he grinned drunkenly, starry eyed and distracted while he leaned against Larad, petting the Varium's chest and abdomen distractedly.

Larad looked down with a crooked mouth and a raised brow before shaking his head. "Yes, yes," he agreed, patting Henry's outer shoulder. "She is a lovely Varium."

"Right?!" he beamed, glancing up just enough to see Larad before snuggling against the other male. Everyone giggled at his inebriated antics, up until Kibum awkwardly tripped over his own feet and leaned harder against Jinki than he meant to.

"I'm okay!" he announced quickly, standing upright with Jinki's help as they stalled for a second.

"Are you sure?" Hajoon teased, her eyes narrowed playfully as she certainly noticed the slight flush he felt on his cheeks.

"Yep," he nodded once, decidedly not looking at Jinki this time. "And I'm not drunk," he felt he needed to add with a chagrined smile, though he was slightly embarrassed he'd imbibed a little more than he intended to.

"You're definitely tipsy," Henry snorted, though he was certainly one to talk since he was still leaning rather heavily against Larad. The Varium laughed and kept his hand hovering close to Henry's back in case he needed to reach out to steady him.

"I'm almost surprised *you* didn't drink more," Hajoon commented with a look at Jinki.

He snorted a laugh and shook his head. "I still have to help both of you tomorrow. Knowing you two, you'd never let me hear the end of it if I tried to practice while hungover." Hajoon and Doyun shared the same look and nodded in mute agreement, both tired but otherwise untouched. They were underage after all and Garum was strict about that sort of thing.

"Speaking of that..." Hajoon trailed off with a meaningful look at Doyun who nodded along.

Jinki rolled his eyes and made a shooing motion with his hand. "Go on. I'll be along later."

"Thanks, Jinki!" the sisters responded in unison, doing a weird little cheer that made him wince awkwardly, and even Kibum couldn't hold back the tipsy giggle. "Race you home!" Doyun taunted, spinning on her heels as she looked back over her shoulder.

"Brat!" Hajoon yelped, scrambling to catch up. In almost no time, they were rapidly fading out of sight, leaving the group in bemused confusion.

"They haven't changed at all," Henry hiccupped a laugh, leaning into Larad's side and looking up at him adoringly. "Neither have you," he added, patting the Varium's abdomen. "So sturdy. Like Aanya. But much taller. And stronger," he babbled.

"You *definitely* had more than you should have today," Ercite commented in dry amusement, their eyes fixated on Henry as one craggy brow rose.

Apparently offended by the claim, Henry tried to stand up straight, pointing at the Dawbn with a weaving finger. "I did no-!" he began to say before he leaned too far back and yelped in panicked surprise.

"Henry!" Jinki cried out in concern, jerking Kibum when his immediate reaction was to try and help him, but Larad was faster.

The Varium's hovering hand reached out to snag Henry's flailing one, catching fast and hauling him close. Henry collided with Larad's sturdy torso again with a grunt and an embarrassed pout. "Maybe a little," Larad reiterated with a nod at the Terran.

"Jinki..." he whined, turning crestfallen eyes on the other man before he wrinkled his nose as Jinki mutely held his index finger and thumb close together.

"Me thinks we should be taking this one back first," Ercite chuckled, patting Larad's shoulder before looking in Jinki and Kibum's direction. Their eyes drifted from the third year to the second year though, a softer smile tugging at their lips.

Partially transfixed by Jinki's profile, Kibum only belatedly realized that Ercite was watching him and he flinched, blinking quickly to look away. He tried to step back to create space, insisting, "I can walk now."

But Jinki held fast, frowning at him with a confused smile. "I've no doubt, but I'd rather be safe than sorry," he defended, fingers tightening on Kibum's wrist and waist in determination.

"Oh," the younger man murmured stilling immediately, even as he felt heat rise to his cheeks and ears.

Henry made a noise of complaint and tried to lurch away from Larad, reaching for Jinki. "I want Jinki to help me too!"

"Henry," Jinki sighed with a shake of his head, attention diverted from Kibum again. It allowed the younger man to look at his profile once more, otherwise unbothered by Henry's antics. He had an otherwise perfect canvas to observe after all, especially since he hadn't washed off the makeup yet and it was stunning on him.

"Get back here," Larad snorted, stepping out to loop his arm around Henry's waist and lift him just off the ground, bracing him against his hip. He immediately turned ragdoll though and made Larad lurch from the deadweight. "Childish," the Varium chided, setting him back down.

"Jinki's the perfect height," he complained, pointing at said Terran without actually looking at him. It was clear he wanted to be 'helped' in a similar manner but Larad was too tall.

"I thought Aanya was," Ercite reminded him.

"But she's not here!" Henry wailed, turning his face towards the sky and pouting.

"Do you want me to carry you?" the Varium asked, opening his arms like he would to a child.

"Nah uh," the Terran mumbled before he shook his head.

"Do you want to carry Ercite?" There was a delayed pause this time, but eventually he nodded and raised his hands towards the Dawbn expectantly.

"Pitiful," Ercite chuckled, allowing himself to be lifted from Larad's shoulder and deposited into Henry's arms. "There, there," they soothed, patting his arms as they let him carry them like a teddy bear. Satisfied with his new role, Henry grinned and hugged Ercite in happy contentment. "Onward!" they encouraged, pointing towards the University.

"Okay!" Henry cheered, automatically starting to march ahead.

"We'll head out first," Larad leaned close to Jinki to murmur, winking at the pair before he jogged a couple steps to reach the wandering duo.

"See you later!" Jinki encouraged, waving after them. Only when they'd moved ahead a bit did he finally turn his attention to Kibum.

The younger man was still looking at him though and they both startled as they realized it at the same time. Kibum coughed once and looked away, desperately trying to wish the heat in his cheeks away.

"You ready to go back to your dorm room?" Jinki asked, already gently steering them in the right direction.

Not really. Kibum had a very irrational desire to simply wander around as long as possible with Jinki taking care of him the way he was. But at the same time, he didn't want to bother him too much. Conflicted, he still found himself nodding in mute agreement. He couldn't trust his tongue to say what he should.

"Okay."

There wasn't any need to say more or talk as they continued along. The silence was actually pleasant and peaceful, a soothing balm after the noise and raucousness of the party. Kibum wasn't sure what he'd say anyway. Every time he snuck another look at Jinki, his tongue grew fat in his mouth and his stomach flipped while his heart skipped a beat and it was very confusing. He who was usually glib and known for having a silver tongue could muster nothing to say in this man's company at that moment.

When they reached the campus, Jinki shifted his grip to allow Kibum more autonomy, but he kept his hand on one of his arms as a steady presence. "I can walk from here," Kibum promised, gesturing towards the dorm half-heartedly. He didn't want to, but Jinki still had a fair distance to go after this.

Jinki gave him a raised brow look and laughed lightly. "You know me better than that," he chided, continuing his steady pace without slowing. Kibum ducked his head and smiled shyly, a faint flush creeping into his cheeks. Yes, he did.

The campus wasn't particularly busy as they made their way to the second-year dorms. A lot of students went home or traveled to other domes during the two-month break. As such, they didn't have to navigate too many early evening greetings or curious looks or knowing smiles. The lift ride was quiet, with Jinki and Kibum the only riders, standing too close and not at the same time. Kibum almost didn't want it to end. It was pleasant being alone with Jinki. Comfortable and easy. Things he hadn't felt in far too long.

The doors opened though and Kibum's floor spread out before them, typically empty for this time of the school year. A hallway straight ahead led to the other side of the floor and there were corridors on either side that revealed more doors where other second-year students already were or would be anyway, come the start of the next semester. Kibum's room was on the other side of the floor and to the left. He'd managed to snag one of the last ones and it had him near the end of the hallway, but he was quite alright with that. Not that he could hear people moving around outside of his space anyway, but it was nice not having to worry about being in the thick of everything.

Almost as if he lived there himself, Jinki guided Kibum out of the lift and towards the second year's room. He waited patiently while Kibum activated his entrance card – through his personal data unit no less – and then moved inside with him. A gentle nudge ushered him towards the bed and Jinki murmured, "Have a seat."

"Jinki," he laughed softly, allowing the other man to coax him down, the hands on his arm gentle and supportive.

"I'm gonna get you a water. Hungry?" he asked, turning to head towards the food processor, his own data card already out so he could pay for it himself.

When Kibum saw the card, he made a sound of complaint and shifted like he was going to get up. "I can pay-" but a look over Jinki's shoulder made him settle in place and grumble under his breath. There was no gainsaying that look... In quiet protest, he didn't answer the food question, but couldn't help when his mouth watered at seeing the mela bread Jinki purchased for him. Still slightly warm, moist, with chunks of soft mela inside and a hint of cinnamon, his mouth watered at the sight. "I hate that you know me so well," he complained, taking the wrapped food in one hand and accepting the water in the other.

"I don't," Jinki shot back, a cheeky grin on his much too sober face as he sat down on the floor in front of him.

"Shut up," Kibum muttered, taking an obligatory sip of water before opening the wrapper on the food and inhaling the subtly sweet scent. He wouldn't normally buy it on his own – he couldn't

justify the cost and the calorie count, but as a gift, he would not refuse. And it was delicious. Slightly buzzed or not – though to be fair it had mostly worn off – it was magical. He took a bite and hummed in delight, rocking on the edge of the bed like a child.

“It’s cute when you do that,” Jinki said quietly, a warm smile obvious in his tone.

Kibum inhaled just a touch and glanced up under long lashes to make sure Jinki was talking about him. Yep. He was if that look was any indication. Saying nothing, he ducked his head and took another bite, looking anywhere but at the other man. “Thank you. For today,” he finally murmured, focusing all his attention on the half-eaten treat in his hands.

“You don’t have to-”

“I know,” he interrupted the expected comment. “But I want to,” he explained further, finally convincing himself to look up and meet Jinki’s eyes. The crinkled corners and upturned lips made his stomach do a flip and he stopped breathing for just a second.

“You’re welcome,” he murmured sincerely, one hand raising like he wanted to rest it on Kibum’s knee. But it paused, hanging uncertainly in the air between him.

Kibum’s skin tingled like electricity was dancing on it, expectant. Yet, Jinki’s hand started to drift away and he felt a gut reaction to stop it. Before he could even think about what he was doing, he reached out to catch Jinki’s hand in his, freezing as contact was made. “Um...” he sighed, the sound barely making it past his lips while he blinked at their connected hands.

Jinki’s fingers curled around Kibum’s, securing the hold. “I’m here,” he promised in a quiet voice, staying still otherwise.

When Kibum risked a look up from the hand holding his, he saw Jinki was just looking at him, as if he was committing everything about him to memory. Kibum’s heart thumped hard against his ribcage. Embarrassed or shy or just plain awkward, he didn’t know how to feel and took a bite that was much too large to cover it. He choked when he tried to swallow and flailed for the water bottle, a muffled, panicked cry escaping him.

“Easy!” Jinki cautioned with a nervous laugh, immediately at his side and patting his back, guiding Kibum’s hand to the water so he could gulp down several mouthfuls.

Through teary eyes and with a brilliant flush on his cheeks, he looked up and felt his throat tighten all over again. Jinki was much too close and he bit his bottom lip with a quiet whimper of sound in the back of his throat. Why was he so close? Why was he so perfect? “Why are you so good to me?” His eyes widened and he inhaled sharply when he realized the last thought was said out loud.

The question conjured a beguiling smile on Jinki’s lips. “Because I want to be,” he promised, sliding his hand up to cup the back of Kibum’s head. Kibum’s heart hammered in his chest and he thought he might die in that moment. “And because I think you deserve to be,” Jinki added, leaning close enough to press his lips to Kibum’s forehead, a soft, warm, and soothing sensation.

Kibum sighed as the tension and brief panic bled away. He reached up to grab the front of Jinki’s shirt in his fingers, holding lightly as he closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the moment. His eyes fluttered open though, when the lips against his forehead disappeared and reappeared on the

tip of his nose, bringing him face to face with Jinki as the other man lowered his face to be level with them.

They were so close he could see every color and pattern variation in Jinki's eyes. Feel the warmth of his breath on his lips. See the searching hope in his gaze as he hovered just in front of him. A question hung in the small space between them, unspoken but painfully loud, begging for an answer. It felt like an eternity before Kibum realized Jinki was the one who was waiting. Kibum didn't know why. Didn't have the ability to even think about it currently, but he was scared that if he didn't answer the question right now, he might never.

"Jinki," he gasped, pulling at the shirt to bring the other man close enough to make their lips meet. It was supposed to be quick, a small thing in answer to the question, and then done. He didn't count on pulling so hard though. Nor on Jinki losing his precarious balance as he was leaning over. Momentum pushed Kibum back and he reached to grab Jinki as an anchor. Jinki's hand on the back of his head cradled him close and then they jerked to a halt, Kibum halfway lying on the bed and Jinki braced above him.

"Sorry!" Jinki gasped in apology, separating just enough to speak freely. One arm was planted beside Kibum and he was partially straddling his body in an effort to keep from falling on him. A flush suffused his cheeks and burned bright in the tips of his ears. "I didn't mean--"

"Jinki," Kibum whispered, his pulse thundering in his ears, body tingling from head to toe. The single word was enough to stop the other man mid-sentence and really look at him again. Kibum watched the panic fade as curiosity and gentle concern took its place, an attentive expression on his face. "Can you do that again?" he asked, suddenly reckless and curious and wanting another taste of something that should never be so sweet, especially under the circumstances. He was almost literally trapped, half-wrapped in Jinki's arms and blocked by his body, but he'd never felt so safe and alive in the same moment before.

A brief look of confusion flickered through Jinki's eyes, but then he whispered in no small wonderment, "Kiss you?" Kibum nodded. Jinki's smile was magical as he blinked down at the other man. "Gladly," he answered, lowering his head to press his lips to Kibum's again.

Kibum closed his eyes and surrendered to the way Jinki's mouth moved against his. How his lips caressed the entirety of Kibum's; his tongue teased, mischievous and mostly innocent at the same time. He had kissed people before, but if this was kissing, maybe he hadn't really after all. It felt like he was drowning in the most intoxicating way and it was difficult to focus when Jinki eventually pulled back. He whimpered in involuntary complaint and then bit his lip in mild embarrassment when Jinki heard him.

Jinki pressed his lips to Kibum's forehead again and explained, "You need rest. And I..." he trailed off, swallowing once and leaning back again with a forced sigh. "I should probably head home now," he admitted with an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh," Kibum murmured in genuine surprise. He'd forgotten that was something Jinki was supposed to do. And how late it probably was. "Right," he exhaled, suddenly nervous and unsure as he smoothed down the front of his shirt and awkwardly sat up. He was hyperaware of Jinki shifting off the bed to stand upright, moving around the space with almost clinical efficiency. But he didn't miss the

little sidelong looks the other man kept throwing him or the way his hand drifted towards Kibum just a bit from time to time.

“Make sure you finish your water,” he encouraged, grabbing the half-empty bottle and setting in next to Kibum again. “And take a shower if you can. You’ll sleep better if you do.”

“But-” Kibum started to say, just a little confused. Was it even humanly possible to separate one’s emotions that quickly? He reached as if to stop Jinki or at least slow him down.

Jinki caught his hand and moved close. “I have to help my sisters tomorrow and it *is* getting late, Kibum,” he reminded the younger man with a genuine smile, all of his attention focused on him once more. He raised Kibum’s palm to his lips and planted a warm kiss in the middle. A shiver raced up Kibum’s spine and he inhaled sharply. “Until next time,” Jinki promised, giving the hand a gentle squeeze before he stepped close, laid one more kiss atop Kibum’s head, and stepped away, heading for the door.

Briefly frozen in place, Kibum was incapable of reacting in time to stop Jinki before he made it out of the door. It whispered shut behind him and Kibum exhaled, his belly unclenching as he stared at his palm. “Until next time,” he echoed, a giddy grin on his face while he pressed his loosely closed fist to his chest. He leaned back to fall on top of his bed and stare at the ceiling in wonderment, the fingers of his free hand making their way to his lips. “Now *that* was a kiss,” he giggled, kicking his legs up and then dropping them to the floor.

“Oh, stop that,” he chided himself, abruptly realizing how silly he was probably acting. “It was just a kiss,” he reasoned, nodding his head once. But it didn’t last long before another shy smile made its way to his lips and he cradled his hands close to his chest. “A really nice kiss. From Jinki.” But then another thought occurred and he cringed. “In my room. On my bed...”

The ‘what ifs’ immediately started from there. What if Jinki thought he was that way? What if he came on too strong? What if that was why he ran away so fast? What if- “Oh, stop it!” he grumbled, flailing and smacking his hands down on the bed. To curtail anymore such thoughts, he hauled himself up and stalked into the bathing room for a quick shower. It didn’t help as much as he wanted it to. But he saw the water bottle on the bed and remembered Jinki told him to drink it. He did. And then fell atop the bed before burrowing under the cover, equal parts mortified and ecstatic over the evening.

Under the comforting embrace of his blanket, Kibum drifted off to sleep, the warm memory of Jinki’s lips on his forehead following him into nothingness.

Chapter Twenty

Jinki made his way home with a confused jumble of elation and trepidation worrying at his gut. He walked, so it took him much longer than usual. Unfortunately, it didn’t help him unravel his concern about overstepping either. Lost in thought as he finally approached the house, he jumped when someone called his name. Looking up with wide eyes, he laughed in embarrassment. “Hey mom,” he waved, moving closer to wrap his arms around her in greeting hug.

"Hey, love," she smiled, hugging him back easily. He felt her arms loosen but when Jinki held on, she paused and tightened her embrace again. "What's wrong?" she questioned, smoothing the back of his neck with one hand while the other patted his middle back comfortingly.

"Nothing really," he mumbled, closing his eyes and reveling in the embrace. She always gave such good hugs: firm and warm, like a weighted blanket that could sooth even the worst case of restlessness.

She laughed quietly and shook her head. "Your sisters said you performed well tonight."

"Ugh," he groaned, hiding his face in her shoulder. "Not really."

"Well, they said the audience liked you," she persisted, a smile obvious in her voice.

He snorted once. "They were being kind."

"And Kibum?" she pried gently, her hands stilling as she waited for the response.

Since that was the source of his uncertainty at the moment, Jinki tensed and eased himself out of his mother's embrace. "He's fine. *I'm* fine. Don't you have work to get to?" he asked, stepping back now to catch her hands in his as he met her gaze head on.

She smiled back at him, the corners of her eyes wrinkling with a multitude of laugh lines. "I do, but it won't kill them if I'm a bit later than usual," she winked, freeing one hand to step close and thread Jinki's hair behind one ear. "Besides, I'm a mother first and you can't very well talk with your father since he's out of the dome at the moment. So?" she pressed, cupping his cheek and looking up into his face intently.

"I shouldn't have kissed him," he finally admitted unhappily after a delayed pause.

Her response was not what he expected. "Oh? Progress I see."

"What?" he asked in bewilderment. "No! I mean yes, but-" he struggled to explain, floundering on the words he needed.

His mother chuckled and patted his hand in both of hers before she gestured towards the bench in front of the house. "Let's have a seat." Her eyes darted towards the front door and she added, "Where no prying ears might listen in, aye?"

Jinki gave a weak but grateful smile in return and nodded. He sat down first and waited for her to send the message to her work before she sat down in turn. At her prompting, he explained the general situation and what he was most worried about.

She listened attentively, a small furrow between her brows and one hand resting on her chin thoughtfully. When he was finished, she nodded in understanding and then let the full weight of her gaze settle on him once more. "You've mentioned he was a skittish thing before." He gave her a look at the word choice and she raised one hand in mute apology. "I don't think you've overstepped here. And to be fair, he was the one that kissed you first," she pointed out with a shrug.

"But... he was... tipsy..." he mumbled, arguing with himself over it. He'd wanted to kiss Kibum many a time before tonight, and it just felt wrong that the first real opportunity came after they'd both

been drinking at least a little bit. Granted, Jinki hadn't felt tipsy and he knew that Kibum wasn't drunk, but still...

His mother's expression was bemused and he wasn't sure he liked it. "Well, if you're worried that he thinks you took advantage of him, just ask. It's what you're good at," she winked.

"Mom," he groaned, rolling his eyes at the comment.

"What?" she asked, gesturing to either side of her in an open shrug. "I can't help it if you're the best communicator in this family," she reminded him with a single laugh. "No idea where you get it from. Your father is terrible and I've never been very good at the speaking *and* listening part," she admitted wryly. When Jinki gave her a deadpan look, she laughed. "Fine! So I've gotten better in my old age."

Jinki's expression relaxed but his tension didn't. "It's not even the kiss," he admitted, knowing that it was but not really. "It's... him," he gestured vaguely, not entirely sure how to put it into words. When he looked at his mother, her head was tilted to the side in a perplexed manner and he frowned. "Okay. Fine. Despite the fact he works at an exotic dance club, I don't really think he's done much dating or anything. I'm scared I'll frighten him off or push too hard or too fast or... yeah," he explained with a grimace.

"So you're worried about sex then?" she asked, being intentionally obtuse.

"Mom!" he groaned, slapping his face with his palm.

"Oh, you're so cute when you're embarrassed," she teased, laughing in quiet delight as she poked at one of his cheeks. When he turned a frustrated glare at her, she raised both hands in immediate surrender and smoothed her expression. "For what it's worth," she started, reaching out to put her arm around his shoulder and give him a squeeze. "I think you're doing a great job. I both love and hate that when you fall for someone, you do so quite hard," she admitted with a sad smile on her face. "Have you ever asked him about it?" she wondered gently, reaching up to grab his chin and lightly turn his face more towards her.

Jinki raised one brow and snorted. "Up until recently, he was still my mentee."

"Right," she nodded in understanding. "The 'no dating the mentee' rule. But he's not a mentee anymore and though you're ridiculously busy, as per usual, you do somehow manage to find time for him," she smiled with a wink.

He laughed without offense. "True enough." Jinki took another breath and then nodded as if to himself. "I think Henry's a bit more jealous than usual too."

"You think?" his mother chuckled, giving his shoulder a pat. He turned a pitiful look at her and she shook her head. "It's never easy feeling like you're being replaced, even when you know you're not."

"He knows that!" Jinki exhaled in frustration, recalling the way he'd acted earlier this evening.

His mother sighed and tapped her head with one finger. "The mind knows that, but the heart," she explained, patting her chest where her heart would be, "is not so easily convinced. You know... it

wouldn't be the end of the world for your sisters if you didn't go to every practice you could with them. That way you could spend a little more time with other people or even just by yourself."

"But it might feel that way to them," he argued weakly, knowing it was not a strong defense.

She raised her brow and laughed once, shaking her head in silence. "Well, love. It does seem like you've got a fair bit to get sorted out in the meantime." His mother paused and raised her hand in front of them. "Speaking of getting things sorted... have you decided on a focus for your last two years yet?"

Jinki groaned loudly. "No."

"You might want to get on that," she teased, poking at his cheek again.

"Mom!"

"What? This break won't last forever you know," she reminded him, chuckling to herself as she stood up and stretched lightly.

Jinki remained seated and looked down at the space between his feet. "What if I can't get it figured out?" he worried. He heard his mother sigh and then flinched when her shadow fell over him, casting him into semi-darkness.

"Then I'll be here to help you," she promised, cupping his face in both hands and placing a motherly kiss on the top of his head. "And your father. And your sisters. And probably Daejung too. Though I don't know how much help he'd be right now. All he seems to know are video games," she laughed.

It was enough to conjure a smile and a weak laugh from Jinki too. Likely as intended. "You never know," he admitted, looking up with a fragile expression of hope. His attention shifted beyond his mother's face to center on the night sky above them, dimmed from the dome's protective surface but still faintly clear in the distance. "I think..." he trailed off, seeing his mother turn to follow the direction of his gaze. "I think I might want to see the stars," he finally whispered, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Huh," was the only response he got from his mother. That and a knowing look as she turned her attention back to him. "Well, whatever you do decide, you'll have my support no matter what," she assured him, reaching down to grab his hand and give it a gentle squeeze.

Jinki smiled when he met her gaze. "Thanks mom," he responded, squeezing her hand back before letting go and stretching. "Goodness. It's getting late, isn't it?" he wondered, giving her a side eyed look to which she laughed.

"Too responsible by far," she scoffed, nudging one of his raised hands and then shaking her head. "But yes. I have work and you need sleep. I expect your sisters will run you ragged tomorrow, but such is your life," she teased, wrinkling her nose at him before leaning close to give him one more quick kiss on the top of his forehead. "Love you, son. Sleep well and see you tomorrow," his mother added before she started to walk off, slowing enough to turn and give him a final wave.

"Bye, mom! Don't work too hard," he advised while waving in response.

"You're one to talk!" she called back but nodded in understanding. And then she made it to the hoverbike and took off with practiced ease.

Jinki watched the lights of her bike disappear in the distance. Only when he couldn't see them anymore did he finally get up and wander back inside. He was still a little unsettled but getting things out in the open always helped. Now all that was left was to follow up. After tomorrow anyway. His sisters probably *would* run him ragged...

The following few days were busy and generally unchanged from whatever Jinki expected. Training sessions wore him out completely, each sister had *some* kind of event to attend in quick succession, including Hajoong's semi-finals match, and he had little time or energy to worry about anything else. He exchanged frequent messages with his circle of people, and especially Kibum, though they both seemed content to skirt the topic from the other night. Well, Jinki at least wanted to discuss it in person and not by text or voice chat. It also didn't help that he found himself tailed by new additions of 'fans' who had enjoyed his performance at The Stars Align either. How did Kibum handle the constant attention?

By the end of the week, he was almost well and ready to seriously consider his mother's suggestion of maybe trying to claim a little more time for himself. Maybe it was just too much of everything, but he simply felt so worn out and stretched thin. Even the thought of trying to meet up with his friends brought no measure of joy. The added stress, albeit minor, of thinking about his future plans and how to interact with Kibum after their kiss only compounded the problem.

In the end, maybe Jinki was the only one that was really caught completely off guard when he suddenly came to in his bed with no recollection of how he'd gotten there. He groaned softly and opened sensitive eyes, wincing even at the dim light in the room. "Huh?" he mumbled, disoriented confusion surfacing when he saw his mother sitting on the edge of the bed next to him.

"Welcome back," she laughed once, leaning forward enough to rest the back of her hand against his forehead.

"Mom?" he whispered with a furrowed brow.

"You're still a little warm, but everything else seems alright. The scanner says you're good at least," she explained before looking down at him with a sigh.

Still confused, Jinki asked, "What happened?" The last thing he remembered was eating supper with everyone in the dining room and then...

"You, my dear, fainted," she answered, tilting her head to the side as if she was disappointed.

"Eh?"

His bafflement made her laugh again and she took another breath. "Our thoughts exactly," she murmured dryly, placing one hand against her chest. "One moment, we're all eating and finishing up, and the next you're collapsing on the dining room floor after standing up." Jinki cringed at the recap and glanced at the door. His mother followed his gaze before she added, "Your siblings are probably listening in from the outside but they've promised not to bother you while I'm here."

"Ugh," he groaned, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired," he admitted with a quiet sigh, letting his hands drop slowly. "How long was I out? It's still Friday, right?" he asked in a sudden panic, worried he might have slept far longer than he should have.

His mother rolled her eyes with a groan. "Yes, it's still Friday. You've only been down for about an hour. But you're staying in bed at this point." Jinki opened his mouth to argue and she laughed once, interrupting anything he might have been trying to say. "I'm pulling the mom card and you are *going* to get a full night's rest or so help me," she threatened vaguely.

"Mom..." he pouted, pitiful in his bed.

"Don't you mom me," she chided, shaking her finger at his nose. "I can't even remember the last time you passed out so no buts."

"Last summer. Hajoon's pre-championship training session," he mumbled as if by rote. She gave him a look with a raised brow and pursed lips. "Sorry," he apologized, shrugging his shoulders and stretching his neck.

"Here," she offered, reaching to the side end table beside his bed. "Take this. It's an Immuno-booster," she explained, handing him a glass of water as soon as he sat up enough to take it.

"Thanks," he mumbled, swallowing the tablet with a quick grimace.

"I feel like I should say I told you so, but knowing you..." she trailed off, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Mom," he groaned plaintively.

"You should just be glad I'm still here right now. Had this happened much later, I'd be gone for work and your sisters would have to take care of you," she explained, tossing her arms up in helplessness. Jinki wrinkled his nose at that but didn't comment. "I've let your father know and he'll check on you whenever he gets back this evening."

Jinki nodded in understanding and scooped back down to lie in bed once more. "What about tomorrow?" he asked, looking at her from the corner of his eyes.

"Boy," she warned, raising her hand like she was going to swat his leg under the covers.

He laughed even as he flinched, and she giggled in response, setting her hand down and looking away briefly. "I know, mom. Rest, right?"

"Exactly."

"Okay."

"Good. I've gotta head out in a couple hours, but if you need anything before then, just let me know." Jinki nodded and managed a half-smile. "And don't let your siblings bother you this evening."

You have my permission to kick them unequivocally out of your room tonight,” she added with a quick wink.

“Got it, mom,” Jinki snorted, gesturing with one hand to gently urge her to get moving.

“Ungrateful brat,” she teased with a bemused smile. He grinned back at her unrepentantly and she leaned over to kiss his forehead. “Get some rest and I’ll check on you when I get back in the morning, alright?”

“Okay,” he confirmed, giving her a thumbs up before shooing her away again.

She didn’t stay much longer after that. When she was gone and the door was safely closed behind her, Jinki took another breath and grimaced. It had been a while since he’d passed out unexpectedly. How embarrassing that it happened over supper... And that it meant tomorrow was going to be a bust. He’d had plans to tentatively meet up with the others but that was not going to happen anymore.

Conjuring up his personal comms, he sent a general text message to the group. *Gonna have to cancel tomorrow guys. Sorry!*

He wasn’t expecting an immediate response, but he wasn’t entirely surprised by Ercite’s single, ?, in answer.

How to explain without being too direct? Hmm... *I’m apparently a bit more tired than I realized and my mom has effectively grounded me. XD*

Larad sent a laughing emoji and Henry finally commented, *She can’t ground you. You’re not even a kid anymore.*

It was followed immediately by a private message from Kibum though. *Are you sick?*

Jinki smiled at the questions and responded to Kibum’s first. *I’m fine. I just passed out earlier and need a bit more rest is all.*

He turned his attention back to the main group and started typing a response. *She’s my mom. Of course she-*

Are you okay?

What happened?

Should I come over?

Each message popped up in quick succession, interrupting his typing as Kibum fired back a set of rapid responses. It made Jinki smile harder. *-can.* He finished sending the last message. *Really, I’m fine, Kibum. Just a bit... overworked.* Hopefully that was general enough.

Sure, sure. Moms have that power. You good though? Henry pressed, following up.

I bet this is your sisters’ fault. Do I need to come scold them? Kibum sent and Jinki could picture him perfectly, the way one hand would be on his hip with the other shaking at his sisters.

Yes. I'm good. I promise, he sent to the group at large. *I'll let you know when I'm out of purgatory and we can maybe catch up on Sunday. Yeah?* To Kibum, he messaged, *Probably but no. They're likely already feeling guilty.*

Okay. You better take care of yourself, Jinki! Henry responded, a shaking fist suspiciously absent in the message.

Get lots of rest and we'll see you when we see you, Larad added.

Sleep well! That from Ercite.

Good. They should be. The message from Kibum made Jinki snort as he scratched at his cheek, a half-smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He thought that might be the end of it and he was going to send a good night message himself, but then he got a brief message that popped up and was immediately recalled. It was followed by ... and Jinki frowned.

What? he asked when no other message came through.

He could practically feel Kibum's hesitation as the seconds ticked by with no immediate response. At last though, he saw: *Can I come over?*

Jinki's brows rose and he blinked in confused surprise. *Now?* As soon as he sent it, it felt like a silly question.

Yes.

That confirmed it. He really was okay and it didn't seem right to ask him to come over right now. It wasn't late yet but the distance was a bit far. *You don't have to.*

Can I? was all he got back but Kibum's frustration was almost palpable.

Jinki rubbed his chin with his fingers and took a small breath. *Sure. If you want to.*

I'll be there soon.

There was no additional response and Jinki nibbled on his bottom lip. It would be the first time he'd seen Kibum in person since... the gathering. The realization had him on pins and needles while he waited for the other man to arrive. Why was it so important for Kibum to come see him now? He didn't have to wait too long to find out though. He was just dozing off when he heard a chime at his door, indicating someone was outside. "That was fast," he whispered, reaching over to press the activation button beside his bed.

The door swished open with Kibum standing in the doorway before he flinched. It was clear he'd been looking... no, glaring at someone nearby. Probably Jinki's siblings. His focus shifted though and he stepped inside quickly. As the door closed behind him, he made a beeline for Jinki's bed, a stormy expression on his face. "I *told* you your schedule was too full," he chastised, stopping short of the bed with his hands balled into fists and a cloud of worry and concern hanging over him.

It wasn't what Jinki expected and it made him laugh. "Nice to see you too."

Kibum flailed awkwardly and then knelt beside Jinki's bed, grabbing the nearest hand in his and holding firm. "Are you sure you're okay?" he worried, a tense furrow etched between his brows as he looked at Jinki's face and then up and down his body like he didn't believe him.

"Really. I'm fine, Kibum," he promised, the burst of amusement fading as he realized that the other man was genuinely worried about him. He'd worn that expression often enough to know what it should look like. For a second, he tried to sit up in bed, but Kibum stopped him.

"No!" he commanded, reaching out to press on his nearest shoulder and back to the surface of the bed. He stood up enough to sit on the edge of the bed, but could hardly sit still, fidgeting and looking at Jinki before looking away and then back again.

Kibum's hold on his hand wasn't a vice but he could feel the younger man's concern. "Hey. It hasn't happened in a while but it's not the first time I've passed out," he tried to explain.

It was clearly not the right choice of words. Kibum's eyes grew wide in his face and he paled further. "That's *not* a good thing!"

Jinki winced. Probably not. "I'll be fine when I've gotten a bit more rest. Mom's made sure I'm staying home tomorrow anyway."

"Damn right you are," Kibum grumbled under his breath, the grip on Jinki's hand tightening.

As cute at the response was, it felt a little strong to Jinki. "What's wrong, Kibum?"

Kibum's gaze turned shaky and he looked everywhere but at Jinki. His grip, however, remained firm. When Jinki shook the held hand to draw his attention back, Kibum exhaled through his nose, his shoulders drooping. "I got... scared... when you said you... passed out," he finally admitted, looking at the space directly next to Jinki's face but not at him.

"Sorry," Jinki apologized, wrinkling his nose. "I shouldn't have told you."

"No!" Kibum denied immediately, gaze fixating on the other man. "You *should* have. I just..." he trailed off, clearly at a loss of what to say or not sure how to say what he wanted to. "I don't know," he blurted, looking away and wiping at his cheek with a quick shoulder swipe.

This time, Jinki refused to be pushed back down when he sat up to meet Kibum's eyes, one hand holding his and the other pressing against his chest. "I'm sorry for worrying you," he murmured, grabbing Kibum's hand on his chest and holding it gently.

"Don't... just apologize," he mumbled, looking down and shaking his head. "It doesn't change anything," he frowned, breathing a little harder than he needed to, clearly at least a little upset.

"You're right," Jinki agreed after a brief pause, feeling guilt settle in his chest while he stared at the other man's profile. "Hey," he called softly, leaning over a bit to try and move himself into Kibum's view.

Kibum glanced up and mumbled, "I'm glad you're alright."

"Me too," Jinki promised, freeing his left hand so he could cup Kibum's cheek and turn his face towards him. "Thank you for worrying about me," he smiled, watching to see how he would react.

"Of course I worry about you," Kibum said immediately, still looking to the side. "I li-" he started to say before he met Jinki's eyes squarely and stopped short, trapping the words behind his teeth as if he was afraid to set them free.

There it was. Jinki's face softened and he shifted his hold to grab the back of Kibum's head so he could pull him close into a loose embrace. "I like you too," he whispered, taking a leap of faith on what he thought Kibum was going to say. Kibum's wiry arms wrapped around him then and he buried his face in Jinki's shoulder, simply holding tight.

Eventually, he shifted to rest his chin on Jinki's shoulder and sighed. "You were so good at taking care of me, but you're *terrible* at taking care of yourself, you know."

It made Jinki laugh as he ran a soothing hand up and down Kibum's back. "Does that mean you'll take care of me?" he asked, half in jest.

"If you won't," came the all too sincere response as his arms tightened and his fingers dug in harder.

"Thank you," he whispered, turning his head to press a gentle kiss against the side of Kibum's head before he pulled back so he could finally get a look into his face once more. Kibum nodded with an unreadable expression, eyes searching Jinki's face. "It's getting late. Are you going to go back to the dorms tonight or..." he trailed off, leaving the question hanging between them. Kibum didn't say anything but his hands tightened on Jinki's noticeably. "You can stay if you'd like," he offered, leaving that possibility open.

Kibum nodded hesitantly. "Just until you fall asleep," he added, scooching back a bit and shifting his hold to grab Jinki's hands instead.

"Okay," Jinki smiled, eyes nearly disappearing when he did so. It was gratifying seeing an answering response from Kibum before he shifted and laid down on his side, pulling one of Kibum's hands close against his chest as he did so. He raised the other man's fingers to his lips and placed a chaste kiss upon them.

That was all it took for Kibum to shift off the bed so that he could kneel beside it and rest his chin on the surface, looking back in mute adoration. "I'll be here," he whispered with a tremulous smile on his lips and hope in his eyes.

Reassured by the promise, Jinki curled his hands around Kibum's and let himself close his eyes. It was still light in the room but there was something soothing about having the other man nearby that helped him slip into a peaceful slumber for the evening. And really, he wasn't even half surprised when he woke up sometime during the night to see that Kibum was still there, sleeping on the side of Jinki's bed and one hand held loosely in his own.

Oh so carefully, he freed his hand so that he could trace the outline of Kibum's hairline, etching his sleeping face into his memory. The sleeper stirred slowly, face scrunching when he felt the phantom fingers touching his hair. Sleepy eyes opened one after the other before focusing on Jinki in front him and a warm smile lit his face up. It slipped though when he apparently realized that it was no dream and that he'd stepped into reality, before sitting up abruptly, lips pursed in silent embarrassment.

"Hello," Jinki smiled, unperturbed.

"Hi," Kibum echoed in a quieter voice, his smile hesitant but genuine.

"I'm glad you're still here," he assured the other man, resting his hand atop Kibum's.

Kibum shrugged and looked away. "I meant to go--"

"It's alright," Jinki interrupted, tugging at the hand he'd just captured, an open invitation.

Kibum's brows rose on his forehead, his expression contemplative. He pursed his lips again but stood up and cautiously lowered himself into the curve of Jinki's body as he settled on the bed on top of the blankets that separated them.

Content, Jinki wrapped his right arm around Kibum's waist and embraced him close as he rustled his nose in the soft dark hair. It smelled of his shampoo, a slightly floral scent. "You smell good," he whispered, feeling Kibum tense at the comment. "It's nice," he added, tightening his hold and lightly gripping Kibum's shirt.

It took a second but he felt the tension bleed from him soon after. Kibum's hands rose to tentatively entrap the one holding onto his shirt. "You... make me feel... comfortable," he whispered in a very quiet voice, like he was trying the words on his tongue.

Still half-asleep, Jinki murmured back, "You too." And then he groaned softly and hugged him tighter, willingly letting himself drift back into unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-One:

Kibum was almost too on edge to fall asleep after Jinki did. He hadn't been lying. The other man did make him feel comfortable, but there was something about sharing his bed that felt almost taboo. Even though they were just sleeping and there were layers of fabric between them. His heart racing fast in his chest, he smiled all the same and traced his fingertips over Jinki's hand around his waist. The sleeper shifted slightly but didn't wake and Kibum breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't want to disturb him preemptively.

His relief turned to abject panic though when the door eventually slid open to reveal someone in the entryway. Kibum closed his eyes tight to pretend to be asleep and tried to will his body to relax. He wasn't sure how successful he was, but the observer didn't actually enter or say anything. There was a quiet exhale like a laugh and then the door slid shut again, leaving the two alone once more. He hadn't gotten a good look before he'd closed his eyes so he really had no clue who it was. The backlighting had obscured them from his sight. But they hadn't said anything so... he guessed it was okay?

That, more than anything else, let Kibum finally relax. Taking a breath, he sighed and closed his eyes to go back to sleep until Jinki was ready to get up.

Their late breakfast wasn't half as awkward as it could have been. Hajoon and Doyun were both gone while Daejung was apparently playing games in the den. Siwoo was the only one still at the kitchen table, picking at the last tidbits of her meal, and Mr. Lee was watching the holoscreen in the living room. Kibum didn't know where Mrs. Lee was but Jinki didn't seem to be worried so he wasn't either. Though he couldn't help but wonder if she had been the one to check on them earlier or not.

Distracted, he picked at his food, nibbling on the fruit bits scattered on the plate and tearing tiny pieces off the single pancake. He kept giving Jinki covert looks out of the corner of his eye, trying to see if he was looking too or not. But that was also when he realized that Siwoo was watching him, her dark eyes blinking slowly. Kibum forced a smile and sat up straighter on his chair. "What's up?" he asked, hoping it might prompt some kind of conversation.

Siwoo looked between them with slightly narrowed eyes. "Are you two dating?"

Kibum nearly choked and even Jinki coughed once into his hand, pounding on his chest when the question caught him completely off guard. "Oh, that went down the wrong pipe," he groaned, clearing his throat forcefully.

"Are you okay?" Kibum asked, reaching out to pat Jinki on the back, a worried laugh escaping despite his being flustered by Jinki's sister.

"I'm good," he promised, raising a hand to reassure him and then coughing once more to finish clearing his throat.

"I guess so," Siwoo commented with a nod as she shrugged her shoulders and went back to picking at her food, a half-hidden smirk tugging at one corner of her mouth.

"Erm..." Kibum trailed off, not sure what to say.

"Siwoo," Jinki chided, giving her a cross look. The single laugh dispelled any actual irritation he might have felt.

"You didn't say no," she shrugged again, not looking up from her food.

Without responding yet, Jinki reached down and grabbed Kibum's hand, loosely threading their fingers together. Then he looked over with a hesitant smile. He didn't say anything, but the question was there, hanging in the space between them.

Kibum pursed his lips, fighting the knee-jerk urge to pull his hand away. He didn't really want to, but the thought that he shouldn't let anyone else know how he actually felt about Jinki reared up and made him afraid. His hand twitched anyway though, and he saw the tiniest of wincing on Jinki's face. The other man's grip loosened further, their fingers unthreading as he looked back towards Siwoo. Kibum's gut twisted and fearful guilt kicked him in the chest.

"That's still not a-" Jinki started to say before he stopped with a flinch.

Kibum jerked his hand and gripped Jinki's harder than he intended, not letting the contact break. He pulled Jinki's hand into his lap and cradled it with both of his before meeting Jinki's eyes with a careful smile. Kibum nodded once, a barely perceptible motion, but he knew Jinki saw it. There was no way he didn't with how his eyebrows rose high on his forehead, mouth forming a silent, 'Yeah?'

‘Yeah,’ he mouthed back after a brief pause, feeling his heart hammer against his chest and wondering if Jinki could feel it too.

Jinki’s smile was magic, a mouthful of straight teeth in a wide grin and his eyes nearly disappearing in his face. He gave Kibum’s hand a little squeeze in reassurance and turned to focus on his youngest sister again. “That’s still not a good habit of yours, but for your information, yes,” he stated proudly, not an ounce of doubt in his voice.

“Oh!” Siwoo giggled, looking up so that her eyes could dart between the two of them. She looked behind them and her grin got bigger. “Dad! Jinki’s dating Kibum now!”

Kibum gasped.

Jinki scolded, “Siwoo!”

And Mr. Lee hummed while the comment registered before responding, “Congratulations.” Then his attention was back on the news of the holoscreen. Something about the grav jumping tournament so far – Hajoon’s team was going to the finals this year too.

“Dad!” Siwoo pouted, clearly disappointed by his lack of reaction to the revelation.

“Siwoo,” Jinki chided again, giving her a worthy glare as he kept his hand wrapped tightly around Kibum’s.

“I’m gonna go tell Daejung,” she announced just as suddenly, jumping up and running off to the den before anyone could think about stopping her.

“Brat!” Jinki shouted at her back, obviously still glaring before he turned to focus his attention back on a slightly panicking Kibum. “You okay?” he asked, raising his free hand to cup Kibum’s cheek in his palm.

No. Not really. Everything in him said he should not have agreed. Especially since Siwoo wouldn’t have reacted like that if he hadn’t. His feelings for Jinki would be safely locked away in a space where they shared it but no one else did. And he wouldn’t have to worry about his trust already being tested. It was clear he couldn’t trust Siwoo not to be a herald. That was obvious but at least understandable. But could he trust Jinki not to... The question in his head died out just as quickly as his panic when he finally looked into Jinki’s eyes and really felt the hand on his cheek.

“Kibum?” the other man wondered, looking between both eyes carefully.

Kibum swallowed and nodded, leaning into the contact with a small smile. “Yeah,” he whispered in response, still holding to Jinki’s hand under the table.

They both jumped in surprise when Mr. Lee cleared his throat nearby. Jinki’s hand fell away and he turned to focus on his father, though his other remained where it was. “Your mother’s sleeping after her shift but she wanted me to remind you that you’re housebound today.”

“Yes, sir,” Jinki nodded in agreement, rubbing at the back of his head in embarrassment. “But what about Hajoon and Doyun’s practices? Hajoon has another practice match before the championships tomorrow and Doyun the day after.”

"Housebound," Mr. Lee reiterated firmly, a breathy laugh escaping his nose.

Kibum recognized the sound. It was the same one he'd heard from the doorway earlier this morning. He pursed his lips and flushed lightly when he looked at Mr. Lee. A very bemused smile was tugging at his lips, though it was hard to say if it was for Kibum or Jinki.

"And Kibum," he called, switching his attention with ease.

"Sir?" Kibum blurted, sitting up straight in his chair again.

"Feel free to stay as long as you like," he offered, nodding once. His attention drifted once more before Kibum could answer. "I'm going to be in my study. Call me if you need anything, alright?"

"Yes, father," Jinki agreed, waving at the older man as he walked off. He jerked to the side in surprise when Daejung and Siwoo came pelting out of the den, nearly running into him.

Daejung gasped with wide eyes. "I knew it!"

"See?!" Siwoo pointed, grinning happily at his response, clearly pleased with herself.

"Ugh..." Jinki groaned, smacking his face with his palm.

It was all so silly in that moment. Kibum had to laugh, a genuinely amused sound.

"What?" the younger siblings asked in unison, sharing confused glances.

"It just feels like something out of a drama," he explained, grinning hard at Jinki who turned to share an equally bemused look.

"No it's not!" Siwoo pouted, apparently mildly offended by the comparison.

"Maybe a little," Jinki agreed, looking over his shoulder to wink at her.

"Jinki!" she grumbled, crossing her arms and turning around to stalk back into the den on her own.

"Wait up, Woo!" Daejung called, trotting after her. "Are you going to be player one or two?"

Jinki laughed again and shook his head before he noticed the tray still on the table. A small frown appeared and he began to turn, mouth open, "Si-"

"It's okay," Kibum interrupted, tugging on Jinki's arm to make him turn back around. Everyone was finally gone and he much preferred when it was just the two of them right now, what with this new fragile thing between them.

"She knows better," Jinki grumbled with a frowning face, but then he laughed once and waved it off.

Kibum smiled but licked his lips, hesitant to speak at first. "Did you really mean it?" he wondered at last, glancing at where Siwoo had been earlier.

"About dating you?" Jinki asked, brows arching when he mirrored Kibum.

Kibum nodded mutely.

"If it's alright with you," he confirmed, reaching under the table to wrap his other hand around Kibum's. "I was going to ask you sooner or later anyway but..." His voice trailed off as he nodded his head towards the empty side of the table.

Kibum was quiet for a second, his brow furrowing. "Are you sure? I'm--"

"Yes," Jinki interrupted him, hand squeezing hard enough to make him pause.

Uncertainty flickered across Kibum's face even as joy tried to take root in his heart. "But I'm--"

"Kibum."

The single word made him flinch and pause again as he dared to look up to meet Jinki's eyes. "Yes?" he asked cautiously, fingers digging in harder than they needed to.

"Will you go out with me?" he asked, making it official with a smile and all his attention focused on the other man.

It was a question that made Kibum's heart thump and his stomach do a flip. He wanted to say yes immediately, but a crushing sense of uncertainty weighed on him. "But why me?" he mumbled, looking down at the hand held between his, suddenly hyperaware of how his nails were pressing harder than they needed to into Jinki's hand. "I'm..." he hesitated, not even sure how to describe himself. The phrases: broken, a failure, a mess, floated through his mind but none surfaced.

Jinki's quiet sigh was all too loud in the silence. "I know you probably won't believe it yourself right now, but would you just trust me when I say that I think you're amazing?" he asked, carefully freeing his hands to wrap Kibum in his arms and hold him close. Kibum snorted in immediate denial, but Jinki shook his head and held tighter. "Stubborn and annoying and frustrating sometimes, but inordinately amazing all the same," he promised, cupping the back of Kibum's head.

Kibum felt the very foundations of his self quake and he swallowed hard, fingers twisting into the fabric of Jinki's shirt. "You're such a liar," he mumbled, the statement utterly weak in its conviction.

"We both know that's not true," Jinki laughed, a breathy sound that washed over Kibum's back.

He was right though. Kibum didn't believe Jinki yet. Didn't agree that he was amazing at all. Seriously. He was such a fucked-up mess, it wasn't even funny. But Jinki had asked and Kibum wanted what he offered, no matter how unworthy he thought he was. A tiny whimper of sound escaped his throat when he shifted to hug Jinki harder, practically ready to climb in his lap just to be closer if the other man would let him. But that might have been a bridge too far so he stayed where he was and held on, taking one shaky breath after the next. "Yes," he finally answered, the response a mere breath of sound on his tongue.

But Jinki heard him. His arms tightened around Kibum and soft lips pressed against his neck, sending a lightning bolt of electric *feeling* branching up to the top of his head and down to the tips of his toes, an army of skittering crawling things that raced over his skin and disappeared in the next breath. Kibum inhaled sharply and pushed back, just enough to create space between them, his heart hammering painfully in his chest and his gut twisting into knots.

"Sorry," Jinki apologized immediately, relinquishing his hold, though he shifted his hands to grab Kibum's again.

"It's okay," Kibum explained with a shake of his head. Well, yes, it was, but no, it wasn't, and he had no good way to explain it so he defaulted to the more acceptable answer.

"Hey," he called gently, giving Kibum's hands a little squeeze. "I will never ask for more than you're ready to give, okay?" he questioned, making sure to meet the younger man's eyes to be sure he understood.

Kibum looked down, his hands tightening on Jinki's. "What if..." he started to say, giving up halfway on the question. But Jinki jostled him gently to make him look up without saying a word. So he continued, "What if... I'm... never ready?" It took everything he had to finish the question. The admittance of some possible flaw in him that could potentially ruin everything. And his heart quailed at the possible answer.

But Jinki just smiled and freed one hand to cup his cheek again, a hauntingly beautiful smile on his face. "Then we'll just cross that bridge when we get there," he explained, leaning close enough to press his forehead against Kibum's, meeting his eyes evenly.

"You..." Kibum exhaled breathily, sniffing once as he felt emotion well up within him. It should have been impossible for him to find someone like Jinki. There was no reason for someone like him to be interested in someone like Kibum. And yet... Here he was. And as much as Kibum didn't entirely believe him, he also didn't want to completely discredit the miniscule possibility that it *could* be real. He feared it as much as he desired it, and that was enough to give him something to go on. For now at least.

"Am hopeless, I know. My sisters remind me often enough," he teased with a wink and a smile that should have been illegal.

That at least conjured the ghost of a laugh from Kibum. "Your sisters are wrong," he grumbled, reaching out with his free hand to grab the front of Jinki's shirt.

"Well, thank you for saying so," he smiled, sighing in contentment. Kibum just nodded in response, but when something obviously seemed amiss, Jinki asked, "What's wrong?"

He was reluctant to answer. It was mildly embarrassing. But under Jinki's steady, unjudgmental gaze, he finally murmured, "I feel like I'm too far away."

"Hmm," Jinki hummed, licking his bottom lip so he could nibble on it contemplatively. "Would this be better?" he hesitantly asked, reaching out to encircle Jinki in his arms, drawing him close and bodily lifting him onto his lap despite Kibum's surprised gasp.

But now seated sideways on Jinki's lap instead of on the stool, that did seem to solve the issue, even if his cheeks and ears burned in response. "Yes," he mumbled, ducking his face into Jinki's shoulder and hugging him tighter. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

There was no question of why. Just simple acceptance of his gratitude and strong arms holding him close. He lost track of the time that he spent relishing in the contact from the other man. But eventually, he felt a need to see where they were, especially since Siwoo hadn't returned to clean her plate and no one else had come back from the den or the study. "What are you going to do today?" he asked softly, worrying at the possible answer.

Jinki's smile was obvious in the way his cheeks moved while pressed against Kibum's head. "Stay home and rest. That's the plan."

"Can... can I stay too?" he questioned at last, biting his bottom lip nervously.

"If you want to, sure." It was such a simple answer with no hesitation. It felt wrong to be that easy, but Jinki left no doubt.

"I do," he whispered, hugging Jinki harder.

"Okay then," the other man responded, rubbing a hand up and down Kibum's back. "Anything you want to do?"

He had no idea... Anything would have been fine by him, really. He just wanted more of... this, whatever this was. With a negating sound, he shook his head.

"Want to watch a holovid then?" Jinki offered, rocking back and forth gently.

Kibum nodded after taking a minute to think about it. "Sure."

"Okay. Let's go then," Jinki encouraged, shifting Kibum off his lap so that they could stand up and head back to the room hand in hand. He murmured something about *someone* taking care of the dishes left behind – eventually – and then guided them back to his room. At least that way they wouldn't be interrupted by his siblings randomly.

It took them a little while to choose a vid they were both interested in, but eventually, Kibum settled into the circle of Jinki's arms, relaxing completely. For now, gone was the specter of worry and concern and fear. In this moment, there was only the vid and Jinki, both of which captured Kibum's focus fully.

News of their relationship status in their immediate circle landed with a pitifully small splash, much to Kibum's chagrin.

"So it's finally official?" Ercite asked upon their first meeting after Jinki's collapse previously.

"Well..."

"Yes," Jinki confirmed, his hand firmly wrapped around Kibum's as they waited to order food at the restaurant they were meeting in after Jinki's mom-imposed isolation.

"Finally," Larad huffed with a glance before turning his attention towards the menu floating above them instead.

Only Henry seemed put off by the 'sudden' announcement. "You didn't tell me first!" he bemoaned, clearly offended by this omission.

"But you knew," Jinki defended, at a loss.

This of course made Kibum annoyed and he glared rather spectacularly at Henry. "If you didn't remember, that's on you."

Taken aback by the comment, Henry blinked in surprise and then laughed, reaching out to clap Jinki on the shoulder. "Nice," he commented, leaving it at that.

"What does that mean?" Kibum asked, confused when the other man shuffled closer to Larad and Ercite to discuss his order.

"It's a good thing," Jinki soothed, pressing a reassuring kiss on the side of Kibum's head in response.

Among Jinki's other sisters, it landed with a veritable whisper and utter lack of surprise. Granted, it didn't hurt that both were otherwise busy and distracted with the final rounds of training and matches.

"Weren't you as good as dating anyway?" Hajoan asked when she came home from her latest practice session, a confused expression on her tired, still sweaty face. Pre-championship match practices were absolutely brutal...

"Hah. At last!" Doyun grinned as she popped out from behind Hajoan like some sneaky shadow to dance around the pair. In direct opposition to her sister, she was thoroughly excited by the announcement. Off-season training was tough but far less strenuous than anything her older sister had to deal with.

At Kibum's work, it made waves as in only the way pseudo parents could draw attention to something. "Oh! Our little boy is growing up!" Jackson teased, poking fun at Kibum as he got ready for his next show. He was unusually slow in putting his makeup on since he kept watching Kibum in the mirror and making awful romantic faces at him. At least until Passeri stepped in anyway.

Already presentable, Passeri stood behind the pair and then swatted at Jackson with a snort. "He has long since been grown up. Now he can seek to build his nest," she preened, carding inhumanly long fingers through his hair with all the air of a mother's pride and affection.

Coming from her, Kibum didn't mind the affection, but he was almost obliged to complain all the same. "Passeri!" he bemoaned with a semi-embarrassed glance down. He was vocally annoyed, though on the inside his heart soared at the thought. Building a nest. He'd never even really thought about it before.

They all jumped in surprise though when Garum stuck his head into the back, blue hair bright against the dark fabric. "So long as that nest is here for the time, I'll have no complaints," he teased with a light wink, his voice dour but his expression playful.

As one, the trio shouted, "Garum!" Unable to withstand the concentrated focus of their vocal attack, Garum barked a laugh and promptly removed himself, his deep throated chuckle haunting them from the other side of the fabric as he left.

"Oh, that man," Passeri huffed, placing her feathered hands on sleek hips before she visibly calmed herself with a quick all over shake. It had the effect of ruffling her feathers so that she looked fluffier than normal and it made Kibum laugh. "Huh?" she chirped in confusion, catching his eye in the mirror before seeing a similarly amused expression from Jackson. "What?" she wondered as her feathers continued to settle naturally into place.

"Nothing," Jackson immediately responded, fixing his attention on his image in the mirror.

Kibum couldn't help but grin. "It's not often we see the fluffy version of you," he winked, leaning away from her preemptively in case she opted to smack him.

Her large eyes widened further, the thin strip of her dark gold iris more noticeable than usual around the coal black pupil. "Oh." Her beaked mouth cracked open to release a delighted giggle. She stepped close enough to wrap her arms around Kibum's chest from behind in a very loose hug. "I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but I want you to be free to choose what you want to do, love," she explained sincerely, staring him dead in the face in the mirror.

It was almost unnerving. Almost. "Thanks, Passeri," he grinned back, grateful to have such support. He patted her hands with one of his and reassured, "If nothing else, I'll at least stick around until I finish university anyway. Guess you'll just have to deal with me until then," he added with a nonchalant shrug.

"I feel like I should be able to make a joke here, but nothing's coming to me," Jackson laughed once, shrugging helplessly as he finished touching up his makeup.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure you'll think of something next time," Kibum snorted with a practiced eye roll.

Passeri tapped him lightly in gentle but mute chastisement and Jackson scoffed. "See. This is how I know he's feeling better. Brat," he laughed once, standing up and leaning close to peer at Kibum's half-finished makeup. He deftly grabbed the auto-applicator stick from Kibum's hand.

"Hey!" he yelped in complaint.

Jackson held it out of reach and swatted at him to calm down. "Easy. I just think we should try something like this tonight," he grinned, overcoming Kibum's objections as he leaned closer to give him a slightly different than usual look, the announcement of Kibum's relationship status otherwise forgotten.

Kibum knew their friends were aware of their dating already, but they were nothing but trolls for the first thirty minutes when they met up again for Hajoong's championship match. It was taking place in their dome and since Jinki was sort of a manager on the team, he was able to get tickets for them all to attend in person, albeit a bit far from the actual ring. Their parents and siblings were closer to ringside as family members, but because Jinki chose to be with his friends, they weren't so lucky.

"I'm not a perfect magic worker," he laughed with a shrug, half-heartedly trying to explain the seating arrangement.

"Hah! I think you just want us to be further away so that your sister doesn't try and launch someone at you during the match," Henry taunted with a good-natured grin.

"There is some merit to that possibility," Larad chuckled, arms crossed over his chest while he looked at the pair out of the corner of his eye. "Couldn't let anything happen to Kibum now, could we?" he asked rhetorically, grinning when Ercite pushed his head from their usual perch on his shoulder.

"To be fair, that is what Jinki was doing the entire semester, wasn't it?" they then added, much to Jinki's embarrassment and Kibum's amusement.

Secure enough in that vein of conversation, Kibum stood up straighter and retorted, "Well maybe if you all pulled your weight to help him, he wouldn't have had to do it alone." For a second, he was afraid he had overstepped his bounds when he was greeted with mostly silence and Jinki's hand squeezing his just a little harder.

But then the tension broke when Henry hissed, "Ouch! But point taken," he chuckled with a shake of his head, eyeing the younger man speculatively. "Wouldn't hurt if *somebody* asked from time to time either, though."

"He shouldn't have-" he started to quip before Jinki pulled him closer into a half-hug to cut him off gently.

"That's something I could work on too," he conceded, nodding around the group before he smiled at Kibum and hugged him a little harder.

"This new Kibum has a very sharp tongue," Larad mused, tilting his head to the side in thoughtful amusement.

"Boyfriend Kibum is delightfully protective," Ercite grinned, giving him two thumbs up.

Kibum flushed at the new name and the weirdly unexpected praise. The planes of his face hardened briefly as he looked at the group but then they grew soft once again when his eyes met Jinki's. "Well, someone has to be. He's otherwise terrible about taking care of himself," he laughed with a single snort. Not that he was any exception, he knew, but he wasn't the target at the moment.

"Oh, we know," Henry barked a laugh and nodded sagely. "But that's what you're here for now," he added with a wink, obviously readying himself to hide behind Larad if he needed to.

"That's no excuse for you to slack off as his friends," Kibum scolded, one finger literally shaking in Henry's direction.

"It is if we can get away with it!" he laughed, fleeing this time when Kibum *did* step in his direction like he was going to smack him.

"Now, now children," Ercite chided from above. Too far away to do anything, Larad was their hands and he grabbed both Kibum and Henry on one shoulder to keep them apart even as he brought them face to face.

"Guys, come on," Jinki urged, promptly rescuing Kibum from Larad's hold. "We're gonna be late if we don't actually head to our seats now. And then we'll never hear the end of it from Hajoon," he reminded them.

"This is true," Larad agreed after a brief pause.

"Don't worry. Kibum will protect you," Henry couldn't help but throw in. He didn't stick around long enough to see what anyone else would say or do before he jogged on ahead to be the first of their group into the stadium.

"Childish," Kibum huffed, one side of his lip curling as he watched the other man go.

"All Terrans are at this age," Ercite chimed in, looking from Henry's back to Kibum's surprised face.

He blinked for a second as the words sank in. "I always forget you have so many memories to pull from," he scowled before a laugh bubbled up.

"Oh. Not mine specifically," they reminded as if by rote.

"Same difference, Ercite," Jinki chuckled, already starting to guide Kibum towards the stadium with his arm around the other man's waist.

It was electrifying. Holding hands was one thing, but the arm holding him near, fingertips digging in just a touch... it felt possessive, protective, proud. For a moment, it was a struggle to string words together and yank his thoughts towards the event at hand. Shaking himself free of his stupor, he finally asked, "Do you think Hajoon's team will win today?"

"I hope so," Jinki answered immediately, a nod accompanying the words.

"The answer is yes," Larad interjected, coming abreast of the pair with relative ease, longer legs and all.

"I *hope* so," he reiterated firmly, giving a mild glare to the taller Varium.

Ercite made a small sound in the back of their throat. "You say that for diplomacy's sake, but we also know you have confidence in your sister and her team."

They winked which made Jinki laugh and Kibum smiled to see the expression on his face. He really did have an unreasonable amount of faith in some people. Himself included. "Come on then! Let's get to our seats before everything starts," he encouraged, adding on a burst of speed and tugging Jinki along in the process. He didn't see the giddy grin he got in response but he was already on a happiness high and he doubted much of anything would change that.

Kibum had never actually watched a championship match before. He'd caught bits and pieces of them periodically throughout his life, but it was never a sport he'd been drawn to. Apparently, he'd been missing out if every match was like the one he had the opportunity to observe. The energy in the stadium was a living thing, breathing life into the most mundane of moments with spine-tingling intensity. After hours of watching training matches with Jinki and his siblings, Kibum had enough knowledge to understand the gist of what was going on, but even if he hadn't, he would have been swept away by the unbridled excitement that thrummed through every attendee.

Body checks and forceful expulsions were slowed down and zoomed in on so that everyone could see the replays on the massive holoscreen that floated above the ring. The occasional competitor did in fact get thrown towards the audience from time to time. Their saving grace was a dead zone of normal gravity and a standard protective barrier just in case, with landing nets at the bottom for the safety of the players.

Hajoon was not perhaps the best player, but she shined whenever she was on the screen. And Jinki truly came alive in those moments. Kibum was mesmerized. Not by the sibling he cheered for, but by the absolutely unbridled passion and hope and pride that positively beamed from Jinki. And when he turned his exultant face to look at Kibum as well, his world just stopped, frozen in that instant as he was graced by the sheer authenticity of the other man. It made him want to be worthy of Jinki.

Hand in hand with him, he joined in to cheer and shout and scream until he was hoarse. Until he was exhausted from the utter tension of a championship match that hovered within a one-point difference for the entirety of the game. Tit for tat and back and forth. One last minute timeout after another when they were exhausted at the end and penalties came easy in the hard-hitting contact arena.

Several players on both teams had already been sidelined with injuries and exhaustion and they were down to the wire by the time the match was coming to a close. The audience was a vibrant roar of sound that bit at each other, back and forth, the home audience versus the opposing audience. A deafening cacophony of sound that somehow reached even higher heights when the deadlocked match started.

A dizzying display of gravity acrobatics and speed, the final players were grace and power and endurance incarnate. Nothing was left but raw determination, skill, and the drilled-in impressions of muscle memory. One of Hajoon's teammates got checked hard, rocketing out of the sphere, and the home-team audience groaned with them. A sudden reversal brought them back though. One of three, Hajoon assisted in an ambush and grappled the target who had the ball. A close-up on screen showed her using an advanced but risky technique to break the other Terran's hold on the ball. It wouldn't have worked with a Varium or Moladhi, but she managed to break their hold just enough for another teammate to swoop in and separate all three of them: the two players and the ball.

"I taught her that!" Jinki howled with visceral pride, pointing at the screen as if her performance somehow vindicated him.

Both her and her opponent got launched out in the next second, but the damage was done. Her team had the ball again and victory clenched tightly in their jaws. The captain, a striking female Varium of lean muscled body mass and savagery, fainted. She dropped the ball back to the Terran flying in her wake and claimed both incoming defenders in a tangled mess of limbs and dazed impact side-effects as they drifted out of the way on a curved arc.

The following Terran continued to sling shot towards the goal. Gravity shifted at the last second and they had to activate some inordinately skilled alterations on the grav controls, but after a brief hiccup that sent them past the desired zone, they cranked the gravity controls and rammed through the zone, earning a tie-breaking point with four seconds left on the clock.

The audience erupted in a frenzy of sound. It was a veritable wave of energy and vibrations that shook the air and deafened the ears. Jinki's hand was bone-crushingly strong as it gripped Kibum's, his other punching into the air victoriously. Kibum mirrored him, his blood thrumming through his body and howling in his ears. When he looked over to see Jinki, he saw the other man shadowing him, their eyes meeting at the same time.

Grin for grin, they stared at each other, elatedly high and untouchable. Maybe that was what gave Kibum the courage to reach out and grab the front of Jinki's shirt so that he could pull him close enough to kiss. Lost in the victorious euphoria of their win, Kibum and Jinki were little more than two people in the audience. But when Jinki let go of Kibum's hand so that he could grab both sides of his face to kiss him back, he became the entirety of Kibum's world. Everything else melted away and fell silent in that moment and Kibum swore he would do almost anything to experience it again. Almost.

The afterparty to celebrate was a pale imitation of what he'd already felt with Jinki. But he never left his side during it. At least not for long. And when he came back, it was always to catch his hand again and stand side by side as if they belonged together.

This man. If he was willing to give so much to Kibum and ask for nothing in return, he could do no less. It was a struggle to pay attention to the rest of the party, but a delightful one. The hardest part was actually separating for the evening.

They shared one more sweet kiss in front of Kibum's dorm room, the door a backdrop to their farewell in the hallway. "Sleep well and sweet dreams, Kibum," Jinki smiled, pressing his forehead against the other man's.

"You too," Kibum whispered, half wishing Jinki would say something to stay or maybe kiss him again. But neither happened. This time anyway.

"See you tomorrow?" he asked hopefully, one hand clinging to Kibum's in a gentle hold.

"Definitely," came Kibum's easy response. He watched Jinki leave and stood in the hallway a bit longer than he probably should have, wistfully daydreaming about the other man returning after a brief moment. Truly, that was wishful thinking and Kibum had to laugh at himself before he went inside and threw himself down on his bed. "Oh Kibum. Kibum, Kibum, Kibum," he sighed, chuckling under his breath. "You've got it bad, don't you?" He nodded in silent agreement with his question. "Yes I do."

He didn't know if it was cruel or a mercy, but his dreams were pleasantly silent, allowing him one of the best nights of sleep he'd had in a while.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The rest of the break was spent in a blur of dancing around each other and their schedules, sorting out their next semester classes, work, and surviving post season practices. On Hajoong's team, the captain was graduating and Hajoong herself was aiming for the spot next if she could win it. She did have some stiff competition to go up against though. Doyun was dead set on following in her big sister's footsteps, though it was likely she'd never have the natural aptitude for it that Hajoong did. Siwoo pushed herself hard with her half-grav gymnastics activities, but she had no aspirations to try

and go pro so she was fine with coasting during the rest of her break. And Daejung seemed content to focus on his games, the thought of learning hover boarding passing like a dream.

Kibum's work schedule remained mostly unchanged, so that was one constant between them, but more of Jinki's time was claimed by their friend group at large. Henry picked up a part-time job as a waste disposal sorter in one of the poorer districts in their dome. It was a common university student and high school graduate job since skilled workers all found something else and robots weren't widely used in such areas. They picked over the bits of non-biomass garbage and removed pieces that could be renovated, repaired, or broken down into component parts for reuse in similarly poor areas. Consignment shops were quite popular among a certain clientele after all.

Like many other humanoid Varium, Larad joined a manual construction crew that worked with robots to handle some of the heavier lifting in the city. Nanomachines were great about maintaining the interiors of buildings, but for exterior repairs and renovations, good old fashioned hard work was the most cost-effective way of handling the situation. Unsurprisingly, Ercite was not far behind, though true to Dawbn form, they were relegated to planning and delegating tasks with the various leading foremen.

With all their different responsibilities, it made meeting up together challenging. Not to mention that Henry also started dating the Varium Aanya and he was even more difficult to get in touch with after that. Of course, that didn't mean that the others didn't get together when an opportunity presented itself. Jinki and Ercite still helped at the University for the newbies and it wasn't like Jinki or Kibum spent all that much time apart. Kibum still went to most of Jinki's practice sessions and Jinki popped into Kibum's work just as often. It was just that they also spent more time together outside of their usual meetups.

By all counts, it was a fairly normal occurrence, with two notable exceptions.

While Kibum knew what he wanted to do, and had for almost as long as he could remember, Jinki was not so fortunate in his future goals. Not definitively anyway. It led to an interesting conversation they shared while they were choosing classes for their next semester.

Seated on the edge of Kibum's bed in his dorm room, they scrolled through the lists of classes Jinki could choose from. Kibum wouldn't be able to choose until tomorrow, due to the rolling enrollment schedule. With a sigh, Jinki leaned back and turned his face up towards the ceiling, not sure about his picks.

"You still don't know what you want to major in?" Kibum asked, leaning close to nudge his boyfriend's shoulder with his own.

Another sigh escaped before Jinki looked over with a shake of his head. "Honestly, I figured I'd have thought of something by now."

Kibum hummed and crossed his arms thoughtfully. "What do you want to do? I mean, you already know I want to be a captain. Really hoping those introductory flight classes aren't full by tomorrow..." he trailed off, partially worried already.

Jinki chuckled and reached out to offer a comforting pat on his back. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Everyone says they want to learn to fly but there are a lot of dropouts in the first couple days too."

"I know, but that's my problem to figure out tomorrow," Kibum laughed with a dismissive wave. "Right now, we're talking about you. And I'll ask again, what do *you* want to do, Jinki?"

His expression was intense, eyes focused solely on Jinki's and he wasn't really sure anyone had every actually looked at him that way before. At least not the way that Kibum did. "I don't know," he admitted with a small frown. He might have an inkling of an idea, but he still wasn't sure if it was because it was what he wanted to do or because it fit so well with what Kibum wanted to do...

Suddenly energetic, Kibum pulled his feet up to sit cross legged on the bed, turning so he could face Jinki directly. "Okay. Well, you haven't really told me much about what you wanted to do when you were younger. So let's start there," he said with a grin, nodding emphatically on the suggestion.

It was amusing, to say the least. Jinki laughed and shook his head. "Like I said. I don't know," he explained with an embarrassed shrug. "I knew more about what I *didn't* want to do than what actually interested me. Well, helping people but I think that could be because I'm good at it."

"Teacher's pet," Kibum teased, reaching out to brush at Jinki's bangs with his fingertips, sweeping them out of the way before they settled back into place.

"Not always," Jinki retorted in a weak defense. Kibum didn't say anything back yet, but his look didn't waver. Clearly he was waiting for a better response. "I mean, you know my parents work in the salvage and maintenance industries. They didn't want me to follow in their footsteps, so I figured I'd go to the university and figure it out when I got there. Not that there's anything wrong with what they do," he added quickly when it felt that could be taken the wrong way.

Kibum held his hands up in surrender. "Never said there was. Your dad finds some pretty cool stuff out there sometimes. At least according to what he's told me."

Jinki laughed and nodded in quiet agreement. "If it wasn't such a dead-end job, I don't think I'd mind."

"So maybe something to do with salvage or working around tech, like your mom," Kibum offered thoughtfully, his hand gesturing in front of him like a restless butterfly.

"Maybe," he murmured with a pensive expression on his face.

"Then again, you're not half-bad at grav jumping," his boyfriend added, a fluid shrug accompanying the suggestion.

"Oof. No thank you. It's bad enough we've got two in the family that want to go pro. At least one of which is actually likely to make it happen," he explained with an emphatic shake of his head. "Did you know Hajoon had a scout asking about her?"

"Really?" Kibum wondered in honest surprise. Clearly he'd missed that conversation at some point, or Jinki had forgotten to tell him.

"Yeah. Not too long after the championship game. She's still on cloud nine and Doyun is a little jealous," he couldn't help but add with a chuckle.

"No wonder she's seemed a bit down lately."

"Eh. She'll be alright. Especially if she starts getting noticed when she gets to Hajoon's level too," Jinki explained. "So yeah. No sports for me."

"Okay. No sports and no planet side salvage and repair. You didn't do half bad at The Stars Align with your debut performance. Ever thought about going into live shows?" Kibum asked, his expression playful but his tone at least partially serious.

Jinki leveled a questionable look at him, one brow raised and his mouth quirked to the side. "That's *your* domain. Not mine, Kibummie."

Kibum's grin was delightful. He always smiled that way when Jinki called him by that nickname. "Yeah, yeah," he waved, still giddy. "But seriously. Focus!" he shifted quickly, clapping his hands and catching Jinki off guard. "We're trying to figure out how to guide the next two years of your life, here."

"Ugh," Jinki grimaced as he leaned back. "When you put it that way..."

"Jinki," his boyfriend whined, leaning closer to smack his shoulder, all sound and no sting.

He flinched away and laughed. But then his mirth tapered out and he quieted, chewing on his bottom lip in the meantime. "I've thought about maybe going into mentoring or teaching. Making the helping thing official, but... I don't know. I don't think it's what I want to do for the rest of my life," he admitted, reaching out to lay his hand on Kibum's knee as if he was anchoring himself.

"You know..." Kibum started to say as he put his hand on top of Jinki's, curling his slender fingers under his palm to hold it lightly. "Never mind," he abruptly said, changing course with a wave of his free hand. "I know what I would like but this is your choice. Not mine," he stated firmly, not looking at Jinki as he did so.

Jinki mulled over how he wanted to respond. Whatever he said next, it didn't mean it would be law. He could still always change his mind later or make adjustments as needed, but he was curious to try the words out on his tongue. He curled his fingers around Kibum's to hold his hand back and then looked straight ahead so that it would be easier to focus. "Before I met you, I had never really thought about leaving the planet. I mean, maybe heading to a different dome if something opened up in one of the newer ones or a position became available in one of the more established domes." He felt Kibum go very still at the words and had to force himself not to look over. "But now..." he sighed, looking up as if he could see through the barrier above him and into the expansive space beyond it.

"Oh..." Kibum sighed nearby, a breathy, excited sound. Jinki couldn't help but glance over and make eye-contact. As soon as he did, his boyfriend grinned and bounced on the bed like a little kid. "Do you wanna join my crew?" His expression was blinding, but then it turned into a grimace as he smacked his mouth with his free hand. "Forget I asked. That's what I want. This should be about what you want. Sorry," he babbled, looking down in frustration.

"Kibum," he called so that the other man would look up and stop berating himself.

"Huh?"

His expression was so innocently surprised it made Jinki chuckle. "I am thinking about what I want. So you don't have to apologize. And my answer *is* yes. Or at least maybe," he conceded with a sideways tilt of his head while he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Really?" Kibum gasped, his hand tightening around Jinki's.

"Kibum," he called again, leveling a knowing look at his overly excited boyfriend.

"Right. I'm listening," he said, taking a breath as he forced himself to calm down and pay attention, back ramrod straight and expression focused.

"I think..." he trailed off, chewing on the inside of his bottom lip. "I do want to go into space." For such a hesitant admission, it actually felt pretty right when the words finally left his mouth. Kibum smiled at him, a flash response before he forced it away to a more neutral one. Jinki had to admire the effort. "And I say maybe to being in your crew because that's three years out at the earliest and a lot can happen between now and then," he reasoned with a shrug.

Kibum rolled his eyes with a sigh and then leaned forward. "Anyone ever tell you that you think ahead a little too much sometimes?"

"Anyone ever tell you that you might not think ahead enough?" Jinki countered, pointing his finger at Kibum's forehead.

"Hey! I knew I wanted to be a ship captain years ago," he reminded the other man matter-of-factly, removing his hand so that he could cross his arms for dramatic effect.

"Then I'm glad one of us knows what he wants to do," Jinki smiled, lowering his hand to tap Kibum's nose with his finger.

"Hey!" his boyfriend yelped, reaching to grab the offending digit but falling forward in the process. He quieted suddenly when their faces became abruptly close and pursed his lips, a light flush suffusing his cheeks.

Jinki smiled, bemused by the situation, and leaned forward to press his lips against Kibum's forehead. "Really," he whispered, shifting so that he could rest his forehead against Kibum's. "I am glad that at least one of us has a direction in mind," he reassured, looking at Kibum until the other man raised his eyes to meet his.

Kibum sniffed once and sat up straight, crossing his arms again as he looked away. "It's not fair that you can just stay so calm all the time like that," he grumbled, the tips of his ears now quite pink.

"Eh. I'm just better at hiding it," he admitted, scooting closer so he could slide his arms around Kibum's waist and draw him closer into a loose back hug.

Kibum yelped and looked down, the flush growing brighter on his cheeks, but he didn't try to escape. "You're terrible," he grumbled, finally pulling himself together enough to look up and meet Jinki's gaze without turning scarlet.

"Am I?" he wondered with a playful smile.

"Ye-es!" he practically shrieked when Jinki dug his fingers into Kibum's ribs, tickling him. Jinki laughed and Kibum smacked his hand before pointing a finger in his direction. "No!" Jinki pursed his lips and stopped for a second but then poked him in the side with a single finger instead. "Jinki!" Kibum yelped, dissolving into giggles that multiplied when his boyfriend continued his playful attack.

"Give up?" Jinki asked with a wide grin, his fingers stilling for a second.

"Never!" Kibum shot back, laughing and thrashing some more when the tickle attack continued. Breathless and tired, he finally panted, "Okay! Okay!" He went limp in Jinki's arms and huffed, "I give up. Jerk," he added with a chuckle.

Jinki hugged Kibum close and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before letting him go gently. "You good?" he asked after a pause, one hand reaching up to rest on Kibum's shoulder.

"I'm good," Kibum nodded in confirmation, holding one hand up to wave away the concern. "Just catching my breath. Next time, we'll see how you like it," he warned, a promising gleam in his eyes.

"Fair enough," Jinki laughed without complaint. "Alright. You can rest up. I still need to finish picking my classes. Probably something to do with space," he mused, nodding to himself before he turned to pull the holoscreen back up and continue the selection process. Without a word, Kibum gathered himself on the bed and then crawled around to latch onto Jinki from behind, arms around his chest, legs around his waist, and chin resting on his shoulder. "Playing big spoon?" he asked with a quick sideways glance.

"Backpack," Kibum responded, holding tighter as if he was afraid Jinki would try to dislodge him.

"Okay," was all he said in response, reaching across to rest his left hand on top of Kibum's while he used his right to continue checking and marking classes. Despite his oftentimes aloof demeanor in public, Jinki had discovered that Kibum liked to be physically close in private. It often felt like Kibum was trying to glue himself to Jinki, as if he was scared the other man would disappear or leave. He patted Kibum's hand and then pointed at a class on the screen. "What do you think about this one?"

"Mm," Kibum agreed with a nod, shifting to settle in more comfortably.

"An engineering class? Me?" he wondered, curious if his boyfriend was actually paying attention.

"Why not? Your mom is sort of an engineer," he explained with a shrug.

"Huh. There is that," he conceded, a thoughtful expression on his face.

And that was how Jinki chose his classes for the upcoming semester: with Kibum on his back and offering commentary for each selection. Then again, the following day it was his turn, though it took Kibum far less time to decide. As he loved to remind his boyfriend, he knew what he wanted to do and how to do it. It was one of the things Jinki admired about him.

On the other hand, when there was something he wasn't entirely sure about, the situation could be vastly different. And that was the case when they got together with a group of friends and relatives to have a friendly grav jumping game on a day when everyone was free. It had to be a late morning, early afternoon event since Passeri and Jackson were invited, but most of everyone was able to make it.

They rented a grav jumping hall in the city center to make it happen. Surprisingly, it was a favorite pastime of many citizens and often had to be booked days in advance for a slot. Jinki and Kibum arrived early so the latter could give his boyfriend some tips and pointers ahead of time. Or at least before everyone else arrived.

"Can't believe I let you talk me into doing this," Kibum grumbled as he adjusted his gear and made sure it felt alright. He flinched away from Jinki's fingers when the other man started to feel around to make sure.

Jinki raised his hands in surrender immediately. "Just making sure everything's good. No tickling. I promise."

"I'm watching you," Kibum warned while he stepped back into range. As promised, his eyes followed Jinki's hands like a hawk when he tested and adjusted various straps and sensors.

"Okay. So it's kind of like the gravity you feel when you're on the mainstage, but it can and does shift when you're in the air," Jinki explained as they made their way to the grav jumping grounds to give it a try together.

"I know that at least," Kibum grumbled with a disappointed expression.

"Sorry," Jinki apologized quickly. "Used to covering all the bases. Okay. You ready to get in the air?" he asked as he approached the switch on the wall that would turn on the gravity well.

"Not really, but sure," his boyfriend exhaled, visibly shaking his nerves out.

Jinki grinned and hit the switch. There was no immediate gravitational change but the well did emerge from a hole in the ground to rise up where it would sit for the duration of the session. "Okay! It's set for static grav so no changes. You ready to turn it on?" he asked, coming close to point at the start indicator on Kibum's wrist control.

Kibum curled his lip and gave him a sidelong look but took a breath and nodded. "Sure. Why not? It can't be that hard, can it?" he asked with a forced laugh.

"Well... that does depend on if you're asking someone like Hajoon versus someone like Daejung," Jinki hedged with a mischievous smile. "Let's see which one you are." He teased with a wink and then turned his gear on, adjusting the settings so that he rose up gently towards the gravity well.

"You're not helping!" Kibum grumbled after him. But when Jinki didn't come down to assist, he reluctantly turned on the equipment himself and then adjusted the settings as he'd been instructed. "Woah!" he yelped when the gravity changed and he started floating up to join Jinki.

To Kibum's disappointment, he was not the natural savant he had obviously hoped to be when it came to grav jumping, but neither was he a lost cause. He was simply unpracticed. They got enough of an early start to help him get a grasp of the basics before the others started arriving, though it was clear he'd probably need assistance in any actual match.

As hoped, everyone they invited was able to attend, and then some, to the rest of the general group's surprise. Hajoon and Doyun came as the resident experts; Larad and Ercite arrived to support Jinki; Henry came with his new girlfriend Aanya – a slimmer and shorter Varium than they were all

expecting, though she was still taller than him; Passeri and Jackson showed up for Kibum, though it was likely they'd just spectate or at the least, take it easy; and then Psitassi came with Crawven in tow, of all Moladhi. A handful of Kibum's fan club were in attendance too but everyone was more surprised by Psitassi's guest.

"He's promised to be on his best behavior," she assured Kibum directly, gesturing in his direction when they got close enough. "Isn't that right, Crawven?" she asked archly, turning her attention to settle on the Moladhi whose plumage and demeanor were muted in comparison to hers.

"Yes," he mumbled, keeping his head partially down so that he wasn't looking directly at anybody in the process.

Passeri cleared her throat and Psitassi looked over to see a curious quirk of the other Moladhi's eyebrow. Passeri smiled and gave a small shake of her head in answer to some unspoken question, though it seemed to satisfy the other female. Then her attention shifted to Kibum and she sidled over with all her usual gossipy energy. "But Kibum! A little birdy told me you and Jinki..." she trailed off, glancing between the pair expectantly, her eyes dancing in preemptive delight.

"That's right," Jinki answered for him, inserting himself in front of Kibum so that he could block Crawven's view.

Voluntarily oblivious to his posturing, Psitassi giggled in delight and clapped her hands. "Oh! Can I run a piece on this on your fan page?" she asked, practically bouncing in place. "Your fans would love to hear this. Especially since it's Jinki," she preened, gesturing at said Terran noticeably.

"Uh..." Kibum blurted while his expression blanked, apparently along with his mind.

"Psitassi, my dear. May I speak with you?" Passeri asked as she glided close and gently escorted the other Moladhi to the side.

"Of course," she chirped, unoffended by the interruption. It was Passeri after all.

"Jinki!" Henry called, happily inserting himself into the empty space left in her wake with his Varium friend at his side. "This is Aanya. My girlfriend. The one I told you about before. Remember?" he babbled quickly, grinning from ear to ear as he looked between the Varium and his friends.

"Hi Aanya. Nice to meet you. I'm Jinki," he responded, giving her a wave in greeting as he finally pulled his attention from Crawven. "And this is Kibum. My boyfriend."

"Oh! You must be Almighty Key then," she smiled, waving at both of them energetically.

Kibum was obviously caught off guard by the comment but he nodded. "I am."

"I have a friend that regularly goes to The Stars Align. You're one of her favorites to watch. No offense Jackson. Passeri," she called, nodding at the mainliners for that particular establishment.

"If it was anyone else, I might be offended," Jackson snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. "But it's Kibum. How can I be otherwise?"

While she was distracted, Kibum leaned close and whispered into Jinki's ear, "Do you think it's her friend or herself she's actually talking about?"

"Definitely herself," Jinki laughed quietly, smoothing his expression when she turned back around to focus on the group at large.

"And we're Jinki's sisters. Hi!" Hajoon pushed into the conversation with Doyun just behind her.

Aanya gasped again upon recognizing her. "You're with the Yonichi Alpha Wyverns. I watched your championship game. It was so good!"

"Thanks," Hajoon smiled politely, glancing at Henry with an uncertain look.

"Oh! You might know our team too! We didn't make it to the championships this year, but we got close," Doyun stepped in, grinning in excitement.

"Oh. That's good," Aanya said, obviously trying to be polite as she nodded her head.

"They'll probably do better next year," Larad commented while he moved into the group, bringing Excite with him.

"Definitely!" Doyun agreed, giving an energetic fist pump.

"Well good luck then," she encouraged turning her attention back to Hajoon for a second. "I don't suppose you know Captain Yarah?"

It was at that point that Jinki lost interest as she was obviously fishing for information about Hajoon's team captain. He turned to look and noticed that Kibum was still regarding Crawven though, the two sharing an uneasy visual exchange. They weren't hostile exactly, but it was clear there might have still been bad blood between them. He grabbed Kibum's hand and pulled him back to move out of the larger group just enough. It was very fortuitous timing apparently.

Passeri swooped in and placed her feathery arms around both of them so she could lean close between the gap they made. "It's not what it looks like," she explained in a low voice, her expression easy and otherwise unreadable. "It's mostly politics, though I do think Crawven fancies her," she added with a wistful shrug.

"She used to fancy him to. What changed?" Kibum grumbled, unable to maintain a neutral expression the way the Moladhi did.

"You," she grinned down at him. "Congratulations, Kibum. Simply by learning of the history between you two, she has decided that he is not marriageable material, but his father does own a series of shipping fleets that transport goods between domes and that make the occasional trip between planets."

"I knew his dad was a bigwig but wow," Jinki murmured in obvious surprise.

"Didn't you know?" Passeri asked with a twinkle in her eye. "The newest domes are always hot spots for people of power to send their offspring for... educational purposes," she explained, pausing long enough to show she was choosing her words with care. "Well, that and keeping them safe from the internal conflict present in established domes," she added with a shrug.

"You sound as if you know from experience," Jinki commented, one brow raised.

"I don't, no," she denied immediately, one hand elegantly placed against her breast as she shook her head. "But my father on the other hand..." she trailed off, letting the unsaid linger in the air between them.

"I thought he was reti-"

"Hey! Are we gonna play or not?" Doyun shouted into the general din of conversation and sound.

Jinki knew by her tone she was annoyed at not being paid attention to – Hajoon must have stolen the limelight again, but he wasn't upset by the timing. "Yes!" he called out to let her know she'd been heard by somebody at least. "We'll have to come back to that conversation at some point," he smiled, shifting his attention to Passeri even as he reached out to grab Kibum's hand.

"I'm on Passeri's team!" Jackson called as he sidled over to join said Moladhi, making his preference for players known immediately.

"I'm with Aanya!" That from Henry of course.

Jinki could feel Kibum's eyes on him and he looked over with a reassuring smile. "Of course we're going to be on the same team," he promised.

Though it made Kibum smile, it didn't seem to be enough for him. "Jinki and I will be on the same team!" he announced, making sure his voice was heard by everyone in the area.

As luck would have it, there were enough for two teams of five. Considering no one else wanted to split up, it actually worked out perfectly since Hajoon and Doyun could go head-to-head. "I'm on Jinki's team!" Doyun announced quickly, raising her hand and running over to join her big brother.

"Alright," Hajoon nodded, dusting off her hands as she wandered to stand opposite them. "I'll take..." she hesitated, looking over the remaining members with a keen eye. "Larad and Ercite," she called, gesturing for the pair to join her side.

There was a moment of intense deliberation then between Jinki, Kibum, and Doyun about who to choose next with Henry looking quite pitiful off to the side as he waved for them to pick him and Aanya. But Doyun was very much between a rock and a hard place and proximity ended up trumping Henry's wishful thinking when she chose, "Passeri and Jackson."

"Yes!" Jackson cheered, bouncing over to join the three who were ready and waiting.

Hajoon wasted no time in selecting, "Psitassi and Crawven."

"Jinki! Why didn't you pick us first?" Henry bemoaned as he and Aanya made their way to join Doyun's team as the last pair.

"Sorry, Henry," he apologized quickly with a gesture towards his sister and a careful effort *not* to look at Kibum. "You made it anyway though," he grinned, clapping the other Terran on the shoulder reassuringly.

Henry made a face but huffed and nodded in agreement. "I guess."

Despite Henry's disappointment at being selected last, Jinki was pleased that Hajoon had opted to keep their teams relatively balanced. Ercite would likely be equally as effective as Kibum – given his beginner status and their diminutive stature, and there was a Varium and at least one Moladhi on both teams. He made sure to keep looking at her until she noticed and then nodded to show he understood what she'd done. She grinned back and gave a quick salute before gesturing for her team to round up so they could discuss strategy.

Jinki found himself doing the same with Doyun and company. It wasn't going to be a hard game. Or at least it wasn't supposed to be. But you never knew when it came to grav jumping. The competitive nature of Doyun and Hajoon could well tip it into interesting territory, but in the meantime, the goal was simply to have fun.

And for the most part, they did. Generally speaking, it was a lot of Doyun and Hajoon intentionally competing against each other and everyone else sort of just milling about, but it was fun. Despite being on opposite teams, Crawven wouldn't touch Kibum with a ten-foot pole while Psitassi made an initial effort to play but then subsided to mostly watching instead. Aanya spent more time flitting about and observing the others play than actually trying to play herself, with Henry tagging along at her heels. And then there was Passeri and Jackson who were otherwise engaged in utilizing the full range of motion available with grav jumping gear and putting on an impromptu performance just because they could.

Like Larad and Ercite, this seemed to suit Kibum just fine as he was having fun trying to figure the gear out and not get decked by anyone on the opposite team, especially Hajoon. He had seen what she was capable of in the championships. As for Jinki, he was just delighted to see everybody loosely interacting together, but he was especially focused on Kibum. An ugly duckling in this arena, with practice he could likely develop into a full-fledged swan, but for now, his floundering was reminiscent of Jinki's early years in practicing and it was fun to step in and help him glide around the arena with practiced gravity shifts.

Considering the hour-long match really ended up being a competition between Doyun and Hajoon, it was no surprise that the latter ended up winning, so to speak. Doyun was frustrated her big sister was still so much better than her, but it was hard to stay sad or upset when everyone else was wearing a smile from the unusual activity.

But then most of everyone had something else to go to afterwards and they generally went their separate ways, but Kibum's first official grav jumping lesson / session was otherwise a success! "We'll have to do it again sometime," Jinki grinned as he walked with Kibum out of the training center hand in hand.

"I don't know about a team event exactly, but I'm pretty sure I can get it figured out if we practice one on one," Kibum grinned. "Bet I can even learn to beat you too," he smirked, all bravado in that moment.

"Yeah?" Jinki questioned, a pleased smile on his face.

"One day," he answered with a laugh. "You've had years of practice ahead of me. Give me time and I know I can do it," he promised with a confident smile.

"I do not doubt that at all," Jinki chuckled, raising Kibum's hand to kiss the back of it quickly. The fact it still made his boyfriend blush was part of the reason he did it, but it was also an easy way to show his affection without being too overt about it.

"Well good," he mumbled, ducking his head briefly in embarrassment before taking a breath and standing up straight. "Wanna get a bite to eat before I have to go to work?"

"Sure. What were you thinking?"

"Hmm... I heard there's a new Terran restaurant near The Stars Align. Garum said it was pretty good actually," he explained thoughtfully.

"Yeah? Let's give it a try then. I'm game."

"Great! Let's go!" Kibum grinned, running ahead and turning back to wave at the other departing people. "See you guys next time!"

"Later!"

Following in Kibum's wake, Jinki nodded in satisfaction. Grav jumping had been a good idea. He could only hope he'd have several more good ideas in the days to come.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

Kibum went into his sophomore year in a completely different frame of mind than he'd entered the university in and it showed. The fact that he and Jinki were an item wasn't really a surprise to anybody. Most had figured it was going to happen or already had before last semester ended, and his fan club, which Psitassi did post an article to, helped spread the news in their various circles anyway. It helped they were accepted without anybody batting an eye. Not that Kibum expected it. There were many other possible pairings that others might consider far less conventional, but you never knew.

While he returned to a shadow of his former self, Kibum was arguably more genuine this time around. His silver tongue was mostly back and he could flit from group to group with such marvelous ease, when he wasn't spending time with Jinki and his friends anyway. He spent more focused time at school this time too, both because he had on-campus housing and because Jinki was there. Any excuse to spend more time around his boyfriend was a good one, and it gave him plenty of opportunity to practice his information mining skills once again.

One group study session he was sitting in on ended with Jinki turning and asking him, "Why do you do that?" The question could have been accusatory but it sounded simply curious.

"Huh?" he blinked, looking around the now empty room, slightly unsure of what his boyfriend was asking him about.

Jinki quirked his mouth to the side like he wasn't sure how to frame it. "I would say dig, but I don't think you're actually doing that," he mused with a thoughtful expression. Kibum snorted, a vague idea of what he was asking about rising up, but he waited until the other man continued to confirm. "Why do you... invite so much information from people?" he wondered again, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Kibum shrugged and crossed his arms before he leaned back in his chair, overlapping one knee with the other elegantly. "You never know when you might hear something useful. If not for now, then for later," he grinned. Information was powerful and as he'd learned from Passeri, it could also be very valuable.

"Heh." The laugh was dry and breathy, not surprised but certainly amused. "Okay," Jinki nodded in understanding, even if his expression showed he didn't really get it entirely. "My other question is: How?"

"How do I get them to talk so much?" he wondered for clarification. When Jinki nodded, he shrugged again. "Most of the time, I just stop talking." When his boyfriend frowned at the simplicity of it, he laughed. "Seriously. The majority of people just want to fill the silence. You're one of them," he teased, a playful smirk dancing on his lips.

"No I'm not," he snorted in defense, the laugh that followed slightly nervous. Kibum raised a brow and waited, watching at Jinki started to fidget in the resultant quiet.

"Now you're doing it on purpose," he grumbled, turning to make sure he had all of his study data sorted and saved before he moved to close them down and pack up.

"See?" Kibum chuckled, unfolding himself from the chair so he could move and sit close to Jinki again, resting his head on the other man's shoulder. Jinki paused when he did so, making sure not to disturb him, even if he did huff slightly. "If it makes you feel any better, your chatter is cute."

"My chatter, aye?" Jinki teased, nudging his shoulder carefully.

Kibum shifted to rest his chin on the same shoulder so he could look at Jinki's profile intently. "Yes," he answered with a grin.

"Brat," he scoffed, reaching out to tap the tip of Kibum's nose with his fingertip.

Kibum grinned unrepentantly and leaned harder, knowing the word was an empty title and nothing more.

Study session after study session and practice after practice, they learned more about each other in observed moments of normal life and small snippets of casual conversation between busy schedules and hectic classes. If Kibum got nervous from time to time when he was in the midst of too many people and had to retreat on occasion, Jinki or Henry or Larad and Ercite were there to offer a protective presence. On occasion, Aanya or Psitassi could fill in too. Or some of his more dedicated fans in a real pinch. To his frustration, shadows from his breakdown the last semester continued to haunt him every now and then though.

He had a real thing about anybody other than Jinki touching his back. Even standing behind him too close could set off all sorts of panic signals and alarm bells. Kibum hated it when such occurrences nearly sent him spiraling so that he had to step aside and ground himself somehow if he was alone. If Jinki was nearby, all he needed was reassuring contact; his presence alone was a weirdly soothing balm and a haven when the inevitable storm appeared on his horizons.

Even more aggravatingly, he still had a fairly tumultuous relationship with Terran anatomy and biology classes, but they were manageable. Mostly. Classes and lessons didn't send him into avoidant

depressive episodes anymore so that was something at least. Didn't hurt that Jinki was practically his personal mentor now when he needed assistance either. And really, it could be quite entertaining and enlightening when Ercite was part of the study group. The Dawbn always had some kind of anecdotal story to share about whatever they were talking about. They'd known many a Terran in their previous iterations. And if they didn't, Larad or Henry could be counted on to provide some sort of example, no matter how far-fetched it might otherwise sound.

And besides that, he had his hands full with his other classes anyway. He didn't get into the flight course like he'd hoped – it wasn't common for first semester sophomores after all, but there was plenty else to learn. Jinki did end up focusing on engineering courses primarily, so Kibum took an auxiliary one to give him a basic understanding himself. As a ship's captain, his focus would be on commanding and making major decisions, manual navigation if needed and there was no functional AI, and otherwise filling in where necessary. And did he mention galactic cultural classes? He tested out of the remedial courses for Dawbn, Varium, and Moladhi cultural basics, but the universe was full of far more than just those species. If he was really going to be a ship captain and a freelancer at that, he would need to know far more than the average company or corporate one did.

Never mind the often heard about but never seen home world Dawbn, Varium, and Moladhi, all of whom looked significantly different from their off-world counterparts, there were such creatures like the Yuenamba, the Kyanwa, the Bagis, the Halcsapos, and many others beyond the ones that a captain might meet in the depths of space. As such, he also had to take classes in diplomacy and de-escalation; basic first aid for Terrans and other likely to be encountered species; basic maintenance and upkeep of a ship; economics and trade to make sure he wouldn't be cheated out of funds, and the list went on. Advanced combat classes weren't mandatory but he was going to take at least a couple so he'd know how to take care of himself in a scrape.

Nor was he alone. To his delight, when Larad and Ercite caught wind of the Kibum and Jinki partnership, they were interested in signing on as well. Henry had no such desire to step into the depths of space in a metallic pocket of air surrounded by icy death at all times, but he was all for helping them get ready.

"I won't go with you, but I'll be your man on the ground," he winked, jumping in front of their group and posing so that both thumbs pointed back at him with a cheesy grin on his face.

"And what exactly is it that you'll be doing as our man on the ground?" Kibum wondered aloud, crossing his arms and shifting his weight to one leg so his hip jutted out noticeably.

Henry's mouth fell open in mute surprise and he straightened quickly, brushing at his arms in quiet uncertainty. "I don't know. Something," he grumbled, flustered at the sudden question.

The group chuckled and Jinki stepped up to clap him on the shoulder consolingly. "It's alright. You've got time to think it over. It's never a bad idea to have a friend on the ground though," he promised with earnest sincerity, squeezing Henry's shoulder before looking at Kibum and tilting his head in silent inquiry.

Kibum wrinkled his nose just a touch and then sighed as he forced his arms to relax. He liked Henry. He really did. But even he knew he could get sharp with the other man all too quickly.

“Depending on our comms gear, it wouldn’t hurt to have someone with access to intel or updates or if you even happen to hear anything through the rumor mill if we’re still in the same galaxy.”

“And if you happen to sign on with one of the transportation companies on this planet, you can potentially have access to logistics, star charts, immediate updates...” Ercite added from their customary perch on Larad’s shoulder. He held his finger to his lips with a bemused glance at the Dawbn but then winked at Henry in a friendly manner.

“Oh! That’s an idea!” he grinned in immediate response, reaching out to smack Jinki on the shoulder. “I also hear Psitassi’s got some interesting plans in the works. Courtesy of Passeri, last I heard,” he laughed, turning a curious look at Kibum.

He snorted and rolled his eyes. “I know nothing more than you. She’s kept that tidbit of information under lock and key. I could probably ask Jackson for more info though,” he added as an afterthought.

“Or Psitassi herself,” Jinki suggested with a quick shrug. He frowned in mild confusion at Kibum’s immediate negating gesture.

“She’s got her guard up now. Whatever Passeri told her, she’s taken it to heart and even I can’t wheedle anything out of her lately. It has been entertaining watching Crawven flounder in her wake though. Her poker face has gotten so much better,” he barked a laugh and shook his head.

“Speaking of...” Larad began to say, a speculative look landing on Kibum.

“No,” he answered immediately, glaring up at the taller Varium.

“It wouldn’t hurt to have a Moladhi on the crew,” he added with an innocent shrug, careful not to upset Ercite’s balance.

“And it would give us the golden number for a small crew,” Ercite contributed, both hands gesturing fluidly to either side.

Kibum groaned and leaned his head back, visibly annoyed with the train of conversation. Despite their history, Crawven himself wasn’t a terrible Moladhi. In fact, away from Boro and Kieran, he was actually tolerable. Under different circumstances, he might even have been likable. But it was not so easy to ignore the bad blood between them, even with Boro gone - he’d dropped out at the end of last semester, and Kieran transferring to a different dome next semester.

“No worries,” Jinki drifted closer, sliding an arm around Kibum’s waist in a comforting manner. “You don’t have to make a decision today. As we all know, nothing will likely happen for at least two and a half more years anyway.”

“Likely more, given all the paperwork and how lucky we get with finding and funding a ship,” Ercite chimed in matter-of-factly. Again, Larad held his fingers to his lips but this time, his gaze was for the Dawbn specifically.

“Yeah...” Henry grimaced in shared misery.

“Ugh! We’ll figure something out!” Kibum scowled, stomping his foot in frustration. He didn’t have money enough to buy a ship now and he probably wouldn’t in two and a half years’ time either,

but he wasn't about to let that detail scare him already. "And I'll think about the Crawven thing. Maybe something will change between now and then," he admitted with a gusty sigh, leaning into Jinki's side.

"That's the spirit!" Henry cheered, pumping his fist into the air. "I wonder if anybody in the fan club knows anyone that could help us," he thought out loud, turning to follow the group as they started heading off to their next destination.

After the first semester, which seemed easy in comparison to the previous ones, the rest of the year was full of such conversations mixed in with the highs and lows of university life. Various tests and exams set them all on edge and called for more than a few late-night study sessions between the group at large. Jinki was stretched thin with his various duties as usual, but not as bad as last year. Kibum didn't let him for one. It wasn't so much that he forbid Jinki from setting certain schedules, but he had a knack for *looking* at him in such a way that his boyfriend realized taking on one more session might not be the best of ideas. For either of them.

For another thing, it didn't hurt that Hajoon was actually scouted in the second semester as everyone hoped. The Niichi Nagas wanted her in the second city dome for their university team after she graduated from high school. If all went well, she could have a shot at joining the global team, but that was a long ways off yet. There was summer training to get through and senior year of high school first, both of which would require more training demands. She wasn't the only one scouted but due to the increased training pressure, Jinki wasn't good enough to keep up with her level for the primary team.

If he wanted, he could help the second-string players, but as much as he loved it, his heart wasn't in it. He'd joined initially to help his sister and if he didn't need to do that anymore... At least he still had Doyun and Siwoo to assist but two extra slots a week wasn't a bad thing for him. And honestly, they all needed the extra time going into the year-end finals.

Kibum's status didn't hinge on passing or failing, but he was undeniably a nervous wreck going into his flight simulation exam especially. It was very important that he passed *and* scored well for the sake of his ability to continue as a freelance captain in the making. Functioning as a stand-in for the Terran biology debacle of last year, the added self-imposed stress almost made him relapse into breakdown territory.

For days, he'd studied with his friends and study groups at large, preparing for the rest of his tests in the public eye, but for nights on end, he'd sequestered himself in isolation so that he could practice the flying simulations alone. This was the first night in a while he hadn't been able to convince Jinki not to come to his dorm room. Even so, as soon as they settled in to study again, he'd promptly forgotten about him as he sank into the simulation world, a coded program specifically uploaded to his personal gear so that he could practice manual flight training. You didn't get to have access to AI assisted flights until you proved you could do it on your own in a worst-case scenario situation.

"Kibum," Jinki sighed, turning off the holo-training simulation with a touch of his hand on the side of Kibum's head.

"Hey!" Kibum yelled, panicking as disorientation set in and fear clawed at his gut. He wouldn't admit to being startled out of his mind too, as he had been caught completely unaware. "I wasn't

finished!" he panted, reaching up to tap on the holo-training vid again so he could at least complete the interrupted program.

Jinki caught his hand before he could though and held firm until his boyfriend looked at him. "Please stop. You're trying too hard, babe," he murmured with a pained expression his face. It was clear by the tension lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes that he'd been watching for a while now without saying anything.

"I have to practice," he stated firmly, tugging at his trapped hand as emotion welled, pressing against the inside of his chest. At the least, he needed to finish the run so that he would know he could do it. Again.

"You have."

"Not enough," he denied, shaking his head harshly. He wasn't like some of the other students in his class that had family members who could pull strings and get them chances to fly on sanctioned ships to the orbiting space station. All he had were simulations and the hope that muscle memory would set in enough. If he passed the simulation, the next year he could fly a school ship for real. He was so behind in everything and he needed this to succeed and- his thoughts suddenly ground to a halt when he realized Jinki was still looking at him with an unblinking expression.

Jinki's mouth firmed and he took a small breath. "I know you are doing your best, hon. But..." he started, taking a quick breath before he launched into his counterargument: "You have terrible circles under your eyes. You haven't slept more than three hours on any given night this week. I can hear your stomach growling even if you can't. And you will be worthless if you get sick before your test," he stated plainly, never breaking eye contact as he delivered his facts.

Kibum's bottom lip trembled and his stomach gurgled as if it had been waiting for the opportunity to be heard by him. He didn't know how Jinki knew he hadn't been getting much sleep, but he wasn't going to doubt that he knew. The man had his ways. "But what if I fail?" he whined, gripping hard to Jinki's hands, his eyes hot and his throat thick.

"And what if you pass?" he asked, letting the corners of his mouth pull up just a touch.

"But--"

"Nuh uh," Jinki interrupted with a shake of his head. "Come here," he instructed, standing up so he could bodily lift Kibum into his arms and off the stool he'd been sitting on for the past couple of hours.

All noisy theatrics, Kibum went limp and whined, "Noooooo." His sigh was heavy when Jinki laid him on the bed instead. Suddenly boneless and tired and utterly wrung out, he curled into a tight ball and groaned, "I'm useless. Why are you here wasting your time on me? You should be home studying," he mumbled dejectedly, hiding his face in his knees.

Jinki's sigh was breathy as he laid a comforting hand on Kibum's upper arm. "Useless? Never. If you're anything, maybe I would say dramatic."

"You're not helping!" he grumbled in a muffled voice, still hiding away.

"Neither are you," Jinki shot back, moving his hand to pat the topmost hip. "And I'm here because I care about you and I know how you can get sometimes," he chided gently, the barest hint of amusement coloring his tone. Kibum's whine was plaintive but he didn't actually say anything in response. "And right now, I know you're probably starving. Foolish man," he snorted before his feet whispered over the floor as he moved to Kibum's food synthesizer. "Food. Shower. Sleep. In that order," he instructed over the soft whirring of the machine.

"I don't wanna," Kibum complained, staying curled up in a ball even as Jinki came back. The bed dipped when his boyfriend sat next to him and a wrapper crinkled. In his periphery, he saw Jinki leaning over him. Then the smell wafted close. His stomach gave an ungodly loud rumble and he groaned, "You're terrible."

"And you are indeed starving," Jinki snorted, poking at Kibum until he finally roused him enough to get up.

Of course it would be mela bread. Kibum rarely ordered it himself and Jinki really only ever pulled it out when he was treating Kibum or... for moments like this. Grumbling under his breath, he took the food and nibbled on a small piece. He'd honestly meant to make it last longer, but as soon as it touched his tongue, hunger reached a hand up his throat and it was gone before he knew it. "Oh," he complained, looking at his now empty hands in genuine surprise.

Jinki's light laugh made him look up to an impressively bemused expression. "Here," he smiled, offering a bottle of water first, another package of mela bread in his lap. Kibum tried to reach around the water for the second mela bread but Jinki expertly caught his hand and placed the bottle in it instead. "Drink first. Then you can have it," he promised, looking Kibum dead in the eyes.

Frustrated but already feeling slightly better for the snack, Kibum sighed and took the water. It disappeared nearly as quickly too. He dabbed at the dribble of water on his chin and then reached his hand out expectantly. "Food."

"Greedy thing," Jinki teased, keeping his tone light. But he didn't argue or delay and picked up the mela bread to hand it over.

This time, Kibum was able to savor it a bit longer. It still disappeared faster than he would have preferred but he actually tasted it this time around. And finally distracted from his constant studying and practicing, the weight of the week began to settle into him. Suddenly weary, he slumped where he was sitting and eyed the bed with a creeping longing.

"Shower first," Jinki reminded him, pointing at the small bathing room off to the side.

Kibum pouted and mock cried softly in the back of his throat. "But what if I really do fail?" he asked in a tiny voice, picking at his fingers in his lap.

"That," his boyfriend started to say as he tapped Kibum on the nose with his finger, "is a question for *after* the exam. Now come on. Shower. I didn't want to say anything but you're starting to smell," he added with a laugh through his nose.

Caught between scandalized and mortified, Kibum inhaled sharply. "No I'm not!" he denied immediately, even as he tried to surreptitiously sniff at himself. He didn't smell anything...

"I'll help you wash your hair," Jinki bribed, reaching out to run his fingers through Kibum's black locks in a tender gesture.

It was only a brief amount of contact, and yet Kibum found himself whimpering and leaning into it. He really wouldn't say no to that, but he sighed heavily and grumbled, "Fine." Jinki's laugh told him the other man knew it was an act.

And it really would be just a shower too. Despite the fact they'd been together for nearly a year, they'd been taking things slow. At Kibum's own request. He loved being in Jinki's arms, being close, cuddling and sharing the same bed, but the idea of letting himself be completely vulnerable, even with Jinki... scared him. Then their schedules got in the way or exams came up and there was always something else to interrupt or slow things down. But Jinki really did always give the best hair washes. And massages. And kisses. And- Kibum stopped his thinking with a quick shake of his head. There would be time enough for that later!

"You coming?" Jinki asked as he stood beside the bed looking down at Kibum expectantly with a poorly suppressed smile, almost as if he could see the thoughts running through his mind.

"Ye-" he started to answer a bit too excitedly before he caught himself and tried again. "Yes," he responded with feigned annoyance, crawling off the bed and following in Jinki's wake.

With the tub setting, he could curl up into a small ball while Jinki sat behind him and worked his fingers through short locks, creating a messy glob of suds on top. A scalp massage followed that drifted to Kibum's neck and then shoulders. Kibum turned to putty under such ministrations and all thoughts of studying and the upcoming tests dissipated like so much fog on a sunny morning.

"Rinse," his boyfriend instructed, sitting back to allow him room.

Kibum hummed in quiet confirmation before dunking his head awkwardly to get the majority of the shampoo out. When he sat back up, Jinki finished rinsing and then continued with a conditioning paste. It all took much longer than it needed to, but Kibum was practically about to pass out in the washroom by the time Jinki nudged him to rinse again.

"I'll be waiting just outside," he promised, kissing the top of Kibum's head before he got up to leave the younger man in peace and privacy.

It took all his willpower to haul himself out of the cooling water and then get dressed for sleep. Just outside the door, Jinki waited to sling an arm around his waist and guide him to the bed so they could curl up together under the covers. No longer hungry, clean and more relaxed than he might have ever been in his life, Kibum had the best night of sleep in a while. Especially because he was curled up in the curve of Jinki's body as his boyfriend kept him company throughout the night.

In retrospect, Kibum knew he shouldn't have been so hard on himself when he passed that particular exam with flying colors. He wasn't first in the class as he'd wanted to be, but given his limitations, third highest overall was nothing to sneeze at. If nothing else, it would set him up nicely for a spot in the more advanced course the following semester.

Nor did he struggle overmuch with the other exams, placing well above passing in all of them. Considering his tutor, he wasn't terribly surprised, but it was nice to see the results all the same. He'd

come to the conclusion he was never going to like Terran biology, but he could handle it without the subject overwhelming him anymore. Now if only he could get a better handle on his anxiety in general...

If nothing else though, they all had plenty to celebrate given another successful year down and being one step closer to whatever their final result was going to be. Heading into their school break, that was about all any of them could ask for.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Surprisingly, the break between academic years was an eventful one. Then again, it was the last one before Jinki, Henry, Larad, and Arcite were set to graduate. It was also the break leading into the year that would really set the tone for the rest of Kibum's path. And they all had some pretty big decisions to start making. Including Hajoon who would be deciding whether to go semi-professional or not once she graduated. If yes, she'd have to spend most of her summer in Niichi enduring an assessment camp to gauge her level and expected rate of growth before she joined the university team the following year. Kibum wasn't particularly worried about her, but Jinki certainly was. It was only in his nature as her big brother after all.

"What if she gets bullied or hazed by them?" he asked the group with nervous worry writ clear on his face.

"Hah!" Henry barked a laugh first. "I'd like to see someone try and bully your sister. Have you not seen her on the field?" he asked as if the thought was a silly one indeed.

Larad swatted at the overly enthusiastic Terran once and shook his head. "She'll likely have some challenges. One always done when going to a new area. But she will probably be just fine."

"But what if she's not?" Jinki groaned plaintively, gesturing towards the space above him before settling his head on the table in front.

Kibum patted him on the back. "Then she'll have us to back her up if she needs. I can rally the fan club if I must," he promised with the hint of a smug smile pulling at his lips.

"Honestly, I'd be more worried about us," Arcite mentioned from their seat next to Larad. "If all goes well, Hajoon will be the most successful member of your family. On the other hand, even if everything goes well for you, or rather us, we will still have to find out how to fund a ship."

"Not helping," he grumbled, pointing a finger aimlessly at the Dawbn.

"But they're right," Kibum admitted with a hiss through his teeth. That was still something they'd have to sort at some point.

"I still think we should ask the fan club if they know anybody," Henry reminded them, hands opening wide in an obvious gesture.

And Henry wasn't exactly wrong, but Kibum was loath to ask anybody else just yet. It often meant just being indebted to someone else and he wasn't sure he wanted to go that route if he could help it. Other than that though, things were relatively good in general.

For Kibum, he was finally more secure in his standing once more, since his long-term goal of becoming a captain and piloting his own ship was starting to feel more and more like a possibility. And the beginnings of a crew were there as well. Jinki had already agreed to be his second in command, of course. His engineering classes were coming along nicely and he'd be pretty good in the engine room if they needed to handle repairs themselves. His mother was helping a lot in that area with basic maintenance tips and hands on experience. Granted, city repairs were vastly different from a ship, but the underlying principles were similar at least.

As for Ercite and Larad, the Varium had a surprising knack for medicine and first aid. He had no interest in becoming a full-fledged doctor exactly, but his current course would set him on track for emergency first aid certification and medical equipment specialist. At least someone would know how to use all the gadgets in the medbay. And if there was a true emergency, they'd have cryopods they could use to put someone in stasis if need be. Ercite was set up for coms, navigation, and logistics. Their work in the administrative department during the school year had given them dozens of hours of practice in dealing with bureaucracy as a whole and a lot of the red tape and rules that went along with flying...

And then there was Crawven. Psitassi had eventually joined in to try and nudge Kibum to think about adding the Moladhi to the roster. While Kibum wasn't super keen on the idea of having a weapons and combat master on board, especially one he wasn't sure he fully trusted, he couldn't deny it wouldn't be a bad idea to have one just in case. That last unit about the Yeunamba had really helped tip the scales in favor of including him on the off chance he encountered one and couldn't talk his way out of the situation.

Kibum could hold his own against a Terran and some of the relatively similar sized species he'd encountered, but the Yeunamba were a frightening cross of reptilian savagery and equine grace with wings, horns, and the ability to switch between biped and quadruped movement patterns. Having a brawny, combat oriented Moladhi might not be such a bad idea after all.

He still didn't have to decide yet though. There were at least two more years for him before he even graduated, much less had a ship he could register and fly. But it was always good to be prepared and think ahead. At least according to Jinki anyway. Stars, he'd already asked his father to start looking for scrap tech they might be able to salvage for the purpose of cutting down costs on purchasing a complete ship if nothing else. If they could find enough salvage and scrap to revamp and overhaul, they'd really only have to cover the cost of the hull.

Speaking of parental figures... maybe he could ask Eric and see if the Varium had any thoughts or suggestions to offer. Even considering it made Kibum's gut twist though and he grimaced. No. He wasn't that desperate. At least not yet anyway.

Kibum flinched when hands landed on his shoulders and an upside-down face popped into view. "Are you going to sit here daydreaming all day?" Jinki asked with his traditionally beautiful smile. It looked slightly odd from the unaccustomed angle, but no less charming.

"For your information, I was planning," he responded coyly, reaching up to tap Jinki's forehead with a gentle fingertip.

“Well, planning can wait. Today we’re celebrating,” he beamed, eyes darting in the direction of the rest of their group. “And since I’ve already taken your turn a few times, I figured I should come and check on you, just in case,” he explained with a wink.

“What?” Kibum gasped, maneuvering out from under Jinki so he could pop up and check the scoreboard on the 4D bowling matches. “You should have called me!” he grumbled, giving his boyfriend a half-hearted glare as the music, sounds of crashing pins, and the general din of excitement suddenly shoved into his awareness once more.

“I did but you didn’t hear me,” he answered easily, standing up and pointing at Kibum’s name on the leaderboard. “Not my best tosses but you’re not last,” he chuckled.

No. That would be Henry. And it was no surprise given his bittersweet semester results. His tests had been fine but Aanya had opted for them to go their separate ways so he was single again and grumpy as a result. To be fair, Jinki wasn’t that much higher on the scoreboard... Though Psitassi and Crawven seemed to be competing for first. Kibum would have expected that to be Larad. Instead, Ercite was nipping at their heels. “Next time, come and get me sooner!” he complained, swatting Jinki’s shoulder with empty fury.

“Promise,” Jinki responded, holding his hand up like he was taking a vow. “Now come on! If you get a couple strikes in the last few rounds, you might be able to catch up to Larad,” he encouraged honestly, circling his arm around Kibum’s waist and drawing him along.

“You should let me go on your turn too,” he prodded, nudging Jinki’s side with his elbow lightly.

“If you want to,” he smiled back, offering no resistance.

“You’re supposed to argue!” Kibum grumbled with a brief eye roll.

“With you? Never,” Jinki laughed once, leaning close to kiss the side of his head tenderly. Before his boyfriend could respond, he called out, “Look who’s back!”

“Kibum!” the group cheered, laughing at his surprised expression from their excitement.

Kibum forced a performer’s façade over his features to present an air of collectedness before he rolled up his imaginary sleeves and sauntered to the island where the balls were resting. “Whose turn is it? Is it my turn? I’m going anyway,” he announced, picking up a ball and getting ready to square off at the start of the lane.

He paused and flinched again when a sharp voice called out, “Kim Kibum!”

Looking around, he nearly jumped when he realized it was coming from by his knees. “Oh galaxies!” he yelped, seeing Ercite glaring up at him as only a Dawbn could, glassy glittering eyes unblinking. “My mistake!” he announced, running away with the ball to hide behind Jinki. Despite their stature, Ercite was not one you wanted to get on their bad side. Not in the least of which was because they had Larad as backup, but they were a classic case of the pen being mightier than the sword. They still worked in the administration office and could make anyone’s academic life difficult if they so desired.

“Better,” they smiled, suddenly innocent and benign again.

“Help,” Kibum whispered into Jinki’s ear from his safe vantage point behind the other man.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you,” Jinki promised, reaching back to loop his arms partially around Kibum.

“Even from Larad?” he couldn’t help but ask, keying the ball out of commission to turn off the weight and parameter approximators, making it disappear in the next second. It gave him room to lean into Jinki and hug him from behind, resting his chin on the other man’s shoulder.

“Is that a serious question?” his boyfriend wondered, brows furrowed questioningly.

“Not really.” The words were accompanied by a head shake and then a quick kiss on Jinki’s cheek. It gave him the rare pleasure of seeing a dusting of pink appear on the edges of his ears. He felt Jinki’s arms lock loosely behind him and the delighted rumble in his body from his laugh. Kibum already knew that Jinki wouldn’t hesitate to do whatever he could to at least help Kibum if he needed it. Probably. Almost certainly anyway. But it was always nice to confirm. “Thank you,” he whispered, tilting his head to lean it against Jinki’s.

“Anytime,” came the equally quiet response and head nudge.

No expectation of reciprocation. No demand for payment of any kind. Just simple acceptance and sincere promises. Kibum still didn’t know how he’d managed to find someone who seemed almost impossibly unreal to him, but he did know he didn’t ever want to let him go. “Jinki?” he called softly, arms tightening just a bit.

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” he whispered and felt Jinki freeze, his breath stopping for just a second in obvious surprise at the first utterance of those words strung together and directed at him.

“I love you too, Kibummie,” he responded after only a short pause, arms flexing to hold him tighter as he turned his head to look at his boyfriend with a quiet but radiant smile.

No. He didn’t want to let him go at all. Granted, he physically had to when his turn came around and it was time to play. As it turned out, 4D bowling was also not his forte. But that didn’t seem to matter by the end of the evening. After they wore their energy out on various rounds and finally called it to go their separate ways, everyone headed out for different destinations.

Crawven and Psitassi departed first. Then Larad, Ercite, and Henry on their way back to the senior dorms. And that left Kibum and Jinki who made their way to Kibum’s junior dorm room together. A goodnight kiss in front of the door turned into more than either intended and they both stumbled into the empty room, intoxicated with each other.

The lights turned on automatically and Kibum mumbled, “Lights off.”

Jinki paused and pulled back enough to say, “No. Keep them on.” He cupped Kibum’s face with one hand, adding, “You’re beautiful, Kibum. And I want to see you,” he whispered, looping his free arm behind Kibum’s back to pull him close as he kissed him deeply in the middle of the room.

"Lights on," Kibum panted when he was given space enough to speak. Tonight at least he believed it when he saw the way that Jinki looked at him. Face flushed, eyes dilated, and mouth partially open, he was irresistibly kissable.

Step by desirous step, they made their way to the bed and Jinki laid Kibum down with such tender care, he felt nothing but cherished and loved while lying under the other man. Questioning fingertips pulled at layers of clothes and Kibum allowed his shirt to be removed by gently trembling hands. Those same hands splayed wide over his exposed flesh and mapped out every plane, rise, and indent with tender fingertips to settle at his hips before coming back up to interlace their fingers together, holding tight.

Kibum gasped, his skin alive with fire and energy. His body seemed to move of its own accord when his legs wound around Jinki's hips, inviting the other man to sink against him. They both moaned and gave themselves up to the taste of each other's lips and the pressure of their bodies separated by a thin layer of fabric.

At Kibum's insistent tugging, Jinki's shirt came free, giving him freedom to roam the smooth expanse of his toned shoulders and back muscles. His hands settled in the low curve of Jinki's back, brushing against the waist of his pants. Abdominal muscles clenched, the sensation obvious from their closeness, and Jinki shifted, moving his kisses down Kibum's chin, neck, chest, stomach, until he reached the top of the pants.

He looked up to meet Kibum's eyes and asked, "Can I?" fingertips playing with the edge of the fabric.

"Yes," Kibum whispered, biting his bottom lip as he watched Jinki's fingers undo the clasp and zipper of his pants and work them down. His fingers painted trails of fire as they trailed back up Kibum's bare legs, making him suddenly shy and nervous. He tried to cover himself with half-heartedly embarrassed hands but Jinki caught them gently and held them close against his bare abdomen.

"Don't. You're beautiful, love," he whispered, knees straddled on either side of Kibum's legs as he looked over the expanse of his mostly naked flesh in admiring awe.

A hesitant smile graced Kibum's lips then and he reached up to cup Jinki's cheek in his palm, smiling harder when the other man leaned close to make it easier. "I believe you," he admitted quietly. Maybe he didn't believe it when *he* said it to himself, but he couldn't doubt the honest sincerity pouring from his boyfriend in that moment.

Moment by moment, Kibum's body became more and more alive under Jinki's touches. Piece by piece, the last remnants of their clothing fell away, leaving them both vulnerable and utterly exposed.

With Jinki hovering over him, Kibum's eyes couldn't help but drift down the expanse of his admirably sculpted body to focus on the enviable firm shaft located between his legs. He inhaled slightly and blinked, "I still don't know whether to be impressed, nervous or scared," he admitted with a breathy laugh upon seeing Jinki's glory again.

"Sorry," Jinki apologized immediately, ducking his head like it was some sort of criticism.

“Hey,” Kibum warned, making him look up. “I...” he trailed off, grabbing Jinki’s hand in his and drawing it close to his chest so he could spread it over his heart. “I trust you. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jinki whispered, smiling back before he leaned down to kiss Kibum again. His hand drifted down Kibum’s chest until it stopped on his lower abdomen, just above his own erect length. “Are you sure?” he asked, waiting for permission as he looked Kibum in his eyes.

Kibum’s heart raced in his chest and he thought he might explode from the tension. He could say no and he knew – absolutely knew – that Jinki would respect that decision. For a split second, he considered saying it just to be sure he would. But the moment passed just as quickly as his own curiosity and desire – and slight shame at the thought – got the better of him. “Yes,” he whispered, inhaling sharply and closing his eyes in pleasure as Jinki’s hand descended further.

The evening ran long when Jinki took his time exploring Kibum’s body, playing him like an exquisitely tuned piano. When he eventually asked to bridge the final distance between them, Kibum would likely have given him anything he requested. Yet all he asked for was the entirety of Kibum. And despite his subconscious trepidation – stemming from uncharitable hollow thoughts like ‘what if he hurts you?’; ‘what if it’s a lie?’; ‘what if it’s a trick?’ - he was more than happy to give it willingly.

Letting Jinki have all of him was frightening and exhilarating at the same time; the last vestiges of his fear faded quickly. Feeling Jinki take him bit by bit was pleasurable painful. He was Kibum’s first but he would have been hard pressed to find a better one. Patient and at least a little experienced, Jinki focused the entirety of his awareness to Kibum’s responses and acted accordingly, pausing or slowing down as necessary, despite his own desire. And experiencing such a joining together was liberating in a way that Kibum hadn’t even known was possible. He’d expected the physical pain, but the pleasure, complete trust and security, and the sensation of being absolutely cherished took him by surprise.

The rest of the evening passed by in an emotional high of slightly clumsy spent energy, fumbling hands, and sweaty bodies that would forever be etched in Kibum’s memory. And even when they were finished, Jinki made sure they were clean enough for sleep before he grabbed Kibum close, holding firm as if he was afraid the other man might disappear if he so much as let go. Achy in a new way but satisfied, Kibum held tighter, burrowing into Jinki’s warm unclothed body like he could never be close enough. Together, they found solace and peace in each other’s sated presence, drifting into sleep in the early hours of the morning at last.

Waking in Jinki’s arms hours later was another pleasant experience. Feeling warm and safe, he stared at his boyfriend’s sleeping face, watching the way his eyes moved lightly under closed lids. Messy strands of hair intruded, haphazardly crossing his forehead and lying against his cheek. It was such a normal sight that Kibum was almost worried last night had been little more than an overly imaginative dream. But a quick look under the covers at their still naked bodies and the noticeable soreness in his backside assured him it was real.

A few questions rose to the surface, but he didn’t need immediate answers for the time being. He was more content to snuggle close, nudging his head under Jinki’s chin with his cheek pressed against the smooth warm chest. Jinki hummed in the back of his throat and stirred slightly, his arms reaching out to wrap around Kibum and hold him closer. A quiet sigh escaped as he rubbed his cheek

against the top of Kibum's head and then he settled back into full sleep again. For a little while anyway. With a larger inhale, he stirred once more a bit later and froze when Kibum made a small sound of complaint in the back of his throat. "Sorry. Did I wake you?" he wondered, drawing smooth lines up the length of Kibum's blanket covered back.

Kibum shook his head and shivered lightly at the contact. "Not really."

Soft lips pressed against the top of his head and Jinki took another breath. "How are you feeling today?"

"Good," Kibum answered with a content sigh. "Happy."

"No pain?" his boyfriend asked hesitantly after a brief pause.

Kibum shook his head again. "Just a little sore."

"Sorry," Jinki apologized, hugging Kibum like it might somehow make up for it.

"I hear it's normal," he assured him, patting his back with a light hand. At least that was what he'd been told from Jackson and Passeri anyway. Honestly, if he'd had any other people to go to about that sort of conversation, he probably would have, but they were more experts on it than he was. Though his cheeks still burned at their eagerness to offer suggestions and advice for the moment if and when it would happen for him.

"Sometimes," his boyfriend admitted with a quiet nod. "I tried to be gentle. I didn't hurt you, did I?" he wondered, obviously afraid he might have.

"No. You didn't," he promised as he finally unwound himself enough to shift up so that he could be even with Jinki. He liked cuddling but it felt they should be face-to-face now. He smiled when Jinki immediately reached out to trace Kibum's face with gentle fingertips. "Is it always like that?" He doubted it. Again, Passeri and Jackson apparently had a plethora of stories they were more than happy to share if he was interested. But he was curious to hear it from Jinki.

"Not usually," his boyfriend chuckled, an embarrassed smile tugging at his lips. "At least, not that long," he added shyly, the smile growing larger as he looked away.

"Was it that long?" Kibum wondered, the memory in his mind a pleasant blur of events and emotions. He honestly couldn't have said how much time had passed at all...

Jinki chuckled, a grin finally taking over as he looked at his boyfriend. "I'm glad you feel that way. And thank you. For trusting me," he added when the statement alone seemed rather vague.

Kibum snorted and gave him a side-eyed look. "After last night, I feel like I should be the one thanking you. Maybe it's because it *was* you, but I don't know what I was so afraid of before," he explained, brow furrowing as he bit his bottom lip. He looked back up again when he felt Jinki's fingers lightly grip the bottom of his chin. "Huh?" he chirped in quiet inquiry.

"I really want to kiss you right now," Jinki admitted, smiling as his gaze moved from Kibum's lips and back up to Kibum's eyes.

"Then kiss me," he responded, tilting his head up like it was a sort of challenge. So Jinki did, moving close and pulling Kibum against the curve of his body again. Morning breath and all, it was still a lovely kiss that made his head swim. At least until he felt something firm brush against his leg as his own body started to respond.

Jinki groaned and paused, intentionally making space between them. "Sorry. I was afraid that might happen," he laughed, reaching atop the covers and pressing them down to create a barrier between them. "You kind of have an effect on me," he admitted, the delightful flush of pink back on his cheeks.

Biting his bottom lip again, Kibum responded, "I wouldn't say you're the only one." Jinki's flush grew brighter and it made Kibum laugh as a flush blossomed on his cheeks too. "You know... we could..." he started to awkwardly suggest, though he couldn't exactly meet Jinki's eyes yet.

"We could," Jinki agreed with a nod. "But you should probably try walking first."

"Oh?" Kibum wondered in obvious surprise. When Jinki mutely nodded, he gave a slow nod of understanding in response. "I see."

And he did. Jinki's advice was sound in that matter as well. Kibum was fine but he was obviously going to have to take things a little slow for the rest of the day. But all things considered, it was a positive experience for Kibum and one more tethering point to secure his relationship to the other man. Not that he was directly keeping score or anything, but the more interwoven his life became with his boyfriend, the more he was able to stand on his own two feet again, facing the world head on.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Another break. Another set of classes and schedules to get sorted. And changes on the horizon. All were positive things, especially in terms of progress and the future, but none of them made Jinki feel particularly settled or assured of his own future. He was very much still enamored with Kibum and his friends were another constant in his life that he could fortunately count on, but... he couldn't help feeling at least a little uneasy. About a variety of things in fact.

It did bother Jinki a little bit that, for all of Kibum's bravado, he had no set plan for actually making his dream a reality. His fly by the seat of his pants and get by on sheer grit and determination approach to this endeavor did not sit particularly well with Jinki. Get a ship, yes, but that took money and none of them had all that much. He himself was making headway with finding salvageable parts from his father's forays and his mom was a deft hand at helping him get the best pieces of salvage in working order, but it was a drop in the bucket overall. They had a long way to go with making that dream a reality.

Furthermore, he was not exactly unsettled by it, but having Hajoon leave for the break to go through pre-season training in Niichi made him nervous. It was not unlike a parent seeing their child go for the first time. He figured she'd be fine, but he'd spent so much time helping her grow up and develop into the person she was becoming that it felt strange she didn't need him anymore. Not that

she'd ever *really* needed him, but it felt like it sometimes. Of course he still had Doyun and Siwoo and Daejung, but Hajoon had always been closest to his heart, annoying brat that she could be.

"I'll just be a call or a message away," she promised him as they stood together at the transport ship platform. Since she was going to a different dome, she had to catch a jump ship that would take her from Yonichi to Niichi since land travel was still questionable. There were vehicles that made the trek but they were relatively slow contraptions and occasionally prone to breaking down in the yet to be fully terraformed landscape. It would be fine closer to lichi, the first dome, where seeding technology had already started to convert the terrain from craggy hard planes to mossy fields, but for now... this was best.

"I feel like we should be more upset than you are," Mrs. Kim laughed, coming close to hug Jinki around the shoulders with one arm.

He sighed heavily and nodded in agreement. "I know. And I know you'll do great," he added, forcing a happiness he didn't truly feel. "But make sure to call me if you *do* need help or if someone is bullying or for anything really," he added with an embarrassed shrug as he looked down.

"I think he's going to miss you," Mr. Kim chuckled with a look at Hajoon before he nodded towards his eldest son.

Hajoon exhaled loudly with a breathy laugh. "Ugh. I'm gonna miss you too, Jinki," she promised, coming close to hug him hard, swaying lightly from side to side as she did so.

"Group hug!" Doyun announced, immediately joining the fray.

"Agh!" Hajoon and Jinki groaned in false complaint as everyone else crowded in.

Even with the positive send off, it was still hard to watch his first younger sister leave. He knew she'd be great with whatever she chose to do. There was no doubt. But things would certainly be different without his sometimes partner in crime around...

And really, all of that was a smokescreen for his other niggling concern: Kibum. Now that they'd been together for over a year and, as far as he knew, they'd gotten serious, he was beginning to see how Kibum really blossom. It was wonderful and amazing and he was happy to see it for sure. Compared to the young man he'd first met, they were almost like two very different people. But for all, it also began to feel like Kibum didn't really need him as much.

They still communicated and met up fairly often. They still cuddled and shared the same space and bed on various occasions. But when he wasn't with Jinki, Kibum was spending more time with other people again. He was taking part in university life and, on occasion, participating more in the few practices that Jinki did go to with Doyun and Siwoo. On the one hand, he knew it was supposed to be a good thing. It was healthy after all.

But what if Kibum *didn't* need Jinki anymore?

Such questions and thoughts rose up at unexpected moments and made... jealous and worried. One good example was when Kibum was sitting a little too close to another Terran during one of their university gatherings before the school year started. "You good?" he asked the Varium he was

currently helping in the library, making sure they confirmed before he turned his attention to his boyfriend. "Kibum," he called quietly, keeping his voice low but pitched enough to carry.

"Huh?" he responded, surprised enough to look up with wide eyes. "Yeah?"

"Can you come here for a second?" he asked, giving a quick smile to both him and the Terran next to him.

"Sure," he agreed without hesitation. "Be right back," he promised with a flashed grin that prompted a dark flicker of something unpleasant to stir in Jinki.

He squashed it down as hard as he could before the other man got close though. "Hey babe," he greeted, reaching out to catch Kibum's hand in his when he got close enough.

"What's up?" Kibum responded, falling into the chair next to him and sliding over to him with natural ease.

Jinki shrugged. Now that he was here, the sensation was gone and he had no real reason for calling him, but he needed to say something. "Is he helping you? You helping him? Wanna switch?" he asked for lack of anything else to say.

Kibum shook his head lightly, a gentle smile on his lips. "We're good. Mihael will be in one of my non-Terran cultural education classes next semester. Might be a good study partner," he nodded with furrowed brows, obviously pensive about the other man.

"I thought I was your study partner?" Jinki mumbled, the words slipping free before he could catch himself.

"You are," Kibum responded immediately, reaching out to place a hand on Jinki's knee. "The best," he winked, though his expression turned pensive. "You okay? Do you not want me to be his study partner?" he wondered, turning his head to the side slightly.

Immediately, Jinki waved a hand in denial and he shook his head. "No. Go right ahead. I mean we'll have different schedules this year anyway and yeah. And I know the guys will also be busy with their respective courses. It'd be good to have another study partner to help you. Especially if you're in the same class," he babbled, feeling like he was putting one foot after another into his mouth.

Kibum didn't seem immediately convinced, his eyes narrowing as he continued to look at his boyfriend. "Are you sure you're okay?" His brows rose as a thought apparently occurred to him and he asked, "You're not jealous, are you?"

"What? No," Jinki immediately denied with another wave of his hand and a forced laugh that felt anything but genuine. "It's nothing like that," he went on, a fake smile plastered on his face.

"I think you are," Kibum responded with a smile, giving his knee another squeeze.

"I'm not," Jinki denied again, flustered and embarrassed.

"Babe. You've got nothing to worry about," he reassured quickly, leaning close to place a warm kiss on Jinki's lips. "I promise," he added, eyes smiling to match the expression on his lips.

"But-" he started to say, stopping when he didn't know what else to add.

"Hey. We can talk about this later, alright?" Kibum encouraged, taking a quick look around at the various people in the library. "You've got plenty of people to help, it seems. I won't take up more of your time, but seriously. Later," he stated firmly with a finger pointing in Jinki's face.

"Okay," he exhaled, not really ready to give up the contact, but Kibum was already standing up and pulling away. On impulse, he grabbed harder to Kibum's hand so the other man had to stop and look back. His eyebrows rose in silent inquiry as he glanced between their hands and Jinki's face. "Happy studying," he forced himself to say, another plastic smile on his face.

"You too," Kibum responded, squeezing Jinki's hand again before gently breaking the contact.

Jinki didn't miss the way that Kibum took a seat on the other side of the table when he went to sit back down though. Ugh... He hated feeling like this. As subtly as he could, he rubbed at his chest with one hand and then turned to see who else needed some extra help.

They did talk later, but it wasn't as productive as it could have been. Especially when Jinki admitted that maybe he could be a little bit jealous and Kibum responded by saying, "Thank goodness. I was beginning to think you might have actually been perfect."

It was a light and humorous comment, meant to make him smile. And Jinki did in the moment because it was expected, but it brought him no relief. Quite the opposite in fact. If Kibum didn't think he was perfect, did that mean Jinki wasn't good enough?

The rest of their break didn't change much from the previous one. Everyone returned to their respective part-time jobs, though Jinki joined his father when he could to help look for parts. Kibum spent more time at The Stars Aligned, and in Jinki's lap or as close to him as possible whenever he managed to come by to visit. For his part, Jinki took every moment he could get, trying to hold Kibum as if doing so would somehow make it more likely he'd remain interested and stay. Kibum never seemed to mind though, so he figured he was doing something right.

Ercite was trying to track down leads on affordable hulls and hardware for a ship using their connections in administration. They were making some headway but it was still a struggle. Larad asked through the grapevine to see if anything might come to light and he had a couple leads to follow up on, but nothing definite yet. It wasn't like they had to have anything immediately but it wouldn't hurt to have something lined up if possible.

And Henry mostly chatted up the fan club and Psitassi as a result. Part of that could have been because he was also starting to get closer to a female Terran in Kibum's fan club as well, but you never knew with him. Interestingly enough, Psitassi started spending more time around Crawven and going to the heart of the city. She was quiet about what she was doing, but there was a new authority about her that suited the Moladhi quite well.

Despite Jinki's occasional jealous and overly worried moments, things seemed to be going well. Almost too well. Maybe that was why, just before the semester started again, Henry pulled Jinki off to the side to speak with him in private. "Jinki. You are a great guy, and I mean this in the nicest way possible, but you might want to tone it down a little bit when it comes to Kibum."

Jinki blanched and he cringed, the worst thoughts immediately coming to mind as a momentary burst of panic blossomed in his chest. "Why? Has he said something? Did I do something to offend him?" he worried, biting his bottom lip nervously.

"See? This is what I mean," Henry exhaled, tilting his head to the side and just looking at his long-time friend.

"What?" he asked, only partially playing dumb.

"Okay. You're good about it when it's just us, but... you're apparently starting to hover and get clingy. A lot. Especially in public when you guys are together," he explained carefully, trying not to come off too harsh.

Jinki shook his head in confusion and blinked several times. Hovering? Getting clingy? "I-" he opened his mouth to deny but stopped himself. If Henry was saying something now, it was not without cause. But thinking over his time with Kibum, he didn't see any of their encounters as him hovering. It was true that he spent a lot of time watching Kibum when he wasn't otherwise engaged. And they did interact together a lot, but did that count as hovering and being clingy? He grimaced and exhaled, "I'm gonna need a bit more than that."

Henry shared his expression for a second and then shook his head. "There is such a thing as breathing room when you're with another person," he reminded carefully, moving his hands apart to give a visualization of what he meant.

"But Kibum likes close physical contact," he explained, knowing that to be a fact. He'd never heard his boyfriend complain about it either. And Kibum was often the one initiating contact in the first place.

"Yeah," Henry agreed with an exaggerated nod. "That's true. And Lorielle says he thinks the jealousy thing is cute most of the time, but... you're getting close to smothering territory."

"Lorielle?" Jinki asked, one brow raised as the potentially questionable source.

"We can talk about her later," Henry waved the question off, holding up a finger in front of his Jinki's face. "Focus," he clapped, making sure his friend was paying attention. "All I'm saying is maybe don't try so hard. I just don't want to see you hurt again," he hedged, wincing preemptively.

Jinki frowned at the explanation. He couldn't deny he went above and beyond for most of his romantic partners. And most of the time, his friends had little enough to say to him to curtail any of his behaviors, other than the occasional complaint to work less and sleep more and take some bloody time for himself every now and then. But when it came to relationships... "But Kibum hasn't said anything to me," he reasoned, shaking his head uncertainly.

"Of course he hasn't," Henry sighed with a rough laugh. He gestured with both hands at all of Jinki and explained, "You're literally his savior."

"Has he said that?" Jinki asked, confused. He'd never heard that tidbit either.

"Not directly, but in so many words," Henry explained as he looked away to avoid direct eye contact. "I mean, think about how you guys first met and everything that's happened since then," he added with a shrug as if he was pointing out the obvious.

Feeling unsettled and slightly helpless, Jinki sighed and fidgeted in place. "I just... don't want him to think that I'm... not enough. You know?" he admitted, staring at his fingers as he picked at a nail absentmindedly.

"Considering the whole savior thing..." Henry trailed off with one hand floating in front like it was self-explanatory. When Jinki just looked at him pitifully, Henry sighed and reached out to clap him on the shoulder with a firm hand. "Have you tried talking to him about this?" he asked, taking another obvious breath.

"Yes," he nodded without looking up. They had, but only half-heartedly.

Henry's scoff told Jinki the other man knew he wasn't saying the whole truth. "You've talked about this issue specifically?" he narrowed the topic down and waited.

"Sort of?" Jinki hedged with a shrug. Kibum didn't really ask about his previous relationships and when he did, it seemed to be enough when he said that, 'Things just didn't work out between us.' Technically true but certainly not the whole story. He personally didn't like getting into the details.

"Jinki..." he warned as only a best friend could.

"Fine. We talked about how I *might* be getting jealous sometimes," he grumbled before letting his shoulders slump and his head hang low. He hated admitting to that. It felt so petty and childish.

"Ugh." Henry's sigh was heavy as he smoothed his hair. "To be fair, you're not a bad jealous boyfriend from what I've seen and heard." Jinki's glare was not particularly a happy one. "You're not. I just don't want you to accidentally ruin a good thing again," he explained, gesturing with both hands to either side of him.

Jinki chewed on his bottom lip as that 'again' struck him unexpectedly. "Do you think I ruined my previous relationships?"

"No!" he answered too quickly. But when Jinki kept looking at him, Henry wrinkled his nose and admitted, "Maybe a little bit with the last one. Possibly two," he added as a quick aside, waving his hand like it was no big deal. "But if you ask me, I still think they were going to leave anyway. Ungrateful cretins," he grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest in frustration.

Well that was a lot to take in all of a sudden as the first he was hearing about it, as far as he knew. Did Larad and Ercite think the same thing? Taking a deep breath, Jinki looked down and rubbed at his forehead with his fingers, warding off the onset of a headache. "Anything else I should know?" he wondered, a hint of bitterness on his tongue.

"We still think you shouldn't work so hard and take more time for yourself," Henry shot back without hesitation, attempting to inject a spot of levity into the conversation.

"About... Kibum," he admitted with an uncertain sigh.

"You should probably ask him yourself," Henry responded with a quick shrug.

Jinki looked up with a perturbed expression. "You said he wouldn't tell me anyway."

"I said he wouldn't tell you first, yes. That doesn't mean he won't answer if you ask him," he tossed back matter-of-factly. "And if he does that thing he does when he's trying not to answer directly and avoids the subject... well, you have your answer there too."

"Henry," he groaned plaintively.

"What? I'm just trying to keep my best friend happy, healthy, and informed. Kibum's fan club likes you, but they're observant and some of them have maybe been getting a teensy bit worried," he explained with a shrug.

"Worried?" Jinki flinched, a confused expression on his face. "About what?"

Henry's surprised look told Jinki he hadn't actually meant to say that particular word. He forced a laugh and waved both hands in Jinki's direction. "It's nothing. Just the hovering and clingy thing," he said a little too quickly.

Honestly, after the news he'd already gotten, Jinki didn't really want to know. There was a ball of nervous tension in his belly and his chest felt heavy anyway. A breathy exhale escaped him and he glossed over that single word before he looked up at last. "Okay. Thanks for letting me know."

"I would say you're welcome but I don't feel like this is a situation where that applies," Henry responded with an uncertain laugh.

It was enough to prompt a snort from Jinki and he nodded in mute agreement. "Maybe not, but it's still good information to know," he confirmed with a forced smile that faded all too quickly. He got quiet though and it didn't take long to feel Henry's eyes on him. Glancing up, he hesitantly asked, "Do you think Kibum will leave me too?"

Obviously frustrated and annoyed, Henry raised his hand with a scoff, like he was going to smack his friend, and Jinki flinched preemptively. "Go talk to your boyfriend, sir! It's what you do," he reminded the other man emphatically before reaching out to press his fingers against Jinki's forehead, giving him a light nudge with a laugh. "I swear. You're one of the smartest Terrans in our circle, but you can be remarkably dense sometimes."

Jinki laughed self-deprecatingly. "I guess we all have our faults, don't we?"

"Hey," Henry warned, one finger pointing at his friend again. "There's nothing wrong with you. You know that, right? The others didn't work out because they weren't meant to." Jinki nodded in slow agreement. He hesitated before opening his mouth like he was going to say something but Henry cut him off. "As for you and Kibum, that's for *both* of you to decide. Got it?" he demanded, pointedly looking at Jinki until the other man responded.

"Yeah," he answered in a dejected tone.

"Good! Now let's go! I know we've both got work but we have to find some way to enjoy the last few days of our break!" he announced with forced excitement.

They'd probably find something like 4D bowling or maybe go to another holovid show. Maybe they'd even get lost in a holocade to while away the time, but Jinki wasn't really thinking about those possibilities. He was more fixated on this newest concern...

When the semester started, very little changed for their in-person meetings. At least initially anyway. When they got together, Jinki was very conscious about not being too touchy or clingy, constantly second guessing himself. Despite that, Kibum still took plenty of opportunities to sit next to him, in his lap when they were mostly in private company, or hug him from behind. Even so, Jinki made himself stop doing the same as often.

During classes and practices, it was easy enough to not focus on the whole situation as he needed to pay attention to what he was doing. But when Kibum was in mixed company and away from Jinki's side, he had to force himself to pretend he wasn't watching as much as before, even if he did notice most every touch and smile and laugh. Did that mean he was happier with someone else? Kibum could fit himself perfectly in the social sphere, with or without Jinki, and it was becoming painfully obvious he didn't really need Jinki's anymore.

If Kibum looked Jinki's way and he noticed, he still smiled back or waved as appropriate. He tried to make sure Kibum never saw the slightly worried frown on his face or the occasional jealous look. In fact, to the best of his ability, he schooled his expression to polite interest or neutrality or paid more attention to those nearby.

"You okay?" Kibum asked once when they were spending time together in his dorm room after their classes and on an evening he didn't have work.

Slightly distracted with trying to not be 'too much' of something but also worried because Kibum wasn't sitting as close to him as usual, Jinki heard the question but it washed over him without understanding. He'd heard it a few times before and usually just gave a stock reply without much thought. But apparently his body didn't agree to say anything this time.

"Hey," he heard with a nudge to jostle him from his thoughts.

"Huh? Oh," Jinki sighed, glancing over at his boyfriend as the word he knew he should say got stuck on his tongue. He took a breath and looked down with a worried frown.

"Jinki?" the other man asked, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder lightly.

He clenched his hands tighter in his lap and closed his eyes. "Am I not enough?" he wondered aloud as despair pooled in his gut. Flashes of Kibum getting closer to other people immediately crowded his mind, reinforcing his worry. Kibum's smile, his laugh, his happiness when not caused by Jinki...

Confused silence followed for a heartbeat until Kibum asked, "What?"

"I mean..." Jinki breathed, gripping his pants in his hands. "Are you going to leave me too?" Forcing the words out drained him of everything he had and he slumped where he sat, letting the weight of that possibility sink in so he could prepare himself for the worst.

Kibum scoffed in disbelief, a small gasp of sound escaping as he appeared to not know what to say. Jinki didn't see the look he gave him, or the frustrated hand gestures, but he did hear when Kibum blurted, "No!"

It surprised Jinki enough to flinch and look up. "No?" he echoed reactively.

"Of course not," Kibum continued, face contorted with confounded furrows. "Why... why would you even think that?" he asked, apparently hurt by the question.

Jinki looked down again and bit his bottom lip. "Everyone does eventually," he whispered, drawing in a shaky breath after the words escaped.

More silence followed and he could feel the weight of Kibum's gaze pressing down on him. But then Kibum placed his hands on top of Jinki's. "Not me."

"But..." Jinki started to say as he glanced up again.

"I'm not everyone," Kibum promised, grabbing tighter. "And I don't know where this is coming from but I love you, alright. You make me happy," he added, leaning down and forward so he could look up into Jinki's tilted face.

He wanted to believe those words. So much. But he'd heard similar things before... "But you don't need me anymore," he admitted with a small shake of his head. The corners of Kibum's lips turned down. "And you weren't sitting as close as usual so I thought you were trying to pull away," he continued, picking up speed. "And I wouldn't blame you if you did. The others di-"

His words were abruptly interrupted when Kibum literally crawled into his lap and wrapped his arms and legs around him in an all-encompassing hug. "Close enough for you?" he whispered with his mouth pressed against Jinki's shoulder.

"Kibum," Jinki exhaled, letting his hands hover in the air uncertainly before he gave in to the desire to embrace his boyfriend back. "Please don't leave me too," he practically begged, burying his face in Kibum's shoulder as he took a shaky breath.

Strong fingers dug into his back hard. "I'm not going anywhere, love. And you're wrong," he added softly. "I *do* need you."

The words were spoken with such quiet determination that Jinki was hard pressed to doubt them at all. He whimpered lightly in the back of his throat and hugged Kibum tighter, hoping with all his being that that was true.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Of course, hearing something and believing something were two very different things. As the semester went on, Kibum and Jinki continued to spend time together, but the shadow of fear and worry seemed glued to the latter. He was still the supportive boyfriend he'd always been, cheering Kibum on with pretty much everything – performing at The Stars Align, studying for his classes, practicing simulations, and so on, but there were moments that he didn't feel good enough for the other man. Moments that he tried to pull away or distance himself.

“Do you want to hang out this weekend before work?” Kibum asked easily, leaning against Jinki as he often did.

Jinki gave a quick smile but waved a hand with a slight warding gesture. “Actually, I have to help my mom repair that new piece of tech dad found the other day. It’ll probably take most of the day and I don’t want you to get bored,” he explained, not looking at his boyfriend.

Kibum snorted and wrapped his arms around Jinki’s. “I wouldn’t get bored.”

“But what if you just end up watching and not doing anything?” he asked, looking down at the other man, confused as to why he would even consider that possibility.

He shrugged and his expression turned thoughtful. “Then I’ll at least be spending time around you. But anyway! It’s tech stuff. As a captain, I should know about some of it too!” he added, tilting his head to the side as if that answered the question.

Jinki couldn’t help but smile and tease gently, “You’re not a captain yet.”

Undaunted, Kibum shot back, “But I will be!”

“Okay,” he relented with a smile and a relieved sigh. “But don’t blame me if you get bored.”

“I won’t.” Kibum’s smile was bright and Jinki couldn’t tell if he meant that for the blaming part or the bored part. Not that it mattered.

Another time, they ran into a mild hiccup and Jinki felt bad about it, but what could he do. “I already promised my dad I’d help with the scrap run this weekend. He said I could come and it’s a great opportunity to look for parts,” he reasoned, looking down to avoid the disappointment he knew he’d see on Kibum’s face.

Surprisingly, there wasn’t any. “Oh!” Kibum gasped and clapped his hands together in excitement. “That’s alright. I know space is limited on those runs and I really don’t want to go outside anyway,” he added with a visible shudder. “But...” he trailed off, grinning with one finger raised between them. “You can video chat with me and I can help play spotter. Oh! We can also invite Ercite and Larad. They’ve been looking for parts too and might have luck spotting stuff as well.”

“Oh,” Jinki chirped in thoughtful response. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“See?” Kibum smiled, stepping close to wrinkle his nose at the other man. “I mean, if you really don’t want me around...” he added, looking away and shrugging with his hands floating on either side of him.

Jinki quickly waved his hands in disagreement and caught Kibum’s so he could hold them in the space between them. “I do,” he answered with a firm nod, a tiny furrow between his brows. “I just... you always seem so busy now. And so good on your own,” he admitted, letting some of the worries free today.

Kibum adjusted his grip so he could hold Jinki’s hands better. “I am,” he confirmed, quickly adding, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to spend time with you. Dummy,” he laughed, jostling Jinki’s hands just a little.

In typical bashful fashion, Jinki blushed and looked down, a little smile pulling at his lips. He never tired of hearing that. "Me too," he admitted, looking up and breaking free from Kibum's hold so that he could pull the other man into his embrace, wrapping his arms around him and hugging him tight.

And even when it came to other flimsy excuses like with his younger brother, Kibum was not to be deterred. "Daejung has been begging me to game with him recently so rain check?"

Kibum raised a brow and scoffed. "I mean, I could but that little brat owes me a game too."

His response made Jinki laugh outright before he tried to smother his smile. "He did beat you pretty good at the racing game last time."

"Not that bad!" Kibum defended himself, swatting Jinki's arm as he winced and flinched away, a smile still in place. "And besides. I wasn't at my best that day," he continued, crossing his arms and looking away, clearly miffed at the results of the previous game.

Jinki immediately moved close to comfort him, sliding his arms around Kibum's waist and hugging him from behind. He watched the smile magically appear on Kibum's face and gave him a kiss on the cheek in response. "I'm sure. And I know Daejung would love to race against you again." Pausing for a second, he blinked thoughtfully and added, "I do believe he actually got a new flight game recently. Not as good as your simulator, but a fair representation."

"Oh?" Kibum asked, a wicked smile alighting on his lips. "Perfect. I've been practicing that myself so... I should definitely be able to kick his butt," he reasoned enthusiastically.

"I don't know..." Jinki hesitated with a playful tone.

"Traitor," Kibum grumbled, smacking Jinki's arms lightly. "But regardless. I'm coming too!" he stated simply, pointing a finger at Jinki's nose as he looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

Jinki smiled and nodded. "I'm glad. If you're coming, maybe we can invite the others too. If they're not working anyway."

Apparently open to the suggestion, Kibum nodded, a sly smile making its way to his face. "I wouldn't mind kicking Henry's butt too."

"Kibum," Jinki chided with a bemused laugh.

"If he's not too busy with his girlfriend anyway," Kibum added, rolling his eyes and completely ignoring Jinki's mild warning.

"That's right," Jinki confirmed, nodding to himself. "I guess we'll just have to see. Though maybe we should try inviting Psitassi and Crawven..." he trailed off, waiting to see what response he would get. Kibum gave him a raised brow look with unmistakable side-eye. "Or not."

Kibum nodded. "Psitassi maybe. Though she's been really busy lately too though," he added, tapping his chin with his finger, a frown pulling his facial features down. "But Crawven... Nah uh."

His response made Jinki laugh and agreed with a quiet hum, rocking them back and forth in happy contentment. It was hard to not feel wanted when Kibum constantly made reasons to stay close,

even when Jinki himself was trying to pull back. For whatever reason. Invariably though, there were times when it worked or when Kibum's schedule didn't allow for them to meet up.

Sitting in the library, their usual on campus study location, and discussing the weekend plans, Jinki grimaced. "Eh. There's a presentation coming up next week that I have to get ready for. I haven't done as much as I need to and I don't want you to feel ignored," he explained with a sigh.

Kibum scrunched his face up at the announcement too but then shrugged as he leaned on the table, looking at Jinki closely. "I know. And I can be a bit of a distraction sometimes," he admitted with a playful wink.

Jinki opened his mouth to deny that but stopped himself short and allowed a guilty smile to play on his lips. "Maybe just a little," he agreed in a quiet voice.

All of a sudden, Kibum gasped in dramatic fashion and leaned back, one hand splayed on his chest. "You agreed with me?" he lamented, pulling an all too believable pout.

Immediately flustered, Jinki reached out his hand to catch the one that was still on the table. "I didn't mean that in a bad way," he rushed to explain, concern welling up quickly.

"I know, babe," Kibum responded, dropping the act without hesitation and laying his hand atop Jinki's. "I was just messing with you," he assured his boyfriend, making sure he met Jinki's eyes squarely.

Jinki exhaled once in quiet relief and cringed, slightly embarrassed by his overreaction. "Sorry," he apologized, dropping his gaze in abashment.

"Hey," Kibum called, leaning forward and down so he could look up into Jinki's face again.

It felt like he was doing that a lot lately. Jinki was going to have to stop looking down so much if even he was beginning to notice such a pattern.

"I know I can be a distraction. And this is obviously important to you or else you wouldn't be saying anything," he explained, patting Jinki's hand comfortingly.

"Yeah..." Jinki admitted reluctantly. "What will you do then? On the weekend, I mean."

Kibum shrugged and laughed once as he straightened up, though he kept his hands on Jinki's. "Eh. I'll either go pester Passeri and Jackson or maybe I can get Psitassi to tell me a bit about what she's been up to lately," he grinned mischievously. "Passeri taught her well," he added with a snort, shaking his head at the comment.

"Ah. Good luck," he chuckled in response, knowing that could prove to be challenging.

"I know, right?" Kibum snorted, one hand rising up to gesture in the air between them. "Eh. We'll get it sorted, either way," he promised, patting Jinki's hand before smiling bashfully when his boyfriend raised it to his lips to kiss it gently.

"I hope so," he murmured, holding Kibum's gaze evenly.

"We will," was the firm response.

Even with such a firm affirmation though, it was still difficult for Jinki to completely release himself from the worry of pushing Kibum away, even for a valid reason. It did help immensely when he sat down to focus on his presentation, but it still felt odd that Kibum wasn't there and that he hadn't tried to convince Jinki to let him come. He voiced his concerns to his friends when they met in the evening on the same weekend, Kibum's absence obvious but expected as he had to work.

"I really don't know what you're worried about. I know you talked to Kibum, right?" Henry asked as they lounged around the table at the Varium themed restaurant they liked to visit from time to time. It had a Terran owner but she was married to a Varium and she collected memorabilia featuring various famous Varium from entertainment, news, and sports. The food was pretty good too: specially concocted from the food processors or hand prepared upon request.

Jinki paused for a moment before he murmured, "Yeah."

"I'm confused," Larad admitted after a momentary hesitation. He gestured at Jinki and then at the spot Kibum would normally be. "Did I miss the part where you two had a fight and that's why I don't know what the problem is?" he asked, glancing down at the shorter Terran and then looking over at Ercite as if they might have the answers.

"No," Jinki answered quickly, waving both hands at everyone around the table. "Kibum and I are fine. I think," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Ugh..." Henry groaned, smacking his face with his palm.

Ercite knocked on the table to make sure they had Jinki's attention. "You're talking. You've had a relationship like this before. And everything seems acceptable. What exactly is the issue here?" they wondered, trying to narrow it down so that they and everyone else could understand.

Jinki floundered for a second and then gestured vaguely in front of him. "That," he stated with a firm voice. "All of that."

Larad chuckled at the explanation while Henry sighed and shook his head. Ercite held their chin in their hand and mused quietly before speaking. "So you're saying that things are too good and you're worried something bad will happen because that's how it's always been?"

For a second, Jinki raised his hand and opened his mouth like he was going to counter their statement, but then he deflated with a nod. "Pretty much. Yeah."

"I keep telling him he shouldn't worry so much," Henry grumbled, shaking his hand in Jinki's direction in frustration. "He always does this to himself. You do," he added when Jinki opened his mouth to object.

"Why do Terrans make things so complicated?" Larad wondered, tilting his head to the side and tapping his cheek.

"Ugh..." Jinki groaned, sliding his hands on the table so he could lay his forehead down instead. "This is the longest relationship I've had and it's... Almighty Key," he explained with a heavy exhale, going limp so that he looked like a drunken fool on his chair.

"Ah," Ercite hummed in understanding, looking over at Henry for a moment.

"What?" he asked when he realized the Dawbn was looking at him.

"Oh nothing," they waved off with a dismissive gesture.

"Seriously. What?" he asked again, looking around the table in confusion.

"Well, you happen to be dating Lorielle at the moment," Larad offered, with a glance down at Ercite.

"And she's been doing a lot of gossiping in the fan club lately," Ercite added, looking back up at the Varium.

"And he's been all keyed up since right around when you two got together," he went on, pointing at Jinki and looking at Henry with a pensive expression on his too sharp face.

"So we thought you might have mentioned something that could potentially set him off," Ercite murmured, one hand gesturing at Jinki specifically as if to prove a point.

Apparently oblivious to the conversation, he shifted his head to rest his chin on the table and whined, "He didn't even try to come bother me when I was preparing for the presentation tomorrow. What if this time it means- Ow!" he yelped when Larad smacked him on the back, the sound loud but the pain only briefly sharp. "What was that for?" he demanded, sitting up with an affronted look on his face.

"Stop," the Varium commanded with a stern look and a finger in Jinki's face.

"Stop what?" he grumbled, stuffing his hands in his lap and pouting.

"Inviting trouble."

"I'm not trying to," Jinki sighed, smacking his head with both fists lightly.

Ercite quirked their mouth to the side and then looked at Henry again. "What did you say to him?"

"What?" he exclaimed in surprise, leaning back from Larad and Ercite's attention. "I was just trying to give him some helpful advice so this wouldn't happen again!"

"Clearly," Larad snorted dryly.

"Hey. At the time, it was looking like there could have been some serious responses," Henry defended himself, gesturing vaguely towards the air again. "I mean, I don't know for sure, because I'm not officially in the fan club exactly, but Lorielle is and she was telling me," he started to say, babbling as his tongue got away from him, "that Kibum hadn't been picking up more opportunities and had been declining opportunities to go out because of Jinki."

"What?!" Jinki gasped, clearly homing in on the statement and despairing in the same instance.

"No, no, no, no, no, no," Henry quickly responded, frantically waving his hands at Jinki. "That was then. Obviously you guys have been doing fine. Kibum's happy, isn't he?" he asked, reaching out to place a hand on his friend's shoulder comfortingly.

"I don't know..." Jinki groaned, sliding to lay out on the table again, even more conflicted now.

"Well that didn't help, Mr. Expert on Jinki's relationship," Ercite commented, head tilting to the side with a perturbed look on their face.

"Hey! Terran relationships are weird. I would know," he grumbled, gently shaking Jinki as if that would rouse him from his stupor. "And I mean, you guys have been partners for forever. What advice would you give him?" he asked reactively, free hand waving between the two and Jinki.

The pair huffed simultaneously and then Larad answered, "Not whatever you told him the first time around."

Henry scoffed with a roll of his eyes. "That's easy for you to say."

"Okay, okay," Ercite interjected, waving their hands at both of them to get the two to quiet down. "Jinki!" they called, loud enough to surprise him.

"Huh?" he mumbled, sitting up with a heavy sigh. He'd been listening in, of course, and he knew he was being dumb, but it was hard to get around it sometimes.

"Has Kibum given you any reason to doubt he's happy?"

Jinki had to think about that one really hard. *Had* Kibum given him an actual reason or was everything literally in his head. After careful deliberation, he shook his head. "No."

"Are you happy with Kibum?"

"Yes!" No thinking was necessary for that question.

"Do you want to stay together with Kibum?"

He hesitated slightly and answered, "If he'll have me."

"No," Ercite chided like a disappointed parent. "Do *you* want to stay together with him?"

"Yes." The answer came out so quiet. It was surprisingly hard to voice his own desire.

"Then you better hold onto that boy, Jinki," Ercite told him firmly, literally pointing their finger at him.

"That's what I told him," Henry added, leaning back when Ercite raised a craggy brow in his direction.

"And don't listen to any advice he gives you while he's still dating Loriele," they tacked on with an amused snort.

"Hey!" he grumbled in immediate offense.

"Jinki," Larad called, reaching over to clap the Terran on the shoulder. For a second, Jinki thought he was about to be scolded or something. "Just remember. What the fan club thinks doesn't matter. Galaxies, what we think doesn't matter. Not really," he went on, chuckling dryly with the second addition. "But we see that you're happy when you're with Kibum. He's happy when he's with you. And we want you both to be happy. End of story."

"But-" Jinki tried to say, almost like it was a reaction of some kind. He caught himself even as Larad interrupted.

"No buts," the Varium scolded, pointing his other finger at him.

"Besides, we're all gonna be a crew together, aren't we?" Ercite asked, a big grin on their face as they looked directly at Jinki then.

"I'm not!" Henry volunteered with a raised hand.

"You're considered an honorary crew member," Larad corrected, waving a hand at him dismissively.

"Ah. I can work with that," he nodded in agreement. "As long as I'm not *on* the ship."

"Speaking of ships," Ercite hummed. "We don't have one yet, but we're getting there. And if we want to make this work, we've gotta have our captain and first mate in good condition," they winked quickly, looking around the group again.

"I feel like this part needs Kibum," Henry admitted as he looked at the spot where said person would normally be.

All eyes turned to follow his gaze and then they agreed simultaneously, "Yeah," with nodding heads. It struck Jinki that they couldn't have done that better if they'd staged it and he started laughing.

"What?" Larad wondered, clearly amused.

It took Jinki a second to compose himself enough to answer, reluctant to give up the feeling because it felt so good to laugh. "Nothing," he explained, beaming at the small group of people around him. "I'm just glad you're my friends," he exhaled happily, some of the weight of his worries lifting at last.

"Of course!" Henry snorted, leaning over to sling his arm over Jinki's shoulders and jostle him good-naturedly.

"So are we," Larad confirmed, gesturing between himself and Ercite.

The Dawbn was right too. Far more straightforward than a typical Terran but they'd spent generations living amongst them and could often give good advice when necessary. Jinki's heart was lighter in the morning when he woke up to find a picture message from Kibum, Passeri, and Jackson. They were all making silly faces, their makeup slightly worn and the lighting a bit poor. The caption under the picture read, 'We hope you prepared for your presentation well. Also, go to bed early!' A second message after that was a simple, *Love you, Jinki! Sleep well and see you tomorrow!*

Jinki smiled harder and rubbed sleep from his eyes enough to type back, *Love you too. Did you have a good night at work?*

He didn't expect to get an immediate response and he didn't. Kibum didn't have class until a bit later and Jinki was up earlier than usual so that he could finish doing some last-minute prep for his presentation in his interspecies diplomacy class. Kibum wasn't the only one that would need to have de-escalation skills on a ship...

Before he left the house, he got a bite from the kitchen. His mom and siblings waved him off, Daejung still half asleep at the table as he chewed by rote. He'd obviously been up too late gaming again. Jinki would probably have to scold him later, or at least try to convince him to go to bed earlier if he could, but his thoughts were focused on the day. As intended, he got to class early to prepare and set his mind to the task for that morning.

Imagine his surprise when he got up to give his presentation and noticed... Kibum sitting in the back of the lecture hall. Near the door obviously, and looking like he didn't get nearly enough sleep, but smiling brightly when he saw Jinki looking at him. He gave a quick wave and then pointed at the screen as if to remind him he had a presentation to give.

Embarrassed, Jinki laughed once and bowed towards the rest of the class as he frantically tried to collect his thoughts. Kibum's presence threw him off but in a good way. He knew he was ready for his presentation but at that point, it didn't even matter to him if he did particularly well or not. When the class was finished, he rushed up the stairs to get to Kibum before he could duck out.

"You surprised me, love. What are you doing here?" he asked, squeezing him tight with a big hug and then rocking him side to side.

Kibum chuckled and hugged him back first. "I can't just watch my boyfriend give a presentation?" he asked, poking Jinki in the side playfully.

He jerked in response and yelped before laughing. "Of course you can, but you worked last night. I know you didn't get your usual amount of sleep."

"I'll be fine," Kibum promised, laughing in embarrassment as he almost immediately had to stifle a yawn. "Besides. You wouldn't let me stick around when you were preparing so I figured this was the least I could do," he explained, leaning close as they wandered out of the room side by side.

"Thank you," Jinki sighed with real gratitude, turning his head just enough to kiss the side of Kibum's.

"You're welcome," Kibum answered, reaching across to pat Jinki's abdomen lightly.

Jinki's conversation with his friends last night came back to him and his arm tightened around Kibum just a bit. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

Kibum shook his head with a small sound in the back of his throat. "I'm not really hungry either. Still waking up I think," he added with a laugh.

"Probably. But you should still eat something. Come on. I'll get you mela bread," he grinned, completely unrepentant when Kibum glared at him from the corner of his eye.

"You're terrible! I'm so gonna get fat if you keep feeding me that," he laughed, not entirely upset with the idea of eating it again.

"I'll still love you, even if you get fat," he responded sincerely. "Not that I think that's possible but still."

"Promise?" Kibum asked, giving him a curious sidelong look.

“Promise,” Jinki nodded once without hesitation.

“Pinky swear.” Kibum held up his pinky expectantly. With a grin, Jinki did just that, his pinky finger slightly awkward since he had to use his left hand. “Now come on!” Kibum urged, sliding free from under Jinki’s arm but holding onto his hand so he could drag him along. “You owe me a mela bread!”

Jinki allowed himself to be pulled along happily. “Yes, sir!” he agreed, watching Kibum’s exuberant face before he turned to watch where he was going. Then his gaze drifted to their joined hands and his smile widened as Ercite’s comment ran through his head: ‘You better hold onto that boy, Jinki.’ His hand tightened slightly and he picked up speed to catch up to Kibum. That at least was advice he could get behind.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Fortunately for Jinki, he came to terms with his insecurity just enough in time to really get ready for their end of semester exams. He was generally ready like always, but that was also a time in which he was busier than usual helping other students – and friends – prepare for their upcoming tests too. He would have said family but Hajoon had a part-time tutor who was helping her to make sure she’d be up to snuff for officially transferring to Niichi after she graduated next semester.

While that was a load off Jinki’s mind, albeit a reluctant one, Henry was his latest concern. Ercite and Larad were fine, as usual, and Kibum had been staying on top of things for the most part. Jinki wanted to help Kibum more but it wasn’t like he could do anything to assist him with his flight final anyway. And everything else was in the more or less acceptable range of preparedness for Kibum’s preferences. But as for Jinki’s best friend... he’d gotten too distracted during the semester with his girlfriend and his grades were looking like they might suffer for it.

Thrown back into the craziness of exam season, Jinki had little enough time to worry about anything else other than himself, his panicking best friend, and all the younger students who practically begged him for assistance, including Loriele, ironically enough. Not that she and Henry could study in the same space at the same time. They were both hopeless in that... But after many long days and even longer nights, all his efforts seemed to pay off.

“Oh! You’re the best, Jinki!” Henry cheered when he finally got his results. He had one barely passing grade just above the sixty percent mark but the rest were in comfortably safe zones for him.

When he spoke to Ercite, they were excited to announce, “I will be interning next semester at the shipyard here.”

“What?!” the group gasped in proud surprise.

“What will you be doing there?” Jinki asked, all smiles and happy energy.

Ercite shrugged once. “I’m not entirely sure. Probably paperwork. And lots of it. Knowing you Terrans,” they teased with a noticeable eye roll. “But I’ve been promised opportunities to work on a ship from time to time to get firsthand experience. If you had told them you were going to be crewing a

freelance ship in the future, they might have offered a similar position to you too,” they reminded Larad, a finger pointing at the tall male beside them.

Larad simply shrugged and grabbed their whole hand in his lightly. “Everyone knows you’re smarter than I am, so it only makes sense I take a few more courses before I graduate. I’ll apply for the interim internship program since we’ll have to wait for Kibum anyway,” he added, glancing at the Terran with a bemused smile.

“I can’t help it I’m younger than you guys,” he scoffed, hands gesturing fluidly in the space around him.

“How’d you make out, love?” Jinki asked to help distract from the current discussion, leaning close enough to nudge Kibum’s shoulder with his.

Kibum grinned and leaned back, immediately relaxing against his boyfriend. “I finally beat that snobby Toran in flight results.” Toran was a well-connected Varium who had also happened to be Kibum’s nemesis in all their flight classes thus far.

“Congrats!” “Congratulations!” “Well done!”

Kibum flinched when the group cheered him on unexpectedly. Then he laughed and nodded in agreement. “He may have money, but he got lazy in the middle of the semester. I didn’t,” he preened proudly, placing one hand on his chest.

“Does that mean you finally beat Floris?” Ercite asked, looking up at him curiously.

“Ugh...” Kibum groaned with a roll of his eyes. “No. I can’t even get mad at her either,” he grumbled with a heavy sigh. “Her family has money but she refuses to use it. She’s just... a damn good pilot,” he admitted begrudgingly.

Jinki knew that Floris was Kibum’s competition. Unlike Toran, they never butted heads as antagonistic rivals, but they were in a deadlocked competition based on skill... A smaller than average Moladhi with azure and emerald plumage, she would have been striking anywhere. It threw a lot of people off when she proved how good she was at flying. “Well, at least it’s a Moladhi that’s your rival. I mean, I know she can’t fly but I don’t doubt that’s something in their blood.”

“Oh. Fair point,” Ercite nodded in agreement as Kibum remained silent, though he sighed again.

“Okay! So we know that we all did pretty well this semester. What are we doing to celebrate?” Henry demanded as he shoved himself into the middle of the group, boisterous energy claiming their attention again.

“We could have a party,” Kibum suggested with a shrug, apparently content to simply keep leaning against Jinki in the meantime.

“Eh. That’s a bit much,” Henry waved off. “I mean, after we graduate, obviously,” he added quickly when he saw Kibum’s mild glare. The younger man’s expression softened in immediate understanding and Henry snorted. “We did bowling last semester. Oh! We could try a grav jumping competition,” he grinned mischievously as he looked around the group. “We might even be able to get Hajoon in on it before she leaves,” he tacked on with a glance at Jinki.

He inhaled quickly and then waved his hands in front of him. "It's fine. I know we don't all favor grav jumping and we'll definitely do something as a family before she goes, so it's okay," he assured them all with a glance down at Kibum and Ercite in particular. His boyfriend had improved a fair bit but he was not a strong player by any means, and Ercite could play but didn't prefer to since it was awkward for someone of their size and composition.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind trying that again," the Dawbn surprised him by saying.

"Oh?" Larad was everyone's response as he looked down at Ercite.

They shrugged nonchalantly and laughed. "When else am I going to get a chance to try in good company?"

"Oh! If we're doing that, can I invite Passeri and Jackson again?" Kibum asked, looking around the group hopefully. From what Jinki knew, they'd really enjoyed the experience, even if they hadn't exactly played in the spirit of grav jumping in the end.

"If we can invite Psitassi. And Crawven," Ercite negotiated when the group looked around at each other. Kibum wrinkled his nose at the response. "You said yourself you'd consider him as a weapons and combat master. Especially after that class about the Yeunamba," they reminded him promptly.

Kibum wrinkled his nose further and then sighed, "Fine! It doesn't mean I've agreed yet, though!" he added quickly, looking at Jinki as if he expected his boyfriend to back him up.

"We can still talk about it later," Jinki nodded diplomatically. "But it wouldn't hurt to see what else he can do outside of bowling," he explained gently. He had a bit of a grudge against the Moladhi himself, due to how he'd treated Kibum previously, but he had to admit he was a deft hand at combat and that was not something to be sneezed at when you were far from home.

"If we're talking about invitations, I'm bringing Lorielle!" Henry chimed in confidently, a pleased grin on his face.

"That's not enough for a full team though. Should we invite anyone else?" Larad wondered, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

"Did you want to invite Mihael?" Jinki asked, nudging Kibum specifically.

He thought about it for a second and then nodded. "We could. I don't know that we're *friends* friends, but he's not bad," he promised with a quick smile. "And you guys? Anyone from the fan club or the administration office?" he wondered, gesturing at Ercite.

They waved the thought away quickly. "No thank you. I see them enough at work."

Larad chuckled and shook his head. "What about those bendy ones from The Stars Align?" he asked, leveling his gaze at Kibum. "I would imagine they might have a natural inclination towards grav jumping."

"Alexander and Senna?" Kibum clarified. When Larad nodded, he shrugged. "I can ask."

"If we really need players, I can probably ask Hajoon to invite some of her teammates," Jinki reminded the group.

"No!" came the unified response followed by amused laughter. "Hajoon is bad enough," Henry snorted. "We don't need the rest of her team wiping the floor with us."

There was that...

Eventually, they were able to get things sorted and opted to ask a couple other well-known people from their secondary circles to join in the fun. Grav jumping could be played with two people but having a full team was always best. And when it was as diverse as their group was... it was bound to be interesting.

And in the end, it was. Everyone survived with only mild bruises and slightly tarnished pride, though there had been a couple close calls. Varium of Larad's size could easily get carried away and accidentally hurt someone. Fortunately, the two similarly sized Varium spent most of their time squaring off for that reason, though Larad got a little protective when a Terran got too close to Ercite at one point. It could have been a nasty hit, but Jinki and Hajoon swooped in to divert the Terran and 'rescue' Ercite, thus giving Larad space to calm down.

Not that it was entirely a fair game overall. Even without inviting her teammates, Hajoon definitely carried the game on her side, but at least she went easy on them. And when it was over, they all migrated to a restaurant in the city center near The Stars Aligned so the performers would be able to get ready for their shift if they needed.

It was a prime opportunity to catch up on everything and come down from their high. After a heart-to-heart conversation which Psitassi mediated, Kibum finally agreed to accept Crawven as the fifth member of his crew. Eventually anyway. They still had a ways to go but that was one less thing to worry about. Though neither Kibum nor Jinki missed the look Crawven shared with Psitassi when their discussion was through. Or the one that Psitassi shared with Passeri. Definitely more going on there than they were privy to.

Psitassi was briefly distracted by the holo-news screen at one point. Something about a new energy source that was recently being utilized in some of the outer worlds and a burgeoning trade deal between two of the galactic powerhouses, but then someone complained and the channel was turned. Psitassi's frown was subtle but Jinki noticed it. Only because he was watching her. And when she turned to focus on the group again, she caught Jinki looking at her and flashed him a quick smile, completely at ease. Wow. She was as good as Kibum at that...

Passeri and Jackson did talk a little shop while they were there with Kibum, as well as the part-timers. They were probably going to be stepping down as the mainliners in the next year or two. "We're not retiring. Don't worry," Passeri purred as she reassured Kibum, reaching over to caress his cheek with her fingertips.

"We're just giving you, and you two," Jackson added, gesturing at Kibum first and then at Alexander and Senna, "an opportunity to shine and for Garum to find more talent if he wants to."

"We've got a nice little nest egg between the two of us," the Moladhi explained with a quick shrug, her tone carefully neutral. "But you," she continued, pointing her finger at Kibum, "will need to purchase a ship in the future. That requires money," she winked, snuggling closer to Jackson happily.

"Don't let this one fool you," Psitassi giggled as she leaned close with a twinkle in her eye. "She's besotted with her Terran and maybe..." she started to trail off before Passeri interrupted her.

"Psitassi!"

With a goofy grin on his face, Jackson chimed in, "I wouldn't mind telling them."

Jinki was rather lost but he caught Kibum's excited gasp and focused on his boyfriend to see what thought had occurred to him. "Are you planning on nesting soon?" Kibum asked excitedly, childishly giddy at the idea.

Jackson nodded with an even wider grin while Passeri looked down at him with a raised brow. "Maybe," she conceded, a rising lilt to her voice.

"We are," Jackson whispered in an exaggerated fashion.

"Oh! Congratulations then!" Loriele chimed in as she looped her arms around Henry's and beamed at the news. Henry didn't seem to know how to react. "Can I ask? I mean, I don't want to offend, but are you planning on adopting? Genetic mod? Oh... I'm sorry," she apologized quickly when the words seemed to flow too freely from her lips.

Passeri at least seemed inclined to take pity on her. "We haven't decided yet. Time will tell," she explained simply, reaching down to run the backs of her fingers against Jackson's cheek. He grabbed her hand in his and just smiled at her adoringly.

The display made Jinki's heart full and he looked at his boyfriend with a similarly adoring expression. Wordlessly, he reached his arms around Kibum's waist and pulled him into his lap so he could hug him from behind with a pleased grin. He felt Kibum's hands settle on top of his and saw the smile playing on his lips when he turned his head to the side to look at him over his shoulder. Yep. All was right in Jinki's world.

That event was certainly the highlight of their semester break before they had to go back for the next one. It was Jinki's last, along with Henry, Ercite, and Larad. Kibum still had one more year to go after that but the second semester of junior year could still be challenging. Jinki needed to make sure his final semester counted so he made sure to take a couple classes that would shore up any weak areas he had, which definitely included an intermediate self-defense course. He wasn't planning on being the fighting expert Crawven would be, but having some know-how was not a bad idea.

Throughout the semester, the seniors made efforts to finalize their year and set themselves on track to have a temporary job immediately out of university since they would have to wait for Kibum to graduate later. Ercite worked hard at their internship with the goal of getting hired on after the fact and Larad made inquiries into the emergency medical response team that handled the heavy lifting in emergency situations in the city. Obviously, nano-tech could work wonders but sometimes physical

hands were needed for larger tasks and transportation purposes. To that end, Varium, especially those who were larger than the average Terran, were especially welcome.

Jinki was aiming to work further with his father or his mother, if at all possible. His father would be the better option for salvage purposes but his mother would allow for more practice with repairs and familiarity with tech in general. As luck would have it, he didn't really have much choice. His mom couldn't pull enough strings to get him into a city job and it was much easier lining something up to work the shift with his dad.

Crawven started joining more of their gatherings together as well and, though he wasn't the best fit, he actually wasn't half bad when you started to get to know him. Large for a Moladhi, he could also be surprisingly fast and it wasn't uncommon for him to try and corner Larad into sparring sessions. The Varium was the only one who could keep up with him anyway when it came to speed and strength combined. After graduation, he would be working in the general orbit of Psitassi.

"We're nothing more than friends. I promise," he explained when they finally asked him about it, since he had been spending far more time in her company. "Not like I'd be able to get all that close to someone of her stature anyway," he admitted with a resigned shrug. "But she did help me find a job as part of the security detail for one of the buildings her father owns in the city center. Nothing too crazy. Though they will give me additional training with weapons and self-defense," he grinned, thoroughly proud of himself.

"Her father owns a building in the city center?" Jinki asked in honest surprise.

Kibum blinked and turned to look at him. "I didn't tell you that? Oops," he added, covering his mouth with one hand in embarrassment.

"I mean, I knew she came from big money but..." he trailed off, blinking at the realization. He hadn't realized they had enough to buy literal buildings in the city. Then again... that should have been an easy leap since he recalled they had been in discussions to help found an eighth dome on the planet some time ago.

"Yeah. Politician and company president's youngest daughter," Crawven snorted, shaking his head wistfully. "And to think she had a crush on me at one point."

"I remember," Kibum grumbled with a narrowed gaze at the taller male.

"Yeah, yeah. Water under the bridge, alright?" the Moladhi snorted, waving his hand dismissively at Kibum.

"Eh?" he nearly choked in response and Jinki had to reach a calming hand to comfort him.

"That was then. This is now," he reminded his boyfriend soothingly.

"See?" Crawven gestured towards Jinki as if that was the answer he wished to give.

"Not helping."

Jinki waved at Crawven to get him moving and then turned his attention to Kibum himself. He could still be a little prickly sometimes. To be fair, so could he when it came to Kibum in turn, but by and large, they were figuring things out.

Of course they had their ups and downs and the occasional petty squabble. Jinki had to fight with himself to not make it worse than it probably was when such things did happen. His inclination to believe it was the beginning of the end was still pretty strong. But Kibum often hunted him down after the fact if he delayed too long. And the one time he didn't... well. It was safe to say Jinki would not be making that mistake again in the future.

He could still vividly recall the condemnation he'd received after one of their worst conflicts – stress fueled and petty as they sometimes were - in which he'd pretty much fled to hide with guilt carving him open. 'Don't you *ever* pull away or disappear on me like that again. And if you do, you better have a *damn* good reason for it. You of all people know what my father did. What happened with my mother.' Really, once was all it took. Most of the time, he put all the punishment on himself, but he'd forgotten how pulling back might affect Kibum. Never again.

And so they slogged their way forward, preparing as best they could for the eventual future. Jinki's storage room at home was full of salvaged tech for the ship. Of course his mother wasn't a ship engineer so the stuff had mostly only been made operable again and it would need an official inspection to confirm if it could be used instead of buying a new one, but it was a start. Ercite and Larad were still tracking down leads and attempting to find avenues of funding for the hull and installation of parts.

They'd come to the conclusion that none of them were ever going to have enough money to buy a ship outright, but they could sign on to purchase one over time as long as they were able to make regular payments. The problem there was the contract. Ercite was none too keen on most of the terms and conditions that were laid out in the offers they did receive. Repayment plans were ridiculous or the contract itself was essentially a form of indentured servitude for 'x' amount of time. They could try to sign on as a freelancer with one of the established companies but that had its own pros and cons. Most notably, they would have a decided lack of freedom of choice. Whatever company they signed on with would come first, so if they were already on a run and the company wanted something, they'd be contractually obligated to drop everything and switch gears. It would be a mess.

By the time graduation rolled around for the seniors, they still weren't ready for the next steps. Their graduation celebration was energetic, but there was a strange pall that hung over everything. For Jinki especially, it was a time of change. Hajoon would officially be leaving for Niichi shortly after the end of her semester. She was going to play on the University team and could potentially be a starter if she performed well over the break.

Doyun started focusing more on academics while Siwoo threw herself into low grav gymnastics with an almost frightening intensity. Daejung retreated further into his games but started making more holo friends and entering the odd competition. Jinki wasn't sure he'd ever become super successful, but he encouraged him all the same.

And he himself had to go to work. Officially. At a full-time job, which meant he wouldn't have as much time to spend with Kibum or help him with his last year of classes. Furthermore, Larad, Ercite, and Crawven were in the same boat. Work. Save money. Negotiate for parts and try to find an acceptable contract for a ship that wouldn't put them in debt for life or demand ridiculous compensation if anything happened to the ship.

Jinki spent as much time as he could with Kibum – in his senior dorm room, at Jinki’s house, at The Stars Aligned – but his schedule was otherwise full. Despite the fact that he was well aware of his parents’ schedules, he hadn’t realized being an actual working adult could be so time consuming. Especially with the hurdles they were facing. They didn’t have the backing of an official entity and, while freelancing gave them the opportunity for far more freedom, it also presented unique challenges. Even when they finally got off the ground, their pickings for jobs would probably be slim, low payoff, high risk, or some combination of all of the above.

Fortunately, Kibum managed to worm his way into a shipping crew for piloting purposes for his internship in his final semester. And that was great for getting experience and starting to make connections with the right kinds of people. But even when he graduated, they were no closer to making their dream a living reality. Frustration and the onset of despair were a real thing they had to ward off frequently.

After Kibum’s graduation ceremony and their group celebration, when they were finally alone again in the privacy of Jinki’s room - since Kibum was no longer living on campus - Jinki hugged his boyfriend close and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Kibum leaned harder into Jinki’s embrace and huffed audibly. “Nothing really,” he mumbled, his forlorn body language betraying the words easily.

Jinki had to stifle a chuckle. “That was very convincing.” With how dry his tone was, there was no doubt he was being gently sarcastic.

“Ugh,” Kibum groaned, quite likely rolling his eyes. Jinki couldn’t see since he wasn’t looking up but he knew him well enough to figure that much at least. “I just...” Kibum started to say, pausing to take a breath and start again. “I just thought we would have gotten things figured out by now,” he explained uncertainly, a hint of doubt creeping into his tone.

“Oh, love,” Jinki soothed, tightening his arms and patting his boyfriend on the back. “We knew this was going to be a challenge.”

Kibum worked himself free to so he could shift to look at Jinki directly. “I know that!” he grumbled, hands resting on Jinki’s thighs. “It just... feels like I failed,” he sighed, looking up in frustration. “I have a crew but no ship and no commercial license yet. And no guarantee our ship will be seen anytime soon.”

“Hey,” Jinki called, reaching out to grab Kibum’s face to make him look at him. “The commercial license is an easy fix, we’ve got a ton of parts to barter with for a ship, and however long it takes us now is time we can spend to prepare and make ourselves more marketable.” Kibum wrinkled his nose at that but didn’t argue, for which Jinki was grateful. He’d been kind of worried about this moment: when not everything had aligned in the timeframe in which Kibum had envisioned it.

“But what if-”

“Nope!” Jinki interrupted immediately, shifting his hand to place it over Kibum’s mouth, silencing him.

“But-” Kibum tried again, pulling the hand away before Jinki used his other one instead.

"No buts!" Jinki laughed, shaking his head.

"Seriously, Jinki!" Kibum grumbled when he freed his mouth again. "What if-"

This time, Jinki pulled on Kibum's hands to draw them both together and silenced him with his lips, smiling when he finally felt Kibum relax just a little as he leaned into the kiss. He freed his hands to cup Kibum's face in both hands again. "I'm serious too," he whispered, pulling back just enough to look his boyfriend in the eyes. "We're on the right track, love. Now we just have to make it happen," he assured him, stroking smooth cheeks with his thumbs.

"Ugh. Why is it so hard?" Kibum grumbled, expression turning bemusedly thoughtful while he snorted from the look on Jinki's face.

No, he was not just about to comment with a 'That's what he said,' joke... Clearing his throat, Jinki smiled. "I didn't know I was dating a captain that was willing to give up so easily," he teased, the mild taunt quite intentional.

Kibum's expression shifted from bemusement to challenging. One brow rose while a sly smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth. "Oh, you want to see what a captain can do, do you?" he asked archly. "Well allow me to show you," he added, the unspoken 'in more ways than one' obvious as Kibum climbed into Jinki's lap and pushed him back so he could proceed to show him exactly what he meant.

Chapter Twenty-Eight:

So maybe things hadn't worked out the way Kibum had hoped immediately after he graduated. As Jinki reminded him, that didn't mean it was the end of the world. It just meant he had a fair bit more work to do in the meantime. At least he could still work at The Stars Aligned. His flight job at the university had only lasted the one semester and they hadn't been willing to hire him on after since he was going freelance instead of signing on with one of the associated shipping companies.

It made sense but it was still unfortunate to him. At least he got to spend more time with Passeri and Jackson. Though both of them were still very much in the process of stepping out of the limelight. Senna and Alexander had been filling in for more shows and there were a couple new faces on deck that Kibum only worked with from time to time. Jinki came by when he could, but their work schedules weren't friendly for meeting purposes. Though that did change a bit when they moved in together.

In order to save money after he graduated, Kibum returned to his apartment on the outskirts of town as opposed to renting one in the city. Jinki objected to the move initially, but it became acceptable when Kibum asked him if he wanted to live with him. Personally, he didn't want to stay in that place by himself. He was better, but that didn't mean the memories were gone. And Jinki knew that, which was probably part of the reason why he accepted. It didn't hurt that he was likely getting a bit old to be still living with his parents... They hadn't said anything but there was a feeling sometimes.

All in all, it was a good thing. Sure, the commute was longer, but for both Jinki and Kibum, it was cheaper. Mostly. They still had to pay for energy and communal building maintenance costs, but it

beat paying rent. And there was Sunny as well. She finally stopped calling Kibum Mr. Kim, much to his relief. In addition, she provided entertaining banter from the coms unit when only one person was there. And with Jinki living in the same space, the apartment finally felt like a home again, which was something Kibum hadn't even considered possible not that long ago. If he had to live there, it was preferable to fill it with new and positive memories, at the very least.

Life could have been worse, all things considered. Kibum had a place to stay, a person he loved and enjoyed spending time with, friends to rely on, and a job that supported him. That didn't make the slow trek towards making his dream come true any less arduous though.

During the daytime hours when he wasn't working, and especially when Jinki was gone, he spent many hours in the city center, visiting the Hub and checking in with Crawven who had a better view of the comings and goings of anyone of importance. Of course they could just check on their personal coms for ship parts and leasing or selling companies, but it was usually best to go in person and the Hub was the best place for such information and reconnaissance. He'd learned that much at least from his own internship. And because of it, he was at least a known entity with connections to Ercite and... if he was really feeling desperate, Psitassi. That latter one he was careful about who he mentioned that to though. Friends in higher places also meant foes of a similar caliber...

For a full year and a half, nothing much changed in their group beyond saving up funds, gaining expertise, and searching for a way to make some magic happen. Kibum did have to take a couple extra steps especially so he could get his Captain and commercial license. Frustratingly, he needed at least two backers to vouch for him in order to complete that process. The only person he could really go to for it, considering he didn't have parents anymore and he had no other person that could vouch for his character from a period of five years or more – was his foster father, Eric. Surprisingly, the Varium was quite willing to provide his support. He didn't even ask that many questions. The second person he leaned on was Garum who was more than happy to be a character reference.

"Do I need to really make you glow?" he asked, a frighteningly large smile on his face.

Kibum waved his hand in mild negation and laughed. "No. Just... tell it like it is. Given my... performer's profession, a glow up is not likely to help from a potential Captain's perspective," he admitted, rubbing the back of his head in amusement.

"Ah well. I can do facts," Garum confirmed with a disappointed shrug. "I'll let you know when it's ready."

With their backing, Kibum successfully obtained his captain and commercial licenses, not that they guaranteed him any work, especially since he was lacking a ship; Larad completed his medical certification so he could officially care for Varium and other species effectively – a boon for their crew; and Jinki upped his engineering prowess by specializing in small craft mechanics specifically. If he needed to change it later, he could but their first ship would very likely be... small.

Approximately six months later though, Ercite made a breakthrough. *I found one!*

Kibum jerked when the message arrived, confused for a moment because he didn't know what Ercite was talking about at first. Then it clicked and he audibly gasped. *You did?! Who?!*

He was definitely not the only one to respond, but Ercite figured they should probably meet in person to discuss the contract before they agreed. So they all managed to find time – or take time – to meet up at a diner near the Hub. Ercite pulled up the contract and they all leaned forward to pore over it in quiet excitement.

“Total Space?” Kibum wondered aloud, frowning at the company name.

Ercite waved it off reassuringly. “They’re a relatively new company. Someone with a lesser amount of business savviness opted for the name which leads many people to overlook them.”

“It does sound generic,” Jinki murmured in hesitant agreement, though his eyes never strayed from the text on the page.

“I wouldn’t have mentioned them if I didn’t think it was a good deal,” Ercite exhaled them. “And I’ll remind you that I’ve spent dozens of hours doing background checks, reading reviews, tracking down current users, and combing over this bloody text with a fine-toothed comb.”

“No one’s doubting your effort,” Jinki soothed immediately, finally looking up to offer a broad smile. “I think we’re all just nervous this might be it,” he admitted with a breathy laugh.

“That’s a lot of credits...” Crawven whistled when he got to that part, blinking several times to make sure he was seeing it right.

“Ships are quite expensive but...” Ercite stated, scrolling through the text and pointing to one of the subsections. “They’re willing to give a discount on the interior tech if outside sources are utilized.”

“All the parts we’ve been gathering,” Jinki grinned, filling in the blanks immediately.

“Exactly! We can’t skimp on the hull. That has to be full cost,” they explained, sliding through to find that particular clause. “No surprise there. It’s one of the most important parts of the ship after all. Similarly, the engine and basic necessities like life support, coms, and the medical center are all full price. But we’ve been scavenging for a while, so we should be able to get a hefty discount. Their initial overhead cost is so high because they’re also trying to be waste friendly. Even if the salvage we bring isn’t suitable for *our* ship, it can be sold or repurposed for other ships,” they explained simply.

“I guess no one really wants to put in the effort to find salvage to lower the cost if they’re not really that well known,” Kibum suggested, scratching his head but not put off yet.

“Or they already have the money,” Crawven chimed in with a quick shrug. “Based on the contracts I’ve seen in the Hub, this one looks pretty decent. Large payment amount but that repayment rate and interest are definitely doable. And that mandatory insurance fee is quite friendly,” he added with wide eyes.

“It’s a little small though, isn’t it?” Kibum asked, chewing on his bottom lip.

“Well, it’s not like we have all that much capital to begin with. And the larger the ship is, the more unlikely we are to actually repay it,” Ercite shrugged logically. “Besides, if we make this work and pay everything off, we’ll be able to save up and trade it in for something better in the future,” they grinned, thoroughly pleased with themselves.

“So are we doing this then?” Larad asked, looking down at Ercite first before he looked at the rest of the group.

“I’m in,” Kibum answered without hesitation. It all looked alright to him, and as long as they had a ship, they could start making magic happen. And honestly, if Ercite was backing it, he had even fewer doubts.

“Me too,” Jinki piped up almost immediately.

“You’ve got my vote,” Crawven shrugged, beaked mouth pulling up into a satisfied smile at the edges.

“Okay then,” Ercite grinned, their craggy mouth pulled out wide and happy. “Just add your digital signature here and I’ll go turn the contract in.”

As soon as Kibum did, he whooped. “We’ve got a ship!”

“Almost,” Jinki tempered his response, signing off on the contract and then drawing close to hug him tightly.

“We’ll have a ship soon!” Larad promised, pumping his fist into the air and then smiling down at Ercite who was scrolling through the text one more time.

“Yes we will,” they confirmed eventually before nodding once and then looking at the group at large. “It’ll still take a little while for construction, but get ready!”

“Yeah!” they cheered together, brimming with the excitement of what the future might hold.

When all was said and done, Jinki was able to get the cost of the ship down at least thirty percent due to the parts he’d found and salvaged in the interim. None of them were really in working condition for a ship like theirs, but they could be calibrated and acceptably modified to offset the initial cost or given to the company and sold as compensation towards their overall costs. As predicted, they had to pay full price for the hull, as well as the AI for navigation and analysis purposes, and any additional weapons they wanted beyond the bare minimum. Surprisingly, Crawven was mysteriously able to help with that side of things...

No one pressed him very hard on it, since they had troubles enough of their own. But in the end, they were finally able to stand in front of their ship together in the shipping yard, staring at the vessel that would be their home when they left the planet for the stars. By all counts, it wasn’t all that much to look at. Approximately thirty meters in length and just over half that in height, she had a fairly boxy shape and limited maneuverability due to short wings and small booster rotation modules. The bridge and cockpit area did extend a bit further beyond the body well above the ground, and the tail did have some individuality overall. Again, not the most awe-inspiring of vessels, but she was their ship.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Kibum asked, a wonderous grin on his face as he sought Jinki’s hand to hold tight.

“She’s technically a boxy bucket of bolts is what she is,” Crawven snorted, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked over the small transport and occasional shipping class vessel.

"But according to the inspector, she'll fly true," Ercite reminded them, one hand resting on top of Larad's head as they sat on his shoulder.

"See?" Kibum beamed, obviously barely able to contain his excitement.

"I would be more excited, except I know how much debt we have for this," Larad chuckled, reaching up to pat Ercite's back carefully.

Kibum scoffed and waved a dismissive hand. "A few successful runs and we'll pay it off in no time," he assured them bravely.

Jinki's snort was self-explanatory. Obviously he had reservations about that thought but was fine with holding his tongue to keep the peace... and his boyfriend's happiness. "Now all we need to do is name her," he murmured, giving Kibum's hand a little squeeze. "Any ideas?" he asked, looking at Kibum first and then extending his gaze towards the rest of the group.

"Guns and Roses," Crawven grinned, patting his bicep like it was supposed to mean something.

"Lady Luck," Larad smiled, nodding once as if that should decide it.

"That one's already taken," Ercite reminded him, tapping him on the head lightly.

"The Shine," Kibum murmured, stars in his eyes as he looked at the ship.

"Eh?" the group questioned, clearly unsure.

"Because that's what we'll do when we're out there. Shine!" Kibum beamed, a veritable personification of the name.

"Oh, that's so cheesy," Crawven complained with a laughing groan.

"I like it," Jinki said as he sided with Kibum.

"See?" Kibum asked, pointing at his boyfriend. He knew it was cheesy and he knew his boyfriend knew it was cheesy, but wasn't that very much a Terran quality?

"So we've got The Shine and Guns and Roses," Ercite summed up for them.

"But--"

"No," Ercite interrupted Larad with a finger pointing in his face. "That one's taken."

"Fine," he grumbled, visibly pouting for all of half a second. "So. All in favor of Guns and Roses?" he asked, raising his hand as Crawven's shot up. No one else did though and he reluctantly lowered his hand as Ercite looked at him questionably. "The Shine?" he asked, watching while three hands rose up around him.

"Ugh..." Crawven groaned with an audible face palm.

"It could just be Shine for short," Kibum smiled, turning to look at Jinki with a mesmerizing grin.

"Yeah. That it could," Jinki smiled back, holding Kibum's hand tighter as they looked over their very own ship together.

It almost didn't seem real. Several years in the making, hundreds of hours spent, and hundreds of thousands of credits to their name, but here she was. Their very own ship. The Shine. "Let's do this," Kibum urged, stepping closer to Jinki so he could hug him tight.

"To the Shine!" Jinki cheered, raising his fist up in victory.

He was echoed by a chorus of four other voices. "The Shine!"

Okay. So maybe they finally had a ship, but that also meant that they then had to officially find and accept missions of some kind. Well, they could just go off willy-nilly into space without a goal in mind but that had very little chance of bringing them any income. There were already ships that did that and they were better equipped and better funded than they were. In order for them to keep their ship, guaranteed income was something they had to have right now.

While everyone officially settled in to tie up loose ends with their jobs, Kibum went to the business and trade district to ask through the Hub about any contracts they could pick up through one of the various freelancing companies in the area. There were quite a few in existence, but one of the only ones that were accessible to Kibum and his crew was MTV+. They were a general freelance agency most well-known for working almost exclusively with Moladhi, Terran, and Varium workers and clients, but as the title indicated, others were possible as well. For the right price anyway. Like any number of other general contract groups, they accepted requests for anything as simple as a personal courier run to things as dangerous but lucrative as retrieving questionable samples or people from neutral or even potentially hostile territories.

Since they were just starting, Kibum did not have dibs on anything that sounded worthwhile. And honestly, after the first couple days, he was simply happy when they snagged their first contract: a shipping run to one of the moons orbiting Star Seeker's Rest. The pay was crap and it was probably going to be a cakewalk, but if nothing else, he figured it would be a good opportunity to see how they all worked together.

After a day of finalizing their preparations, they were ready to go and Kibum felt a peculiar thrill of excitement shoot through him as he settled into the pilot's seat with his hands hovering over the controls.

Awaiting clearance to undock from the landing pad. Please wait until we have been confirmed for flight approval, the AI instructed over the intercom.

Kibum wrinkled his nose and sighed. "You ready for this?" he asked, looking over at his first mate in the seat beside him.

Jinki grinned and nodded once. "Absolutely, Captain."

Delighted by the title again, Kibum couldn't hide his mirth and he waved at Jinki almost bashfully. Then he tapped the coms and spoke to the ship at large. "How we doing, crew?"

"All systems clear," Ercite chimed in almost immediately, safely sequestered in their cubbyhole where they could observe and analyze the inner workings of the ship and handle any incoming transfers as needed.

"The medbay and engineering are good to go," Larad followed up. "Though I believe Jinki should be down here next time," he added with a snort.

"I know," Kibum scoffed with a reassuring wave at Jinki. "He will be. I just wanted him up here today."

"Weapons and self-defense protocols in the clear," Crawven finished up the sound off. "Not that it matters this time. I don't think we'll be running into anything that needs them this close to the planet."

Clearance granted.

"Don't jinx us!" Jinki warned over the intercom at almost the same time the AI announced their permission to fly.

"Let's do this!" Kibum beamed. "Computer. Take us out of docking!"

Aye, Captain, the standard monotone male voice responded. When they got some money to start paying down their debt and had some left over, that was one of the first things Kibum wanted to fix.

And he was quite right about the run being a cakewalk. The whole trip took all of two days. It was simply a matter of ferrying the package from the surface to the moon and dropping it off at the processing station once it had been appropriately signed off. The return trip was just as uneventful. But Kibum was still filled with glee when he could walk through the interior of his ship – *their* ship, and see everything it had.

It had two levels and a number of rooms present. The bridge in the front sat high off the ground and led to a connecting hall with the dining area straight ahead and crew quarter access ladders on either side: four rooms in total, though Kibum and Jinki shared, as did Larad and Ercite. The dining hall was small but large enough to eat and lounge in together if they wanted. There was a small corner for entertainment if they wanted, and the food processor was stocked with whatever they could afford. As of right now, it was nothing more than the bare essentials...

Connected to the dining hall were offshoots heading towards engineering in the rear of the ship and two ladders that would take them into the small cargo bay area. Their ship was small and everything about it was a bit cramped, including the storage space, but that was fine for now. At the bottom tail end of the ship was the infirmary and the access to their escape and cryo pods. In the front part of the ship and under the bridge was where the airlock was located.

All in all, it really was boxier than Kibum would have preferred. He longed to have one of those sleek flyers with extended wings and sublime handling he'd seen on the purchasing site, but they were significantly more expensive... For now, he was just happy to have a ship, as clunky and basic as it was.

After he checked in with MTV+ to confirm the successful closure of their contract, he encouraged everyone to get ready to celebrate. Back in Yonichi after their first completed run, they headed to The Stars Align for drinks and conversation.

"I would say drinks are on me, but even with that run, our pockets are a bit empty," Kibum laughed in mild embarrassment.

Garum overhead the comment and leaned over the counter to wave it away dismissively. "Enough of that. At least this once, the first round is on me. Consider it a welcome back gift, Almighty Key," he added with a wink, gesturing at his Terran bartending assistant to help take care of the drinks.

"Oh! Thank you!" Kibum grinned, flashing a perfect smile at the much larger Varium.

It was not an evening in which Passeri or Jackson were present, for a wonder, and Kibum looked around to see who was performing. Not surprisingly, Alexander and Senna were there, as was one other relative newbie that Garum had hired. Kibum had worked with them a bit before, but the androgynous Varium was a bit aloof sometimes. Rather eccentrically, they had chosen a Terran and Moladhi basis for their form. Shorter than a typical Moladhi, more feathers than a Terran, too long fingers and a slightly beaked mouth, they evidenced characteristics of both and no obvious gender. They were much like Ercite in that respect. Garum did like the oddities though. They were often attractive draws to the establishment after all.

He thought he might try to get on stage again, for the nostalgia if nothing else, but then Henry arrived and the idea flew out the window. "Jinki!" the other man beamed, throwing himself at his best friend with reckless abandon. Amusement paired with a tiny twinge of jealousy sang in Kibum before he hurriedly pushed the latter away.

"Hi, Henry," Jinki laughed, prying his friend off so he could look at him at arm's length. "I've only been gone a couple days," he reminded the other man.

"I know, but I missed you," he whined, staying close until a small cough distracted him. "Oops! You guys remember Lorielle," he beamed, retrieving his girlfriend from the outskirts of the circle.

"Hello," she waved politely, hovering close to Henry with a slight air of uncertainty.

"Hey Lorielle. Welcome to the celebration," Jinki smiled, gesturing for her to come closer.

Ever one to hold a bit of a grudge, Kibum didn't not like her, but he had his reservations, namely from when he had front row seats to Jinki's insecurity. Still, when decorum demanded it, he could play nice. Personally, he was just a little surprised Henry and her were still together.

Crawven noticed him hanging out at the edge of the conversation and sidled over. "Psitassi should be coming soon. Thought you might like to know," he added with his arms crossed over his chest.

"That's good. Would be nice to see her," he smiled politely, the expression turning into a speculative grin. "For you too, I'd imagine."

The Moladhi snorted and clacked his beak once. "I can still look," he admitted in a roundabout way.

The group exchanged pleasantries for a bit, explaining how the voyage had gone and what, if anything was new or unexpected in their lives. But after the initial burst of curiosity wore thin, Ercite bowed out to go speak with Ixo the music master and Larad divested himself to engage in a more direct conversation with Garum at the bar. Then Psitassi arrived and the conversation amidst the Terrans ramped up again with Crawven hovering in the outskirts looking like he wanted to participate but not sure how. He wasn't the greatest of small talk conversationalists.

Not surprisingly, the evening ran long and everyone more or less departed when it was closing time. Jinki and Kibum made their way back to their apartment after saying their farewells and crashed almost immediately. The next day, they had to visit Jinki's family to let them know how it went and see if they couldn't holo call Hajoon to bring her up to speed too.

And for the first few months of actually being employed as a captain and crew, that was the general pattern of their runs. Kibum tried to find them new tasks, but word on the streets was that newbies like them often got stuck with the menial jobs until they'd been around long enough or happened to stumble across something special. Since the latter didn't happen, they just kept plugging away at it, cashing in where they could and trying to pay down their sizable debt in the meantime. MTV+ did let them know they'd keep an ear out for something that was the next step up for them, but there was no luck yet.

Really, the only truly interesting thing that happened while they waited for something better to come along was seeing Passeri and Jackson again. Passeri called to see if he was available to meet up in the city center sometime in the near future and Kibum was so there. "Passeri!" he shouted upon seeing the elegant Moladhi waiting beside Jackson in an alcove a little out of the way of the general pedestrian traffic.

"Chicklet!" she crooned back, the full vocal range of her voice evoking joy and happiness automatically. "Careful, love," she cautioned when Kibum tried to hug her as he usually would.

Kibum gasped and looked at Jackson for confirmation. "Yep," the other Terran grinned, looking slightly odd in a fully clothed and makeup-less state. He even had a shock of dark hair starting to grow in again. "We're nesting," he confirmed, sliding his arm around Passeri's waist and looking up at her.

"Oh! I'm so happy for you!" Kibum grinned, reaching back to grab Jinki's hand and pull him closer in his excitement. "Looks like you're gestating too," he added, eyeing her abdomen knowingly.

Passeri grinned and nodded. Looking down at Jackson, she explained, "We agreed upon a donor and then spliced the genes. These two," she explained, much to Kibum's delight upon hearing the number, "will probably look a little more Terran than a full Moladhi, but I don't consider that a negative."

"I kept telling her it would be better if they took more after her, but she wouldn't have it," Jackson snorted with a shrug.

He flinched and laughed when Passeri swatted at him ineffectively. "There is no better Terran for them to take after," she reasoned seriously, nodding her head once to affirm her statement.

"Congratulations," Jinki smiled, reaching his hand out to shake Jackson's. "Have you thought of names yet?" he wondered, glancing at Kibum quickly and then focusing on the other two.

"Not yet," Passeri answered with a shake of her head.

Her answer sort of faded into the background as Kibum listened but turned more of his attention towards Jinki in that moment. Did he want kids? He was so attentive and good about asking questions right now. They'd never really talked about it. Kibum was certain he'd make a good dad though. That being said, did *he himself* want kids. He hadn't really thought about it. Oh, he was very

excited for Passeri and Jackson. They'd probably have absolutely beautiful children. But they'd also been together for a while and were quite committed to each other with very stable jobs. Well, previously anyway. Now... it looked like they were getting ready to become full-time parents. Huh.

"Kibum?"

"Huh?" he blinked in distracted confusion, focusing on the group at large again. "Yeah?"

Jackson laughed and nudged Jinki knowingly. "We were asking when your next run was. Once the chicks are hatched, you're welcome to come by and see them if it fits your schedule."

"Right," Kibum laughed breathily. "Um," he murmured, licking his lips with a quick glance at Jinki. When was their next run?

"We haven't settled on our new contract yet," Jinki filled in for him, giving him a reassuring hand squeeze. "We were kind of hoping for something that might at least take us to the next planet in the solar system," he admitted with a shrug.

"I guess you're still dealing with small fry stuff then?" Jackson wondered, casting a sad smile in Kibum's direction.

"For now. But that's how it goes, you know?" he waved off, putting on a brave front. He couldn't admit he was worried they'd be stuck doing this forever himself. He knew it was unlikely but it felt like it could happen since they'd been in a similar pattern for a few months now.

"Just keep doing what you always do, chicklet," Passeri encouraged, reaching out to smooth his hair down with her free hand. "Shine. Like your ship," she chirped, chattering in personal delight at her word play. The sound was infectious. Likely unintentionally so, but Kibum and the others laughed along with her. "Sorry," she apologized immediately when she realized what had happened. "My control is not what it should be lately," she added with a downward look at her slightly swollen belly.

"It's fine, dear," Jackson promised her, one hand moving to rub said belly lovingly.

Their visit with Passeri and Jackson was a bit short, but it left Kibum with plenty on his mind. Oh, nothing he needed to figure out immediately, but there were a fair few things he would have to think about at some point. But the first one was making money enough to pay off their ship...

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Over the next couple months, they continued to snag short distance trips that netted them small returns. It was enough to maintain payments and start thinking about upgrading things eventually, but nothing too crazy. Larad and Ercite started staying on the ship when they stayed planet side so that they could get rid of their housing in the city and free up some funds that way. Crawven could stay at a guesthouse near Psitassi's family's business, on their dime, provided he pulled a guard shift or two. As for Kibum and Jinki, they switched between the apartment and the Shine depending on the length of their stay between runs.

At every opportunity, Jinki visited his family and Kibum often tagged along but not always. He certainly heard about it later though. Hajoon was definitely making her mark in the grav jumping world.

It was looking like she might well make pro within the next year or so and she hadn't even graduated yet. Doyun had given up grav jumping entirely and had turned her attention to law of all things. Jinki had no idea where she'd come up with that plan but she was pretty entrenched the last time he came back to talk about it. Siwoo was still doing her low grav gymnastics but since she didn't think she'd have the talent to excel at it, she was considering coaching as her career path, though it was still early. There was a good chance she'd change her mind later. And as for Daejung, he was still trying to establish his place in the holo gaming world without too much success. Didn't help that he wasn't even in high school yet.

When they weren't spending time with family or friends, Kibum and Jinki visited the scrap yard or went on salvage runs as often as they could. Kibum was determined to replace the AI in the ship. He really didn't like the generic voice or the almost complete lack of personality. They'd started a small collection of data chips that could have useful info on them, but they didn't have the time or money really to get into them and see if they could be utilized later. Jinki's parents didn't have the knowhow to repair or access them and it would cost money to take them anywhere else.

The thought did occur to Kibum to ask his foster father but he wasn't eager to owe the man anything at this point. It wasn't a priority for the moment so leaving it on the back burner wasn't a bad thing currently. That didn't mean that Kibum was exactly satisfied though. The humdrum existence of mundane runs and typical maintenance and short jumps to the nearest locale were... less than thrilling and not at all what he imagined when he thought of what it meant to be a Captain.

"We're getting there," Jinki told him reassuringly, hugging him close. "Just give it more time. Things like this don't happen overnight."

"Did you know there are captains who lived and died after having never done more than the kinds of runs we're doing now?" Ercite commented once, a statistic Kibum could have happily done without.

"Not that I'm complaining or anything, but should I start looking for a part-time job when we land next time?" Larad wondered, obviously worried about funds.

"I don't mind the downtime. There are plenty of other Moladhi to practice with when we're here," Crawven shrugged when asked about his thoughts of their current plan. The Shine didn't have enough space for him to really practice and since Larad was usually his only sparring partner, the Moladhi feared getting rusty on their runs.

It was safe to say the consensus wasn't bad, but Kibum wasn't satisfied. He wanted more. He *needed* more. And not just because he didn't want to be indebted forever. "How will I ever find my father if we don't get off this planet for more than a few days at a time?" he demanded, frustrated with their current lot.

"Give it time, love," Jinki encouraged, trying his best to soothe the anxiousness in his boyfriend. Jinki couldn't understand what he was feeling. Kibum knew that, but it didn't make it any easier to accept the current status quo.

But inevitably, a small change occurred at last. "Finally! We have a run to Earth 3.0!" Really, it was LDECV-02 but no one other than the officials called it that. And some non-Terrans who spent most of their time in space, but that wasn't important.

"Really?!" Jinki exclaimed in excitement when Kibum came home to give him the news.

"Yes! It's not even a message this time either!"

"Oh! What are we carrying?" Jinki asked, running up and bouncing around in his excitement, mirroring Kibum.

"Interplanetary supplies from Ichi to Earth 3.0. The journey should take at least two weeks!" he flailed in excitement. Larger ships with FTL jump drives could get there in next to no time, but their basic small ship had boosters only. Obviously, the package was not a rush delivery but he wasn't going to complain. The pay was better than usual and it would put a decent dent in their payback amount when all was said and done. Oh, they'd still have plenty left, but this would help more than the other jobs had.

"Yes!" Jinki beamed, snatching Kibum up and twirling him around the apartment as his boyfriend clung to him with arms and legs wrapped firmly around. "When do we leave?" he wondered, slowing enough to set Kibum back down again.

Kibum took a second to catch his breath and grinned. "In two days. They've gotta finish preparing the package and all that, but from there, it'll be smooth flying!"

"See babe? I knew we just had to hold out a bit longer," Jinki encouraged, leaning close to hug Kibum and give him a reassuring kiss.

"We should tell the others," he announced. "The sooner they know, the sooner they can get ready and that way, Larad won't be able to get upset at us for not giving enough warning."

Jinki chuckled and nodded. "He can be a bit prickly about that."

"Don't I know it," he snorted, rolling his eyes with a shake of his head.

As figured, it didn't take them long to get ready and sorted. By the end of the next day, they were airborne and on their way. The longer travel time gave Kibum an opportunity to really try out the manual flight controls on the ship. They were fortunate artificial gravity maintained a constant field so that no matter how much he spun them around, they didn't actually feel it. Though the AI did warn him a time or two about potentially risky maneuvers near possible projectiles...

Outside of the freedom of simply flying, Kibum and his crew got to finally see the expanse of stars around them. Staring out of the bridge portal, a vast sea of darkness speckled with tiny dots of illumination filled the horizon. Too far out to see any nearby planet and nowhere near the galaxy situated in the left of their viewpoint, everything seemed small and insignificant.

"You should come up and see this," Kibum tapped over the coms to the engine room where Jinki spent a fair chunk of his time.

"What is it?" Jinki asked, the sound of gentle clinking in the background as he tinkered with something.

“Nothing,” Kibum laughed once, shaking his head in wonderment. “I don’t think I’ve never been able to see a moon or planet or asteroid belt in sight before. It’s...” he hesitated. He didn’t want to say frightening, though it kind of was if he thought about it too long. “It makes me glad we have a navigation system,” he admitted, still trying to spot something familiar in his view.

“That makes two of us,” Jinki chuckled in gentle agreement. “I’m almost done here though. I’ll be right up and you can show me this nothing you’re in awe of.”

Kibum snorted. “I wouldn’t say in awe of exactly.”

Jinki’s laugh over the intercom did not go unnoticed.

It wasn’t all nothingness though. Sometimes other ships would zip by in the distance. As the AI warned, the odd projectile had to be avoided – a piece of space debris tumbling through the ether or an asteroid. They were fortunate this system had no major asteroid belts or black holes to worry about. But that did mean there were more chances to see the odd voidbits – tiny sparkling creatures that traveled in massive schools like fish; etherians – an umbrella term for any of the larger cosmic creatures that made their way through space; or cosmic entities – intelligent beings (as far as everyone was aware) that lived in space without the assistance of ships.

Everyone was eager for a chance to see them so it was often a contest in regard to who would stay up for what shifts. Traveling in deeper space, their sleep patterns were slightly different than when they were only heading for a nearby moon. One person was always awake with the AI, just in case. The rest took turns and maintained their posts at their various locations for the most part. When possible, they gathered in the dining hall for meals, as cramped as the space was and simple as the meals were. One day, they’d upgrade the food processor. One day.

Despite the vessel being small, the way they split up their time and gathered for meals kept their general relations pretty smooth. No one had to be around anyone for too long unless they wanted to be and gathering was mostly a voluntary choice. Kibum wondered how it might be for even longer journeys though. Despite his thoughts, it was a worry for another day.

As expected, they arrived at Earth 3.0 within a week’s time with no hiccups. Two smaller moons orbited the gemstone hued planet, one considerably smaller than the other. Fully terraformed, the planet had no dome spheres to speak of and they entered the atmosphere to head for Whitelock Spaceport, the massive city that they would need to dock and check in with processing and customs to deliver their goods. Interplanetary traffic was mild but flying into the spaceport, it was bustling with intracity comings and goings that necessitated them queuing up behind other similarly sized vehicles waiting for permission to dock. That was alright. The AI could handle it and it gave Kibum and the crew a chance to really take a look at the city and the surrounding area.

Larger than Yonichi by at least fifty percent, the sprawling metropolis was full to the brim with towering skyscraper buildings in the city center. A buzzing hive of traffic filled the spaces between them, making it hard to focus on one thing at a time for long. Further out in a descending cascade, the metallic and reflective towers gave way to more mundane domiciles, artificial greenery, and a view of the surrounding countryside. Rolling plains of emerald greens blended with azure blues and amethyst purples, the multihued grasses swaying in a perpetual breeze. Ringing the southern part of the city

further out, the plains gave way to an expansive forest of sparse towering trees with overarching branches that played sentinel to a lush biome of shorter trees and growth thriving amidst their roots.

"Wow," Jinki whispered, the sound painfully loud in the silence of their awed wonderment.

"I saw the pictures but this is something else," Ercite laughed once, a disbelieving sound.

"There's nothing like it anywhere on Star Seeker's Rest," Kibum murmured, reaching out to grab the edge of Jinki's shirt in his fingertips.

Jinki wrapped his hand around Kibum's and shook his head. "But maybe one day."

"Kind of reminds me of what my home world is supposed to be like," Crawven commented, scratching at his jaw distractedly. "The tall trees anyway," he clarified when all eyes turned to look at him for further explanation.

"Were those here before or was that after the terraforming?" Kibum wondered aloud. He knew terraforming had been necessary to shape the atmosphere to be suitable for Terran life, but he wasn't sure how much had been needed.

"The big trees were here before," Ercite explained, pointing at the towering behemoths that worked to blot out their view of the southern horizon. "Terraforming didn't kill them outright but they haven't had a chance to adapt the way the forest below has. That's why the branches look skeletal. But see all those vines?" they asked, pointing at the dark growths that twined up the trunks and hung off the limbs in vast swathes like unkempt hair.

"Yeah," Jinki answered for everyone.

"They're literally growing *from* the trees. You'd think it would kill them, but it's *actually* a symbiotic relationship. The vines grow on the trees and since they are high above the forest, they get plenty of sunlight. The roots of the trees provide nutrients from the ground while the vines bring in nutrients from the sun, creating a positive reinforcement cycle."

"Why do you know that?" Jinki asked in bemusement.

For a second, Ercite waved their hands around their head, a thoughtful expression on their face. "One of my progenitors used to live here," they explained at last, expression softening when the answer came to them.

"I guess life finds a way, doesn't it?" Kibum laughed softly, shaking his head as he looked at the Dawbn.

"Same goes for the city," Larad reminded them with a gesture towards the metropolis directly in front of them. "I know none of us have the money for it, but do you think we'll have a chance to see what's available here? Last I heard, they have a rather interesting assortment of rare good and novelty shops."

"And a Red Light District 'with no equal in this galaxy'," Crawven added with a knowing smirk as he quoted an advertisement he must have heard when he was looking into it. When everyone else scoffed at the comment, he puffed up and looked around at the other members of the crew. "What? As a *single* male Moladhi, I should know these things," he almost proudly reminded them.

"Fine, fine," Kibum sighed with a wave of his hand. "First things first. We have to deliver the package and *then* we can decide how much time we want to stay. Just remember, time is money, and we don't have much of it..." he added with a shrug.

"Not yet. But we can certainly take a minute to look around and see what we might want to come back for later," Jinki encouraged, squeezing Kibum's hand once.

"That is an idea I like," Larad agreed with a slow nod.

"Oh. Maybe we can talk to someone here about the processing chips," Ercite suggested, their eyes settling on Kibum. When he wrinkled his nose preemptively, the Dawbn reasoned, "Chances are good they can give a quick consultation with little to not charge. And really, it might let us see if any are worth anything. Especially if we take Crawven."

"Huh?" he chirped in confusion after hearing his name.

"At least his eyesight is better than his attention span," Larad chuckled, clapping the slightly taller male on his shoulder and shaking his head in amusement.

Captain. We have been assigned docking bay B, row 5, platform 14. Shall we proceed?

"Yes, Computer," Kibum answered immediately.

Understood.

"Okay! Let's do what we came here to do! We'll figure the rest out after," Kibum grinned, moving to take his seat at the front once more.

"Aye, Captain!" the rest of his crew responded in relative unison, dispersing to secure themselves before they docked. Artificial gravity – and now standard gravity since they were planet side – kept them stable and secure on the deck, but docking could still be interesting. No one wanted to risk an injury due to the unexpected impact when securing the ship. Especially not when they were finally on a planet worth exploring in a city that was as far from Yonichi as they'd ever been yet.

As with most of their previous runs, the actual delivery part was a breeze. The staff they worked with – mostly Dawbn, surprisingly enough, were efficient and cordial. The on-deck staff – largely Terran based Varium and Moladhi, wasted no time in carrying things from here to there. And those few Terrans that were in the mix followed suit, but often with supplemental equipment to help them match their larger counterparts.

From a distance, Kibum and his crew collectively stopped to stare at a real live Kyanwa outside of what was presumably their ship. It was hard to guestimate, but they looked to be both taller and broader than either Crawven or Larad. Not surprising since they were supposed to be around eight feet tall in general. This one had fluffy sandy blonde fur with large tufted ears that flicked and rotated irregularly. A lengthy tail swished behind them while they appeared to be scanning the area. They wore no clothes but they didn't need to. The Kyanwa did look a little put upon though.

"I'm surprised it's not inside on the ship," Ercite commented as they looked across the dock.

"Why?" Kibum asked in automatic response.

"Their planet has a lower natural gravity than more Terran worlds. This one functions at a gravity that's approximately 90% of Earth's original gravitational force. The Kyanwa home world has a gravity level closer to 80% of Earth's."

"Right!" Kibum said with a snap of his fingers. "I should have remembered that. It was on one of my tests," he exhaled, shaking his head.

"No wonder they look tired," Jinki murmured sympathetically, reaching out to pat Kibum's back sympathetically.

"They should probably not go to Star Seeker's Rest then," Larad commented. Everyone nodded in mute agreement. Their home planet had a gravity slightly higher than Earth's. It wasn't so bad in the dome, but as soon as you left...

Crawven was the first to shake himself free. "So we've seen our first Kyanwa. We'll probably see more later," he reminded them, stepping in front of the group to break their line of sight. "Aren't we going to go see the rest of the city?"

"I don't know about the *rest* of the city..." Jinki trailed off with a laugh.

"We can at least take a quick look around. A day isn't gonna hurt us that much," Kibum confirmed, looking over to smile at Jinki and feeling relief when he got a reassuring smile in response.

"I still think we should see if we can find a consult for our data chips," Ercite reminded him.

"And check out the Red Light District!" Crawven chimed in.

"That is the last of our priorities today," Kibum snorted, one brow raised and an amused smirk tugging at his mouth.

"Oh, come on!" he whined, shoulder slumping as he groaned in frustration.

Larad patted him on the back consolingly. "A handsome Moladhi like yourself might find more trouble than you're looking for in such a place."

"But *that* kind of trouble is good," he reasoned.

"If you have the money."

"Ugh..." the Moladhi groaned again, finally reluctantly giving up on the idea.

"Next time," Jinki whispered, reaching out to pat the taller male's arm.

"Will there even be a next time?" he grumbled back.

"There better be," Kibum grinned, fully confident that since they'd snagged one run here, it would be possible to do another and more.

"Alright then. Let's go!" Jinki cheered, pumping his fist into the air and giving Kibum a nudge to get him moving.

They did wander for the day, their heads on swivels and eyes as wide as data disks. Even if they didn't get to the Red Light District, the bright lights of the city center assaulted them as if they had, screaming for their attention at every turn. The vendors were mostly silent, or at least respectfully moderate in volume, but their ads and decorations did the speaking for them. At one point, Kibum was afraid his eyes might well fall out of his head because he'd never seen an actual piece of 'fresh' fruit and there was a stall selling them amidst the mix of goods. He was so ready to burn a hole in his pocket to buy a piece too, but then he saw the price.

"On second thought..." he sighed wistfully. He could buy an entire meal for the cost of one piece and he simply couldn't justify it today. Not until they had returned to confirm delivery and picked up the rest of their pay.

"One day," Jinki soothed, giving him a gentle one-armed hug around his shoulders.

Dejectedly, they moved on and continued their jaunt. Most of the other shoppers were Terrans by nature, making it easy for Larad, Crawven, and Ercite to figure out the best places to go next. The majority of the sellers were non-Terrans. That wasn't to say the businesses weren't owned by Terrans behind the scenes though. Considering it was a Terran planet, that was likely the case. Non-Terrans just often had better sales' records due to their natural abilities in reading Terran body language more effectively.

Eventually, they did find a consultant for their data chips, but the upfront cost was too much for them this time. It was another 'later' shop they'd hopefully return to in the future. As the time went on, the sunlight faded and the lights of the city became ever more intense. Worse than the heart of Yonichi, it was bright as day even in the dead of night.

Kibum had thought he was used to such environments, what with his work at The Stars Aligned and all, but even he had to admit it was getting to be a bit much for him. Looking at the rest of his group, Ercite seemed the least bothered by it all, their expression a natural façade for whatever they were thinking. But Larad had a subtle frown, Crawven's feathers were slightly raised – like the hackles of a dog, and Jinki looked a bit paler than usual, though he put on a brave smile when he noticed Kibum looking at him.

"We should probably call it," Kibum announced as they came to a stop out of the way of the general flow of pedestrian traffic. The flying cars and scooters overhead never seemed to stop, the patterns dizzying if one looked at them for too long.

"Do we want to try and find a place to get a bite and take a break?" Jinki asked, obviously hungry.

"I'd rather go back to the ship. Everything's too expensive here," Larad chimed in, his voice flat and curt. That was a sure sign he was done with their current adventure. Ercite patted him on the head in a quiet soothing gesture but said nothing in response.

"Seconded," Crawven agreed, raising his hand as he looked to Kibum.

"Let's go back then," Kibum nodded with a half-hearted shrug. "At least the food processor supply is currently paid for," he added with a weak laugh. He got weak snorts in response, the group tired and overwhelmed, just like him.

It was plain fare but satisfying. No one was interested in staying up late though and it was generally agreed that they would all just... go to sleep early and head out in the morning.

In the circle of Jinki's arms, Kibum couldn't quite manage to fall asleep. He stared at the top of their room and tried not to fidget so he wouldn't wake his boyfriend up. But he wasn't surprised when he heard, "Can't sleep?"

"No," he admitted quietly, shaking his head.

"What's up?" Jinki asked, pulling Kibum closer and nuzzling into his hair.

Kibum wrinkled his nose but took a breath to answer. "I thought I'd enjoy the city more."

Jinki laughed once, his breath brushing against Kibum's scalp. "It was a bit much, wasn't it?"

"I just... I thought Yonichi was big."

"It is. Just not as big as Whitelock." When Kibum didn't say anything, Jinki raised his head to peer at him out of one partially open eye. "What else?"

Kibum gave him a half-hearted glare with a pout. "It was really expensive too."

Jinki chuckled and managed to open his other eye. "That's just because we have no money yet," he promised, leaning close to kiss Kibum's head.

"And when will that be?" he grumbled with a disappointed sound in the back of his throat.

His boyfriend traced a stray strand of hair off Kibum's forehead and smiled down at him, leaving his hand to gently cup Kibum's face. "When we pay off this ship and you keep finding us contracts that take us further into the cosmos."

"You could help me find those contracts too," Kibum grumbled, hands gripping the light blanket loosely.

"Gladly. But... I seem to recall you having much better luck," he admitted with an embarrassed smile.

Kibum's scoff turned into a genuine laugh. "That's because you're too nice, dummy."

"So you always tell me," he agreed without complaint. "Now sleep, love. We've got a ways to go to get back and you need your beauty sleep," he teased with a wink.

Kibum gasped and lightly slapped Jinki's chest. "I'm always beautiful, thank you."

"Yes, you are. Even with dark circles under your eyes and dry skin," he nodded back, apparently serious.

"If we had more money, I could afford products to deal with that," Kibum grumbled, turning over onto his side in mock-anger.

"I know, love," Jinki said as he simply hugged Kibum from behind, spooning him tenderly. "One day."

“One day, indeed,” Kibum grumbled, not sure if he was complaining about or affirming the statement. Maybe a bit of both. It was hard to say. Harder still to stay annoyed with his situation when he had a man like Jinki holding him close in the ship they owned together though. At least with those things, ‘one day’ was actually a possibility.

Chapter Thirty

Their journey to Whitelock was just the steppingstone they needed to start landing more contracts. Over the next few months, Kibum and crew managed to snag a couple more local runs but, on the whole, their longer trips started to become more numerous and further out. They weren’t quite ready for truly long-distance journeys yet – they needed to invest in better cryopods for that, or a larger ship – they did start making jaunts to the other side of the solar system. And sometimes... just beyond it.

Careful, Captain. There’s an incoming pod of voidbits you might want to move the ship clear of, the AI reminded Kibum as he smoothly steered the ship just beyond the boundary of their current solar system.

“I see them,” he waved off, leaning forward to watch the schooling critters in fascination. He never tired of observing them in their journeys. Like up close stars, they flickered in dizzying patterns of whorls and abstract shapes. He felt he could lose himself for hours watching any such murmuration they came across.

Captain.

With a start, Kibum realized this particular murmuration was swarming right towards them. “Oops,” he gasped, tilting the controls hard to port. He hissed through his teeth when he heard a faint pattering of sound on the right side of the hull.

Captain. We have come into contact with various voidbits.

Kibum winced at the confirmation and wrinkled his nose. “Do you think they’ll be okay?” he couldn’t help but wonder.

I am unable to say with one hundred percent certainty, sir.

“Damn.”

“Everything okay up there, Kibum?” Jinki asked over the intercom.

“Yes,” he answered quickly, surprised by the question.

“I thought I heard something on the hull,” he added when Kibum didn’t offer any additional information.

“Yeah... I hit a couple voidbits.”

“Oops.”

Kibum’s thoughts exactly. “The computer hasn’t said anything though.”

Incorrect. I said I was unable to ascertain the nature of the damage with one hundred percent certainty.

"Yes, yes," Kibum mumbled with a wave of his hand. "We'll check the hull when we land, okay? Ercite. Any hiccups in the system?"

There was a brief pause as the Dawbn obviously ran a quick check prior to responding, "The system is clear, Captain. No issues that I can see. Should there be?" they wondered.

"No! Just making sure," he forced a laugh in response, shaking his head. Ercite was too perceptive by far.

"Hah! So long as it's not a class five etherian, we'll be fine," Crawven announced as he suddenly joined the intraship communication. They had a small ship so anytime coms opened in any other department, a ship wide message was sent to allow everyone to listen in, just in case.

"You just want a chance to try your new gun," Kibum snorted, rolling his eyes at the comment.

"Better to be overprepared than not," Crawven retorted. "It certainly worked well in scaring off the class four on the last run."

Ercite laughed over the coms and even Jinki chuckled. "It wasn't interested in us anyway," the Terran reminded them.

"It sure looked like it to me," the Moladhi scoffed, clearly put off by his dismissal.

Class four etherians are mostly large-scale debris feeders. They would have no need to attempt to consume the Shine.

Kibum had to clap his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. Especially when Crawven snapped, "I'm aware, computer! I did not ask for your automated response."

Apologies, Combat Master Crawven. Would you prefer I not inform you when information appears to be lacking?

The Moladhi audibly sputtered over the coms. Before he could answer, Larad finally piped up. "Ercite..." he drawled with an amused tone.

"What?" the Dawbn responded far too innocently.

Jinki barked a laugh and Kibum finally broke his silence again. "I knew the computer had been sounding different lately."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ercite shrugged nonchalantly.

"No. Keep it. I like it," he explained promptly, a large grin on his face.

"Captain!"

"Alright, alright! Enough chatter on coms, crew," Kibum laughed, shaking his head again as he turned to focus on the skies ahead of them. "Let's focus now." The general commotion died down quickly as they listened for the follow up. "We've just left the Olex star system now. Entering the open

space in Quadrant 5 on the perimeter of OSS 1 and enroute to the planet Avov in the Fau solar system. Computer. What's our ETA?"

At our current speed and trajectory, we should arrive at the planet Avov in sixteen days, seven hours, and twenty-three minutes.

"Everyone hear that?" Kibum asked, tilting his head to the side as if that would somehow help him listen to their responses better.

"Yes, Captain!" came a chorus of responses over the coms.

Content with that, Kibum returned the controls to the autopilot setting and leaned back to watch the scenery go by. Maybe he'd go down and help Jinki in the engine room before too long, but for now, he was curious about Avov. Of course he'd read up on it prior to taking the contract, but it never hurt to check again.

Spinning in his chair, he focused on the empty space behind him and called up the holoscreen to get a better 3D visual. One of four life sustaining planets in the Fau solar system, Avov was a Varium settled world. It was far less stable than Earth 4.0 with a much-reduced gravity and constantly shifting continents. Well, he would consider them continents. It was more like they were expanding and shrinking plates that changed as much as a typical Varium did, dependent on the temperature of the sun on any given day. The atmosphere was not suitable for sustaining Terran life without breathing gear either, so they wouldn't be landing on the surface of the planet. This was strictly to deliver a package to the orbiting space station just above the planet.

Kibum would be lying if he said he wasn't curious though. Maybe they'd be able to come back and check it out on their own one day. It might be fun for Larad to investigate especially. He was a Terran based Varium but that didn't mean he wouldn't be able to adapt enough to remain on the surface without assistance. Ercite would probably be fine too. It wasn't like they actively needed to breathe the same atmospheric mix that Terrans did. Though Crawven would probably be out of luck like them. He was even more sensitive to atmospheric changes on other worlds. A side effect of being Moladhi and having a more delicate internal constitution.

Well, either way. The pay was going to be good when they got back so there was that. And they'd obviously have more opportunities to check out other planets in the future when they paid off this ship and were able to start adding on for longer distances and possibly FTL capabilities.

The rest of the journey to the planet was relatively uneventful. They did have a chance encounter with a cosmic entity that unnerved Kibum and the crew a little bit. From a distance, it looked like a small, spikey rock that tumbled gently in their direction. But when it got close enough, it expanded rapidly like an old Earth pufferfish. Kibum called everyone up to get a better look at the novelty since the computer indicated it was relatively safe.

The GP Cosmic Entities are considered benign and curious. They have been known to spook, however, and incidentally damage nearby vessels when they collide with them. Caution is advised but there should be no active danger.

"That's reassuring," Kibum laughed once, marveling at the geometric structure. GP was short for geodesic polyhedron as that was the shape the entity resembled when fully expanded. That being the case, it was no surprise that it was capable of inflicting notable damage without much risk to itself.

"It's amazing," Jinki grinned, wrapping his arm around Kibum's waist to observe it as well.

"Is this one native to the system, computer?" Ercite wondered, perched on Larad's shoulder so they could see better.

General Terran records confirm that yes, this one is local. In typical Terran fashion, they have nicknamed it Polly.

"Color me surprised," Ercite laughed dryly.

"We're not all like that," Jinki defended himself.

"Enough of you are," the Dawbn shrugged.

"I would wager the local Varium have simply named it GP-1," Larad offered with a simple nod.

You are not far off. GP Alpha is the other registered nickname.

"Huh. Creative for them," Crawven teased, nudging the Varium with his elbow.

"Oh look. It's shrinking," Kibum pointed out as he watched Polly decrease in size to resume its original spiky ball form.

We have been deemed neither a threat nor a novelty. Congratulations.

"Really, Ercite?" Kibum laughed with a sidelong glance at the Dawbn.

They shrugged and shook their head. "I only started the initial change in programming. Whatever the computer does now is on its own."

"Oh, self-learning algorithms," Jinki smiled, patting Kibum's side in a knowing manner.

"Don't put that on me," he grumbled, pointing at his boyfriend with a warning finger. But then Kibum looked around at the rest of the group and blinked in surprise. "I am *not* that bad." When he got stifled laughs and amused smiles in response, he reiterated, "I'm not!"

"Of course not, love," Jinki soothed, giving a gentle kiss on the side of his head.

Grumbling under his breath, Kibum sighed. "We are changing its programming when we get back to Star Seeker's Rest."

"Sure we are," Ercite hummed in quiet response, turning so as to not draw further attention to herself.

Kibum let it slide. This time. He was still fascinated by the cosmic entity they'd had a chance to see. It didn't hurt they were also relatively near their destination. With a quick comment and dismissive wave, he got the crew to go back to their stations and resumed his watch on the bridge.

A couple days later, they arrived at the orbital space station above Avov and were able to successfully deliver their package. They had the orbital crew do a quick once over on the Shine to make sure it was ready for the return journey and then settled in for a decent night of sleep in the docking bay. It would be a fairly long journey on the way back and this would be one of the only times they had a chance to eat together and then sleep simultaneously.

Scattered around the dining room, they laughed and celebrated their successful trip to Avov. "To the longest journey we've made yet!" Jinki cheered, raising his cup with a grin in Kibum's direction.

"Here, here!" the others cheered as they followed suit.

"Now that we know the Shine can handle this distance, it might be a good idea to start looking further out," Ercite commented with a small nod.

"It would mean better pay," Kibum agreed with a heavy sigh.

"I don't mind the better pay but I would prefer to have better equipment before we shoot for further in the stars," Larad cautioned, looking over his shoulder as if he could see the medbay behind and below them.

"Are you doubting my ability to protect us with my weapons?" Crawven snorted, slinging an arm over the Varium's shoulder and giving him a shake.

Larad shifted to give the Moladhi a deadpan sidelong look himself and then shook his head. "I do not like that we have mostly secondhand equipment in the medbay."

"Hey. The cryopods are new," Kibum reminded him with a finger pointed his direction.

"Because they had to be in order to fly," Jinki added with a shrug.

"And they cost an arm and a leg because of it, thank you."

"You could have just asked Psitassi," Crawven commented as he crunched on something hard and noisy.

Kibum snorted. "Maybe you don't mind being in debt to her for your weapons, but I'm already up to my eyeballs in it."

That is physically impossible, Captain.

"I didn't ask you!" he grouched at the computer, though even he had to crack a smile when the rest of the group did too.

"Oh," Ercite started to say, raising their hand to draw Kibum's attention. "I heard this system has some pretty good solar waves if you're interested in trying to ride any out of here," they explained earnestly.

"Yeah?" Kibum grinned, perking up considerably.

"I know you've been dying for a chance to give them another go since the last time," Jinki chimed in, reaching over to squeeze Kibum's shoulder reassuringly.

"Of course our captain would prefer to ride larger waves than those piddling ones in the Ki system." Crawven preened at his compliment, beakish grin equal parts fascinating and unnerving, especially when he clicked it together in excitement.

"If you want, I can call you up if we find any," Kibum promised, holding up his hand like he was making a vow.

"Yes!" the Moladhi cheered quietly, chomping on another crunchy bit of food from his plate.

"Any other business we need to attend to?" Jinki wondered, glancing at Kibum first before looking around the rest of the group.

"I promised Ercite I would play darts with them," Larad added with a raised hand before he gestured towards the entertainment corner.

Kibum laughed and motioned for them to go ahead. "Sure. I've got nothing else."

"Me either!" Crawven confirmed, stuffing the last of his food in his mouth.

"You about ready?" Kibum asked as he looked to Jinki, reaching out to grab the other man's hand lightly in his.

"Ready when you are," he grinned back wrapping both hands around Kibum's. At Kibum's nod, Jinki stood up and pulled him to his feet smoothly. "Let's go."

"Night guys," Kibum waved, shuffling close to nestle into Jinki's side as they headed for their shared sleeping quarters.

"Night, Captain! Night, Jinki!" the trio called back in almost perfect synchrony. Kibum snorted and grinned, reaching over to grab Jinki's hand in his and hold tight.

As promised, a few days out from Avov, the computer announced, *Captain. Fau has released several solar waves to our starboard side that we can intercept if you are interested.*

"Oh! Yes!" Kibum beamed, perking up in the seat as he looked around to try and spy them with his naked eyes.

Showing them on screen now, sir.

"Thank you," he offered by rote. Kibum flexed his hands and then shook them out before a wide grin overtook his face. "Computer. Ship wide coms," he instructed, taking the controls in hand. A quiet beep told him the channels had been opened. "Solar waves have been sighted. I'm taking manual control now. Crawven, if you want to see this, you better get up here now."

"Yes!" came the immediate response from the Moladhi followed by a muted bang and louder curse. "Coming!" Quiet laughter echoed the sound and then fell silent.

"Have fun, Captain," Jinki added, an obvious smile in his voice.

"Of course," Kibum snorted with an affirmative nod as he leaned the ship in the direction of the waves.

Captain. Please be advised there is a small debris field located approximately five hundred meters above the waves we are on trajectory to catch.

"I am advised," Kibum responded quickly. The field wasn't anywhere near where they should be so it wasn't really a concern of his. The computer was merely giving him the lay of the land so he didn't decide to try and do something foolish like a backflip into the same space as the debris field. He'd done something similar before, with no repercussions after the fact. It had been a near thing though.

"Wow! You can actually see them in this system," Crawven gasped as he came on deck and saw the on-screen visuals.

He was right too. Like waves on old Earth's oceans, a thin crest of light could be seen from the radiant dust blown from the orange sun's fiery perimeter. Too fine particles shimmered like so much sand as they outlined the crest of the waves Kibum wanted to ride. It was one of the benefits of having a small ship. The large ones didn't even notice the waves, but here, he could turn off most of the boosters and literally surf on space waves. Not that he knew what surfing was like in general, but he'd read about it in class and had fallen in love with the idea in space.

"Oh! You should go for that one," the Moladhi pointed, tapping Kibum on the shoulder to help draw his attention in the right direction.

"I see it," Kibum grinned, veering right to line himself up so he could get ready. The barest rumblings of turbulence teased the aft part of the ship and Kibum's eyes narrowed in preemptive excitement. "Reducing boosters to fifty percent." Crawven reached out to grab the back of Kibum's chair as a stabilizer, just in case. There was a slight lull in the sensation of speed before a gentle swell picked them up, shifting the viewing screen naturally.

You are currently riding the nearest solar wave, Captain.

"I noticed," he scoffed once with a crooked smile.

"Can you go deeper?" Crawven wondered, gasping once when the edges of the wave crept to the front of the ship, easily visible with the naked eye now.

"No problem," Kibum nodded, taking a breath as he eased them into the wave, effectively submerging them. The turbulence intensified slightly, but it only manifested in a subtle hum throughout the ship. "Reducing boosters to twenty five percent." Now that they were in the wave, the momentum alone should be enough to keep them going.

Captain. I'm reading concurrent solar waves above and below the one we are currently riding.

"Any danger?" he wondered, pausing just for a moment to make sure.

Not that I can predict. However, there is a sizeable projectile on an intersection course with our current trajectory. It may be a piece of debris from the field above us, given its composition.

“Should I get ready to blast it?” Crawven wondered, looking at the door curiously.

“No. I should be able to avoid it just fine,” Kibum explained as he waved off the Moladhi’s question. “Understood computer,” he nodded, drawing up the trajectory line and making sure to move them out of the path. As they started to draw abreast of the object that was approximately half the size of their ship, both Crawven and Kibum whistled appreciatively.

“I’d wager that used to be a pretty large ship,” the Moladhi commented, head tilting in a very birdlike fashion.

Captain. The projectile has fallen into the same wave we are riding. Caution should be- Warning!

Kibum heard the sound as he instinctively yanked the controls to the left. Catching the front edge of the curved wave, the projectile slipped down the arcing crest and directly towards the Shine. “Hold on!” Kibum shouted as Crawven yelped. Even with artificial gravity and stabilizers, the Moladhi shot across the deck and crashed into the passenger chair. “Boosters at full power!”

The engine whined and the Shine vibrated at the sudden demand. “Kibum!” Jinki’s worried voice was loud and clear.

“Crawven! Get in the copilot chair! Computer! Status!” Kibum barked with a sidelong look at the projectile keeping pace with them as they both continued to slide down the curving edge of the wave.

Projectile holding steady. If we continue on our current path in the wave, we will encounter additional debris. I advise breaking free, Captain.

“Understood,” Kibum grimaced, pulling up on the flight controls to get them to surface. He breathed a tentative sigh of relief when they crested and he started to ease off the controls.

“Everything okay up there?” Jinki asked into the resultant silence.

“We’re good now,” Kibum called back, feeling his racing heart starting to slow down. He frowned slightly when the controls felt stiff and reluctant. They didn’t want to come free from the left leaning tilt they were in.

“Whew. You had me worried for a second there,” Crawven chuckled, reaching over to clap Kibum on the shoulder, the distance an easy reach with his longer arm.

“Me too,” he laughed once without looking up. “Computer. Run a diagnostic of the controls.”

Aye, Captain.

“Something wrong?” Crawven wondered, peering at the controls Kibum was currently messing with. He shrugged in response but held steady until the computer could report.

Captain. The right booster rotational array appears to be stuck. I can see no obvious obstruction. However, though we are on top of the wave, we are still enroute to encounter the smaller debris in the latter portion of this wave.

“Suggestion?” Kibum asked, still testing the controls. He didn’t want to risk damaging it unless it was necessary. The left booster worked and was trying to push them to the right but the right booster was stuck in a perpetually left direction, causing undue stress when he tried to steer.

Break free of the wave entirely and cut boosters to take a look on foot.

Kibum made a face but then sighed. “Understood.”

“What? If it’s only stuck, why don’t you just yank it in the right direction to get it unstuck. It always works for me,” Crawven snorted, looking at the controls.

“No. I mean, it might work but it could also damage the ship,” he reasoned with a shake of his head. “Best just to follow the computer’s suggestion in this case.”

“Feh. That’ll take too long,” Crawven grumbled, already leaning over to push at the controls.

“No!” Kibum gasped, reaching to stop the hand. But Crawven was larger and stronger than Kibum, and when he got a thought into his head, it was often difficult to dissuade him. He shoved the control stick to the right. The left booster turned full throttle, setting the ship trembling as they straightened out for just a second.

“See?” he scoffed, looking at the horrified Kibum like he’d accomplished something.

In the next second, the right booster came free with a sickening wrench. The Shine lurched to the right and crashed through the solar wave with a muted hiss of sound as fine particles washed over them. Alarms blared.

Proximity warning!

“Hold on!” Kibum screamed. His hands held the controls in a death grip. Wide eyes darted from point to point on the screen. The nearby projectile. The smaller bits of debris. The painful brilliance of the wave itself as it caught the sun’s illumination in blindingly reflective particles.

“Novas!” Crawven cried out, bracing himself on the control panel.

“Captain!” A myriad of voices howled over the coms as Kibum desperately tried to stop their tumbling spin. Stuck in the hard right position, they spiraled in a tight circle, rolling like a piece of trash in the wave. Small pings of sound echoed off the hull as bits of debris shattered against them.

“Turn off artificial gravity!” Kibum commanded. “Jinki!”

“Engines okay! They’re starting to redline though,” he called immediately.

“Ercite! Larad!”

“Strapped in.”

“Medbay’s a mess. But I’m strapped in.”

“Computer!”

Projectile proximity alert. Two hundred thirty-one meters and decreasing rapidly.

Kibum grimaced. "Boosters at ten percent! Be ready for full power," he instructed, sending a quick glare at Crawven.

Aye, Captain.

The nauseating spinning finally slowed. They were still tumbling towards the projectile but now he could see it.

Two hundred meters.

They winced as smaller bits of debris scattered across the screen sounding like hail.

One hundred fifty meters.

"My controls are stuck. I'm going to try and jump us over this projectile."

One hundred meters.

"You can do it," Jinki immediately supported, breathless and scared.

Kibum wasn't so sure. He couldn't predict the wave any more than he could the fragging projectile.

Fifty meters.

There was no more time though. "Full power to boosters!" he shouted, ramping up the energy when the angle and projected trajectory felt right. The Shine whined. Kibum hissed as he lost sight of the projectile from their irregular rotation. It felt wrong...

Collision warning!

Shit! The Shine jerked as she was bumped from the top. Metal on metal keened. Alarms blared and the lights flickered. Kibum yanked at the controls in desperation. The Shine rolled and then jerked to a halt.

Left booster caught in projectile. Engines at risk of overloading.

Kibum froze. He didn't know what to do in this scenario. It had never happened before. Jinki!

"Do something!" Crawven yelled.

Collision warning!

Again? It was the only thought Kibum had before the ship turned sideways and a series of metallic and living screams hounded him.

He blacked out.

And then came to with a gasping start. He blinked rapidly as blaring sound returned, pounding at his head. "Crawven!" he coughed, jerking in genuine fear when he saw the latticework of cracks on the window of the bridge.

"Here," the Moladhi groaned, floating nearby. Artificial gravity was off or down.

“Computer?” No answer. The bridge was dark. Shit. Sparks danced and leapt in his periphery. “Jinki?” Again. No answer. “Ercite. Larad!” he called in quick succession.

“Coms are down,” Crawven grimaced, floating close to anchor himself on Kibum’s seat.

Kibum’s stomach dropped when he felt a small explosion in the ship. “Where was that from?”

“Huh?” Crawven wondered obliviously.

He touched his personal communicator to try calling. “Kibum!”

“Jinki! Are you okay?”

“Engines are failing. You need to get to the evac pods,” he panted, in obvious pain.

“Are you okay?” Kibum demanded again, yanking at his straps to get out of the chair.

He was silent for too long after that. Kibum was about to go running after him when he finally answered, “Get to the evac pods first. I just need to take care of something here first.”

“Come on,” Crawven urged, grabbing Kibum’s wrist and starting to pull him along.

Kibum didn’t trust it. “No. I’m coming to you,” he insisted instead. “You can go to the evac pods. I’m going to the engine room.” When he looked up to make sure Crawven was listening, he saw the Moladhi was staring at the window with wide eyes instead. Alarm spiked.

One arm wrapped around him first as they lurched towards the entryway. With a heart stopping boom, metal and layers of space proof polycarbonate collapsed. The cold hit him first, icy claws wrapping round and stealing the breath from his lungs. A deafening howl stole his hearing as he clung to Crawven like a dying man.

Sudden silence and peace fell on him as they collapsed into a weak floating position. “Star shards,” Crawven gasped with a choking groan.

“Crawven?” Kibum asked, looking up and then paling further at the piece of metal sticking out of his abdomen.

“I’m good,” he gasped, his breathing sounding off.

“Larad!” Kibum cried as he looked around for the Varium. He would know how to handle this. Another small explosion rocked the ship. “Jinki!” he immediately called, hitting his personal communicator again. There was no answer this time. “No, no, no. Answer,” he tried once more, placing one hand on Crawven’s shoulder. “Fuck!” he panted, bringing up the general condition of the ship. Not as comprehensive as what the computer could tell him, he knew that all the red blinking at him wasn’t good...

Bridge out. Coms, controls, navigation, and power down. Life support failing. Sleeping quarters mostly destroyed. Engine room... critical. From the looks of it, it was likely to fail at any minute. But that was where Jinki was. Medbay was mostly okay but the cargo bay was redlining. Shit. Another hit like earlier and it’d probably be ruined too.

“Kibum!”

He jerked like he'd been struck as he looked up to see Larad running his way. It was dark, yes, but Larad's skin was darker still. Varium didn't bleed that color. "Larad! What happened?!" he asked, eyes going wider when he recognized the color he was covered in.

"We have to go. Now," the Varium urged, grabbing both Kibum and Crawven to pull them along in the gravity free space. "Jinki is in critical condition. I put him in a cryopod but we have to get out of here now. Where's Ercite?"

Stuck on hearing about Jinki's condition, Kibum shook his head dumbly. "I-I don't know."

"Novas!" He stopped and held both at arm's length. "I have to get them. Go to medbay through the hatch in the hallway to the engine room. The cargo bay is compromised. Opening the doors now will break the equilibrium in the hull and cause a rupture."

"What?" Kibum mumbled, panic and fear clawing at him. He couldn't think. Couldn't do anything.

"GO! The engine room is failing. We don't have time!" Larad snarled, shoving the pair down the hallway so that he could go after Ercite in their coms room sequestered in a small space under the bridge.

"Come on," Crawven hissed, nudging Kibum with his elbow as he used his other arm to pull himself forward.

The journey to the medbay passed in a blur of flashing lights permeating the darkness and wailing alarms. A series of small explosions sounded off as they were approaching the engine room though. The sealed door started to bow outward, the seal warping from heat and pressure. Crawven snagged the hatch handle and hauled it open so he could stuff Kibum into it first.

"Crawven!" he shouted, relief giving way to horror as bluish orange flames roared above them, reaching into the tunnel and enshrouding the Moladhi with a sickening stench of burnt flesh and feathers. With an agonized howl, he dragged the hatch door back into place and went limp, a smoldering figure of whimpering pain and reeking flesh.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Kibum cried, reaching for someplace safe to grab so he could pull the injured male along. There were no other thoughts then.

Get Crawven into a cryopod. Get the cryopods into an escape pod. Get free. Get to somewhere safe. The cryopod closed easily and left Kibum in relative silence. The wail of the ship alarm continued unabated but he was otherwise alone. With an upward blurry glance, he whispered, "Larad? Ercite?" Despair choked him and made it hard to breathe. He couldn't bring himself to look into Jinki's pod yet either. It was enough to know that Larad had brought him to safety. He was alive. That was all that mattered right now.

One functional escape pod. One he could manually pilot. No time to think. Another explosion and Kibum flinched. One gut wrenching look at Jinki's horrifying condition decided him. He couldn't trust himself to get him home. Jinki and Crawven in one. Autopilot to home. Kibum in the other.

Drifting in the pod, he was drowning. Larad. Ercite. The Shine. Disappearing in the distance. Looking the other way. Crawven and Jinki's pod flying away. Here. Kibum was here. Alone. Unharmd? How? Why? Alone. He was lost. A wail escaped him as he collapsed.

Chapter Thirty-One

Another night, another recurring nightmare. Rubbing hard at his watery eyes, Kibum sat up in bed and tried to slow his uneven breathing. His heart was still racing in his chest, a frantic thing struggling to escape his ribcage. He placed a hand against his damp skin and exhaled once, a breathy sound more akin to a sob.

A month had already gone by since he'd been rescued from his evacuation pod. Slightly longer since Jinki and Crawven had been rescued and taken to the hospital for treatment. Despite that, he was still having the same nightmare. The accident. Shrieking metal and breaking polycarbonate. Icy cold. Jinki's trembling voice in his coms. Crawven shielding him, protecting him. Burning heat. The smell of charred flesh. Losing Larad and Ercite. The Shine.

Kibum took another breath and rubbed at his temples with both hands, as if he could massage the memory, and the headache, out of existence. It didn't help. For either. He groaned and waved his personal screen up. 3:21. "Ugh." Barely two hours of sleep. It was hard to come by these days. He was always tired and restless. Even though he tried to go out and about, he was skittish and wary; random loud sounds gave him panic attacks and if he heard a siren, he passed out. Even though he had the occasional friend come over from time to time to check on him, he could only pretend to be okay.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and grimaced, closing his eyes briefly. In the next, he opened them again with a gasp, stomach turning as memory bucked at the opportunity. It took everything he had to swing his legs over the side of the bed and stand up. Doing so made him briefly dizzy and he swayed where he was. Balance returned quickly but the feeling of being off kilter remained as the phantom wail from an old nightmare echoed from under the bed.

In the dim automatic lighting of the apartment, the shadows felt too long, taking on a haunting life of their own. Even with the new pictures that had been added, it felt all too empty and... accusatory. The dim faces distorted into twisted visages if he looked at them too long. Swallowing hard, he shook his head once and shuffled over to the corner where the table and chairs would be. With a brush of his fingers against the wall, the surfaces rose into place and Kibum settled himself on the stool.

Pulling up his personal page again, he pushed it out so he could see better and fell back into his nightly ritual: going through the reports and retrieved video from the accident. Galaxy Investigations had done a very good job in salvaging the remnants of the Shine and breaking down the reality of the incident. And since the data drive had been rescued from the wreckage, it had been easy enough to see that negligence hadn't been a primary cause of the incident so he wasn't charged with additional accident and repair fees.

With tired eyes, he traced the words carefully, each sentence already memorized. Mildly reckless behavior with solar wave surfing. Low to minimal risk of incidents. Systems check in the Avov space station showed no red flags. Issue with the booster rotational array from voidbit particles arose

later. One or two had been caught at some point and worked their way into the deepest recesses of the array. No issues arose with basic maneuverability but when the full range of motion was utilized, it had caused the booster to stick.

Kibum swiped the text to the side and played back the overhead recording from the bridge. On mute, it was bearable, but only just. Maintaining the controls. He was nervous. Crawven reached over. Kibum just... sat there. 'Stop him!' The Moladhi grabbed the controls and everything spiraled. It was eerie seeing the scene in retrospect. His body jerked around like a ragdoll. Crawven snapping free of the straps. The latticework of cracks appearing on the viewing window from the impact. Him freezing again when he came to. 'Do something!' But no. Crawven did. The window broke and space clawed at them, trying to pull them out. The Moladhi dragged them beyond the doors, hitting the emergency switch on the other side.

Agitated, he swiped the video away and went back to the text. No primary fault of Captain Kibum. A bitter snort escaped him. Incident initiated by Weapons Master Crawven upon forcing controls. Insubordination confirmed. Failure to command appropriately confirmed. Cascading power failure in the engine room upon first impact. Blocked power coil went critical within moments. Artificial gravity failed. Engine components broke free from the supports. Caused substantial injury and damage from internal momentum and propellants.

For a moment, his hand hovered like he was going to switch back the video. Frozen in place, his body locked up. It was hard to breathe as memories flickered. Gasping, he dropped his hand and clenched it hard on the table. Only once. He had seen the engine room footage only once. And he could not face it again.

The report told the story after all. Engineer and First Mate Jinki critically wounded in the incident. ... crushed... ruptured internal organs... critically burned... Kibum skipped over those words quickly. Put in cryopod stasis for transport and evac. Weapons Master Crawven critically burned and impaled by metallic projectile. Put in cryopod stasis for transport and evac. Evac pod jettisoned and sent on vector course for Starseeker's Rest. Retrieved two days after incident. Comms Officer Ercite trapped in personal compartment onboard the Shine. Deceased. Body recovered. Medbay Operator Larad trapped in failing ship. Deceased. Body recovered. Bodies and ship recovered four days after incident.

His death had been relatively fast, but painful. Signs of suffocation combined with the freezing effect of space. He'd watched it once too. Only once. The aftereffects sending him into a full-blown panic attack that left him unconscious and waking up from the floor later. Ercite had been almost peaceful. A slow fading away that was just as painful to watch. Why had they not been able to get free like him? Why did they have to die?

His own report was pitiful in comparison. Captain Kibum escaped in evac pod. Minor injuries sustained. Banged up and bruised but that was all. Rescued four days after incident. He hadn't even been flying, just drifting in space. Why had he gotten away so easy? He should have been more hurt. Maybe even killed. Why was he spared so much suffering?

Final case results pending. How much money would he get for the incident? How much would he have to pay? What compensation would be given to the deceased?

Contractual financial compensation pending. Did he still have a contract? Did he still want to? The Shine had been salvaged and parts were still left. Would he want to resurrect it? How? Why?

With a disgusted wave of his hand, Kibum banished the screen and pulled his knees to his chest, perching on the stool precariously. “No primary fault my foot,” he grumbled, resting his head on the tops of his knees as he looked at the wall, flinching when shadows danced in his periphery; familiar haunts of bitter memories tugging at his already frayed nerves.

If he hadn’t gotten too close to the voidbits...

If he hadn’t wanted to ride the solar waves...

If he hadn’t called Crawven up and let him force the controls...

If he hadn’t left Jinki in the engine room that day...

If only he’d been a better pilot...

If only he wasn’t a failure...

“Jinki,” he whimpered as tears seeped from the corners of his eyes.

Five weeks. It had been five weeks since he’d been rescued. Or so they told him anyway. Jinki didn’t know for sure himself. He only had the dates to go by and they simply seemed to blur into each other, one after another. He was still in the hospital. Still recovering. Still hurting everyday but getting better little by little. Slower than Crawven but better all the same. He could walk on his own now, tottering like an infant on unsteady feet, but not much else.

“Here. You should try to eat something,” his mother urged, pushing a spoonful of food his direction.

Awkwardly, he waved it off with a shake of his head. “I’m not hungry,” he assured her, the statement mostly true. If he didn’t move, sometimes he got hungry. But as soon as he attempted to use his arms or... lower body in general, the sensation dissipated. It didn’t hurt so much anymore but it still didn’t feel real. Didn’t feel like him.

“But you barely touched your food this morning,” she complained worriedly, tired face pinched and worn out. She hadn’t been sleeping much. Had probably been eating about as much as him too. Her cheeks looked sharper than the last time he saw them.

Jinki looked at her with a conflicted sigh. She was the watcher today. Since he’d come-to in the hospital, there’d been a revolving door of family members – and friends – coming in and out so that he was never alone. Siwoo and Daejung were too young to stay by themselves but he’d had plenty of one-on-one time with Doyun, Hajoong, and his parents. With a grimace, he looked back down at his hand and flexed his synthetic fingers. They felt so real to the touch, covered with fake skin over the titanium alloy frame beneath. “I’ll eat later,” he reasoned, turning to look at the closed doorway wistfully.

His mother followed his gaze and sighed to herself before setting the food aside. “They say that if your progress continues like it has been, you can come home in another two weeks at the earliest.”

Jinki looked down with a nod. He was aware; especially that the home she was talking about and the one he wanted to go to were two different places. He held his peace though. It didn't matter yet anyway. First he had to recover like he'd been doing. Since the beginning, they'd marked each stage with goal posts. After waking up from his stabilizing surgery in a haze of pain and confusion and fear, the first one had simply been staying alive for the next two days. Multiple internal organ failures, crushed lower body, shattered arms from where he remembered bracing when the engine had literally pinned him against the wall before gravity had gone out. A massive concussion and hemorrhaging. He'd still been whole then. They hadn't replaced anything yet. He just remembered he couldn't move and everything hurt.

"I'll be fine, mom," he assured her with a nod. 'Unlike Larad and Ercite.' He hadn't heard about them until four days after his surgery when he could finally stay awake without feeling nauseous from the pain or drowsy from the painkillers.

She laughed at his bravado and forced a smile for him before reaching out to grab his hand in both of hers. The touch receptors worked just fine, but it still felt odd. "I know. Your sister has certainly done her best to make sure of that," she added with an embarrassed laugh.

Jinki nodded in agreement. After weighing the pros and cons of trying to repair his broken and shattered bones and ruined muscles or simply replacing them, they'd opted for the latter approach in large part because of Hajoon. Their family wouldn't have been able to afford the state-of-the-art replacements he'd been given. At least not without Hajoon having made it to the Pros in the time since they'd been gone. Everyone refused to tell him how much it cost but Jinki was pretty sure she'd given up at least a year's worth of her income for the procedures, each a week apart to make sure the replacements took and he was able to function with them. Doyun promised to help when she could, but she was still in school. And their parents pulled extra shifts as much as they could.

"Have you...?" he hesitantly started to ask, still looking at the doorway again.

His mother looked down and shook her head. "Not since that one time," she explained, sucking her bottom lip in to bite on it harshly.

Jinki waved the question off quickly to hide his disappointment and worry. From the way they'd explained it, he'd panicked, face white as a sheet and eyes wide. He hadn't made it more than a foot past the doorway, frozen in place for an eternity before he'd turned to flee. Knowing Kibum, it was more likely he was running away from himself. "It's fine. He's probably just busy. I saw the reports and all."

His mother looked up with wide, surprised eyes. "Even the video footage?"

He had to laugh, but it was dry and unamused. "Not the video. Only the Captain has personal access to that."

By the way his mother looked away, he could guess she'd probably seen it. Or at least some of it. Maybe from the investigators. Or possibly from the doctors when they were deciding whether to replace his broken parts or fix them.

He looked down and sniffed once. "I could request it. They'd probably send me the recordings since I am- I was the First Mate," he explained, biting on his bottom lip uncertainly. "My personal page

is back online and with no more trouble.” For a while after the incident, it had been down due to surgeries and connection issues from the head injuries. But it was up and running and since he was one of the surviving members of the Shine, he’d been privy to the reports. On the one hand, he was overjoyed Kibum had only received minor injuries in the incident. That was undeniably a plus. But on the other hand...

“I’m sure he has a reason for not coming to see you, son,” she murmured, reaching up to brush his hair away from his forehead, glad to get away from the topic of video recordings. His hair was getting long and needed to be cut, but at least that sensation hadn’t changed. The skin grafts to heal the burned side of his face had taken and healed nicely. There wasn’t even any scarring there.

Jinki nodded and looked down without saying anything. Kibum probably did, but he wasn’t sure they were good reasons. It took all his self-restraint to not check his messages again or try to call once more. He’d sent several but Kibum hadn’t opened them or answered. Nor had he sent any in response. “I miss him,” he whispered, trying to blink away his suddenly blurry vision unsuccessfully.

“Oh, honey,” his mother crooned, standing up so she could sit on the edge of his bed instead and hug him close. “I know.”

“Why won’t he talk to me?” Jinki sniffed, leaning harder into his mother’s embrace as he let his mask slip just enough.

“I don’t know, love,” she murmured with a shake of her head and a kiss on the top of his.

Jinki didn’t even have the energy to try and command his arms to hug his mom back. He just rested in her embrace and cried softly. “Kibum. Where are you?”

Six weeks. Another interminably long day with an equally long night to look forward to, increasingly terrible nightmares notwithstanding. Kibum stared at the entryway to the hospital, absolutely rooted in place. He should go inside. He should see Jinki. It shouldn’t be this hard. He’d done it for Crawven already. The Moladhi was recovering nicely. Badly burned, his feathers were taking time to grow back, but he was otherwise fully functional and working with Psitassi. No surprise since she was the one funding his medical bills at the moment.

With a wave, he called his personal screen up and stared at the unopened messages from Jinki. At least one a day since he’d regained consciousness. He couldn’t read the whole of the messages. He would have to open them for that. But the previews were telling enough. *I’m glad you’re okay... When can I see you? Where are you staying? What are you doing? Come see me, alright? I miss you... I love you... Where are you? Kibum?*

Exhaling forcefully, he shook his head and closed the screen again. “Just go inside. Just go. Step forward,” he commanded himself, glaring down at his traitorous feet. But even as he looked at them, his vision started to blur. Treacherous thoughts filed into his mind, further binding him in place. ‘It’s your fault he’s hurt.’ ‘You don’t deserve to see him.’ ‘Why would he want to see a failure like you?’ ‘He’s got his family. He doesn’t need you.’

The memory of walking into the room to see him and suddenly being confronted with Jinki's entire family just staring at him... Accusations. Anger. Disgust. It was all he could see on their faces. Because Jinki had nearly died and Kibum was... virtually unharmed. He hadn't been able to protect him. He'd failed in his duty as a Captain and as Jinki's friend... boyfriend... It suddenly became hard to breathe and Kibum hugged himself tight, digging his fingers into his arms as he fought to keep from sobbing. "I can't do it," he hissed, turning and walking away so fast it was almost a run.

If he didn't stop... if he had no time to think... such thoughts couldn't touch him. He lost himself in the hustle and bustle of the city center where constant voices created a white noise to drown out everything else. He looked at contracts blankly and talked to whoever spoke to him first. Pretending he was okay with relative strangers was easy. It was like performing on stage. Going through the motions was enough to satisfy most people. Those that heard about his accident and knew him offered congratulations and warm wishes to get back on his feet. He forced a plastic smile and thanked them, offering some noncommittal answer about when he'd return to being an active Captain.

"Sorry about your ship."

"Sorry about your crew."

"When are you going to fly again?"

"Got a new ship yet?"

When the questions got too much or the strain too hard, Kibum returned to the apartment. Its silence was soothing to his nerves but the solitude howled at him endlessly. Jinki's absence ripped him to shreds and left him bleeding out over the memories they had made together that picked him up only to shatter him all over again when he inevitably remembered what had happened to the other man. He couldn't get the video clips out of his head. The picture of his burned and bloodied face in the cryopod.

The odd visitor came by to break up the solitude, but it depended on who it was. He could handle Jackson and Passeri, bringing their twin chicks to meet him. Two bundles of curious joy and energy that consumed most of his attention when they plucked at his clothes and pawed at his face. They didn't ask prying questions. Mostly gossiped and talked about their kids. He thought he was doing a pretty good job of hiding himself. Even with them, it was easy to put on a fake smile and pretend he was fine for a short while. He could laugh and tease like Almighty Key and never let them see how paper thin he really was.

He could handle the occasional call from Psitassi. She couldn't or wouldn't come visit him in person, but that wasn't too surprising. His apartment wasn't in the best area and as one of the heirs of her father's company, she had certain appearances to keep. Especially since she'd married another heir to a different company stationed on Earth 3.0. Gone was the naïve starling he'd interacted with in university. Now she had come into her own and could pull the few political strings when necessary. She didn't offer any such thing to him, but the option was always there, hovering in the background.

He could even manage to send messages to the fan club when they tried to reach him from time to time. The farce was easy to maintain. He knew what words they expected to hear and could repeat them effortlessly. They weren't exactly lies either because he wanted to believe they were true.

'I'm fine.' 'Jinki's recovering in the hospital.' 'The Shine will be back soon.' 'We'll start looking for a crew when everything's sorted.' But even as he wrote the words, he didn't feel them. The only one that rang true for sure was Jinki. He *was* getting better. But Kibum couldn't bring himself to face him. Not yet. Maybe not...

He could never quite finish the thought.

Every now and then, Jinki's family members tried to come by. He got messages from Hajoon and Doyun often. They were angry with him. He never opened them to read the rest but headlines of *Damn you!* or *Where the novas are you?* or *If you don't get over here...* didn't exactly make him feel any more welcome. Not when he was cursing himself already. And even when he got messages from Mr. and Mrs. Lee, they just made him feel even worse about the whole thing. *It's not your fault... He misses you... Why don't you come see him?... I know you're busy but...*

And when they came by his apartment in person, he sat against the door and pretended they weren't there. Pretended he couldn't hear them with his hands pressed hard against his ears and his forehead to his folded knees. He couldn't face them either. Their disappointment. Their sadness. Their blame and their resentment of him. It was his fault after all. All of it. The death of Ercite and Larad. The loss of the Shine. The injuries of Crawven and Jinki. Because he wasn't enough. Because he was a failure. Just like before. Like when his mother had gotten sick and he could do nothing...

Star shards. He had no idea what he was going to do when Jinki tried to come home. Wait. No. This wasn't his home anymore, was it? His family would take him in and make sure he was okay. They'd keep him safe, like Kibum hadn't been able to. Jinki would be better off with them. Because he didn't need Kibum and if he wasn't around Kibum, he wouldn't be at risk of dying again. Wouldn't be reminded that he had almost died and Kibum had barely been hurt at all and resent him for it.

No. It was better that he not come here to this shitty apartment that was all Kibum had left. He couldn't help him the way Jinki needed. Wouldn't even be able to look at him.

Novas he was such a coward. Maybe it would be better if he just faded away. Like his mother had. He wasn't sick like she had been, but he felt it. Broken and useless. A failure of a captain and a failure of a friend.

Numb, he crawled away from the door and rolled under the bed he just didn't put up anymore. Like he had years ago, he curled up against the wall, making himself as small as possible. He clapped his hands over his ears like he could shut out the quiet accusations circling around in his head. 'It's your fault. It's all your fault. Everything is your fault.'

Chapter Thirty-Two:

Seven weeks. Jinki had never been so relieved for a date to arrive. He could finally leave the hospital and go personally check on Kibum. If his parents would let him... By their excessive hovering, he wasn't entirely sure. "I can walk now," he promised them with a tight laugh, taking slow steps as he moved from the hospital room. He almost would have preferred Hajoon or Doyun but they were both busy with practice and school. He'd taken enough of their time already.

"We know," his father nodded reassuringly, moving close to let one hand hover behind him. "Just take your time."

"Here. Get his bag, hon," his mother encouraged, darting around the room as she checked to make sure nothing had been left behind.

"Right."

As soon he stepped away, Jinki stuttered stepped just a bit and paused, frowning as he struggled to remain silent from the uncomfortable pain that jolted through him. The doctors weren't happy with the way he hadn't fully synched with the new nerve system yet but hadn't forbid him his freedom. If his parents knew how much he felt the lapse in synching, they'd probably try and keep him here, but he couldn't stay any longer. He had to get out. It wasn't a prison but it felt like it. And he wasn't going to be able to relax until he got to check on Kibum himself.

"Come on, hon," his mother urged as she came up and took his arm in hers, helping guide him along.

"Coming," he mumbled, biting his bottom lip as tingling pain danced along the bottoms of his feet. Nope. Not as seamless as it should have been at all.

His father came up on his other side a second later, flanking him as they babbled encouragement, talking excitedly about home and the room they'd gotten ready for him. Hajoon had taken his room shortly after he left, but then Doyun took it over when she left and now it was Siwoo's so they'd taken Daejung's old room and turned it into a guest space. That would be his room now. Notably, they did *not* mention Kibum at all.

They didn't say it loud or often but Jinki was almost certain they thought Kibum had abandoned him. They'd heard enough from Hajoon and Doyun when he was visited by Jackson and Passeri and when Psitassi called to check on him. They followed the fan club forum often enough to keep track and see if anything came up too. All signs indicated Kibum was doing okay. That he was acting like things were back to normal or like there had never been much of an accident that personally affected him. They saw how he never talked about him and Jinki together anymore. How his name was never mentioned in crew posts or comments about the Shine. How he never called him his boyfriend. Especially how he never messaged or called or came by to visit.

To anyone on the outside looking in, that's exactly what it would appear like. But Jinki wasn't fooled. He knew Kibum. Probably better than the other man knew himself. And he'd heard enough that wasn't said from Passeri and Jackson to feel that something was *very* wrong. They didn't admit it outright either, but he knew they were worried. And they should be. The whole thing reeked of the breakdown from when Kibum had admitted to losing his mother. He'd had *no* control then and it had nearly ruined him. Now, as the Captain of the Shine, the one who was supposed to be in *total* control...

The only reason Jinki hadn't tried to leave the hospital sooner was because he might have done more damage to his recovering body, thus forcing him to stay there longer. Already, they were pushing it considering the extensive replacements he'd been given. But he held his tongue and tried not to show his worry as his parents guided him to the checkout station. He let them do the talking, going through the necessary procedures and documentation and only answering when he needed to directly.

Finally, they gave the all-clear and shuffled him to the front door. His father had brought their car and he hurried off to get it so he could swing back around and pick them up. Jinki didn't say anything as they waited, his mother practically vibrating with happiness and excitement by his side. Only when she tried to help him into the car did he pause and look at her.

"Before we go... home," he hesitated, knowing they'd like the answer but feeling it wrong at the same time. His mother smiled at the comment, making it harder to continue. "I need to go by Kibum's."

"Shouldn't you come home first and get settled in?" his father asked from the front seat, a slight frown on his face.

"Dad," Jinki grumbled with an equally dissatisfied frown.

"Your father's right," his mother added, one hand squeezing his arm gently.

"Mom," he sighed, turning his frustrated attention to her.

"Come on. We can talk about it in the car, okay?" she tried to compromise, giving his arm a little nudge.

"No." Jinki braced himself firmly against the top of the car. His nerves hadn't synched properly yet and he was still learning how to use everything to their full ability but he was already much stronger than she would ever be. "If you don't promise we go see him now, I will call a cab."

His father laughed once as if it was a joke, but then fell silent when Jinki was unmoved. He sniffed and finally grumbled, "He didn't come to see you once while you were in the hospital. I don't see what you owe him."

"You promise or I get a cab," Jinki reiterated, fingers tightening enough to dent the top of the car.

His mother noticed with a small gasp and leaned forward. "Honey," she called to her husband, gesturing for him to agree with a mute nod of her own. "It's okay, son," she soothed, standing back up and placing her hand on top of his. "It's just one trip, right? It shouldn't take that long," she added, leaning forward to look at her husband again.

After a long moment of silence, Mr. Lee eventually grumbled, "Fine. I promise. Now please get in the car."

Undeniably relieved, Jinki let out a breathy laugh and a tiny smile as he looked at his mother. He really hadn't wanted to call a cab. He would have if necessary, but right now, he didn't feel up to much of a challenge at all. That didn't mean he wasn't watching his father's path carefully when he did get in the car to ride along. True to his word though, he went straight to Kibum's- their apartment complex.

"Wait for me here," he instructed, awkwardly getting out of the car and shuffling towards the entrance.

"Wait!" his mother called, scrambling to get out and follow along. "Go park the car," she called to her husband before turning and rushing to support Jinki again. "Careful."

Once again, Jinki had to smother his smile. But it bloomed across his face anyway when Sunny popped up to greet him on the screen. "Jinki!" she beamed, ageless face as lovely as he recalled from the last time he'd seen her a couple months ago. "Welcome back!"

"Hey Sunny. It's good to see you," he smiled, the expression hurting his cheeks. He hadn't smiled so hard in a while.

"And you've brought your mother. Hello Mrs. Lee!" the AI waved enthusiastically, earning a slightly confused greeting in response.

"Hello again," she smiled, still not entirely sure how to interact with the all too human-like program.

"Is Kibum in?" Jinki asked, turning to look down the hallway towards the elevator that would take him to the fourth floor.

Immediately, Sunny's demeanor shifted and she bit her bottom lip like a living Terran would. "He is," she admitted hesitantly, looking down.

Frowning at the shift, Jinki pointed towards the elevator. "I'm going to go see him then."

"Actually!" Sunny started to say, lifting her head up and reaching out as if to stop him. "He asked... told me not to let you up if you happened to come by."

Alarm spiked and Jinki shuffled closer to her. "He told you *not* to?"

She nodded unhappily. "Told you," his father muttered upon arriving just early enough to catch the tail end of the exchange.

"But I live here," he said, ignoring his father and keeping his attention focused on the AI.

"You did," she agreed, still grimacing.

"But my name's on the registry."

"It was," she confirmed with a cringe.

"What? When did it change?" he gasped in shock and surprise.

She looked down and touched her index fingers together unhappily. "Three days ago."

"Kibum?" She nodded slowly. "Can I call him?" She shook her head, still frowning dejectedly.

"Come on, son. We should just go," his father huffed, clearly annoyed.

"Dad!"

"Hi, Mr. Lee," Sunny greeted, her usual exuberance much deflated but her programming still shining through.

"Isn't this the same as blocking you?" his mother wondered hesitantly, not quite as to the point as his father.

"Mom..." Jinki exhaled in frustration. She wasn't wrong but he was sure it wasn't for the reason they imagined. "Is he alive?" he asked instead, focusing on the AI.

"Yes," she answered immediately with an emphatic nod.

"Is he in danger?"

She wrinkled her nose and admitted, "Not enough to notify emergency services."

Jinki really didn't want it to get that far. Emergency protocols dictated the automated assistance notify emergency services if and whenever a tenant's vitals dipped below or went above certain parameters for an extended period of time. "When was the last time he had a guest?"

"Five days ago," she answered without hesitation. "But it was Doyun and she didn't get to go inside."

"Star shards," he cursed, his worry mounting by the moment.

"What's going on?" his mother finally asked, coming close to grab his hand worriedly in hers.

"Not now, mom," he urged, motioning at her with his other hand distractedly before he looked at Sunny again. "Sunny. You know me. You know Kibum. What can I do in this situation?" he asked, placing both hands together like he was praying.

"You? Nothing. Only Kibum and..." she trailed off as a thought apparently crossed her circuits, "his guardian- er- former guardian, can gain or allow access to the apartment."

Hope flared. "Can you give me his number?" he asked almost desperately.

"No. I'm not allowed to *give* you his number. But you are both listed as his emergency contacts still. And that information is listed on one document file in the system. And Kibum has not revoked that permission. Do you need to modify your emergency contact information?" she asked with a sly smile on her face.

"Yes!" Jinki answered immediately, clapping his hands and wincing when the touch and pain receptors sent a shockwave through his body.

"This is a very strange AI," his father commented, mystified by her responses and the situation.

"Remarkable," his mother murmured, still hovering at Jinki's side with a new appreciation for the artificial receptionist.

With a tiny smirk, Jinki responded, "Kibum may or may not have made some minor personality adjustments to her circuitry."

"Huh," his parents chirped in acknowledgement at the same time.

"Got it! Thank you, Sunny! I'll be back," he waved, already hobbling out of the complex, forcing his parents to follow him.

"Wait up, son!"

Seven weeks. That was what the calendar had said when he checked it this morning. Since he'd been rescued. And yet it felt an eternity. Like he'd been floating in space for months and drifting in life for years at this point. Numb. Even the pain was gone. He had nothing left. His nightmares were old friends and Jinki had finally given up on him.

Sunny told him so. He'd come by two days back. She hadn't let him in. As Kibum instructed. He laughed once, a bitter deathly sound. 'Worthless,' he whispered, staring at the curled-up body under the bed.

Part of him hoped Jinki would try harder to see him. Maybe call or scream or break the doors open somehow. Something. He hadn't even tried though. 'Stupid.'

He wasn't worth the trouble anymore. He'd already known as much. Hadn't been sure why people had kept coming by. Wasting their time on him. But that confirmed it.

It wasn't like he didn't deserve it though. He had left Jinki first. 'Failure. Idiot. Worthless.'

The body under the bed with his back to him curled up harder, sharp spine prominent under the thin fabric of his shirt. He snorted again and looked down to blink at the open claw-like hands in his lap. Too long nails. Painfully bony fingers. Wrinkled skin. He thought he should be more upset but it wasn't like it mattered anymore. It might be nice to just close his eyes and never wake up again. He wouldn't be missed after all.

Despite the thought, his eyes grew misty and he closed his hands into loose fists.

He didn't know what time it was. Or how long he sat there for. But surprise registered when he heard the door chime. It was locked. Why was it opening?

The automatic lights came on when someone stepped inside. Kibum couldn't see them, blinded by the illumination. They paused just past the threshold and sighed. Blurry vision cleared enough to see he was tall. Short dark hair. Evenly oval face and too strong a jawline. The face and hair were wrong. Nice overcoat. Not Jinki. Kibum's attention faded and he dropped his gaze again.

"Oh Kibum," came the deep vaguely familiar voice.

He looked up again and blinked in confusion. He knew that voice. The speaker didn't even seem to see him though. He focused on the body under the bed. Quiet footsteps sounded in the silence. He sat down on the surface and leaned over, looking down. Kibum knew that profile. Knew him.

"What are you doing?" he asked softly, glancing around the unkempt room once more with another heavy sigh. Again, his eyes passed over Kibum where he sat against the wall.

The name came to him slowly, as if he had to dredge it up from the depths of his memory. 'Eric.'

Eric, his foster father and former guardian, gently slipped from the edge of the bed so he could sit on the floor. He reached under to place his hand on Kibum's shoulder. "Kibum."

His touch was like fire and Kibum's eyes shot open as he found himself staring at the blank dark wall under the bed. Pain and hunger. Exhaustion and never-ending fatigue. They all crashed into him at once and he sobbed, a rough broken sound ripped from his neglected throat.

"Shh," Eric soothed, running his hand down Kibum's arm with the lightest of touches. He didn't say anything else yet. Just waited for Kibum to breathe and his body to stop shaking.

When it became apparent Eric wasn't going to leave anytime soon, he had to ask, "What are you doing here?" The words were barely more than a whisper.

Eric sighed again as his hand stilled. "I heard you were having a hard time and acting foolish," he responded, pulling away to break their light contact.

It felt like he cut Kibum adrift with the loss and he flinched. "I am foolish," he rasped, turning his face into the hard floor.

"Right now? Yes," Eric agreed without argument. Kibum didn't respond as they appeared to be in agreement. His foster father sniffed once and then snorted. "Aren't you going to go see him?"

He didn't even need to explain who he was talking about. Kibum knew immediately. But he didn't answer. Didn't move. Neither did Eric, waiting each other out. Kibum broke first though with the barest shake of his head.

"Why not?" came the immediate answer. Eric was obviously watching him closely.

Again, Kibum didn't answer. He had to know already. There was no reason to explain.

Eric sucked on his teeth. "You know he came by the other day." It took him a while, but Kibum finally managed a tiny nod. "You locked him out." Again, there was a long delay followed by a short nod. "Coward."

His nod this time was much faster. He already thought so too and curled up harder under the bed. He listened as Eric fell silent for a little while. The Varium shifted slightly behind him, eventually getting to his feet. Footsteps traveled the length of the room and back.

"Huh," he finally sighed, footsteps pausing just behind Kibum again. "I never would have thought you'd have so much of your father in you."

Kibum froze and blinked once. His father? What did his father have to do with this? Why was he bringing that bastard up?

The covers on the bed shifted as Eric sat down. "At least when he abandoned you and your mother, he had the decency to leave the planet. A clean break and no pretending. Just gone."

A tiny spark of something hot lit in Kibum's belly, appearing amidst his pain. "This is different," he spat, the words forced through closed teeth.

"Is it?" Eric asked rhetorically.

It was. Kibum's breathing picked up a little bit, his pulse increasing. His father had made his mother sick and abandoned them. Kibum wasn't abandoning Jinki. He was protecting him. Keeping him safe from himself so he wouldn't get hurt anymore. But doubt had been planted, the seed already taking root.

"Your mother was likely going to die, even if she could get treatment." Kibum winced and blinked hard at the blunt statement. "Your father did that to her. And then left. How are you any different?"

His guts twisted into a tight knot and Kibum found it hard to breathe. Fingers dug into his arms as he silently grimaced. Jinki wasn't sick like his mother had been. He wasn't going to waste away. He was going to be fine and live a long and healthy life. "Jinki isn't going to die!" he growled in defiance of the comparison.

"Exactly. So what are you doing here, Kibum?" his foster father asked, leaning down so that his voice could echo under the bed.

He whimpered and bit his lip until he tasted metal on his tongue. "I'm trying to keep him safe," he rasped with a shuddering breath.

"Him. Or you?" he wondered with a soft sigh. "Because right now, it looks like you're still running away."

Wide eyed and staring at the wall, Kibum whispered, "I can't face him. It was my fault. Everything was my fault."

Eric scoffed. "Terran logic. In a tiny ship in the entirety of space, do you really believe you alone could control everything that might happen?"

Kibum didn't answer and the Varium grumbled under his breath. Apparently, he'd disappointed his foster father too. He really was worthless.

A knock on the top of the bed made him jump and he finally turned his head to look up. Eric was watching him and they locked eyes. His expression was unreadable. "Do you remember the last thing your mother wanted before she passed?"

Kibum shook his head even as his throat closed and tears welled. He didn't remember but something in him did.

Eric smiled sadly. "She wanted you *and* your father to be there. Of course she was angry at him. And her own fate. But she wanted him by her side. Even after everything, she wanted him there." He held Kibum's gaze for a moment longer and then sat back up. "You have a choice, kiddo. Do you want to follow in your father's footsteps?" Eric stood up and started walking towards the door. He paused at the entryway and turned back to look at him under the bed. "Or do you want to be someone else?" With a sad smile and no more words, he opened the door and stepped outside.

The barrier whispered shut behind him, leaving Kibum alone with his thoughts and the warring sensations of pain, anger, and doubt that roiled inside him. He was *not* like his father. He wasn't! He really was just trying to protect Jinki. Wasn't he?

Closeted in his room and full to the brim with uneasy tension, Jinki stared at the sent messages in his personal screen. It had been two days since he'd visited Kibum's place. Two days since he'd called his former guardian and agreed to the Varium's plan. Not that he wanted to. At all. It was nigh on

torture waiting to see if it would do anything that they hoped it would. He knew Kibum was in a bad place. And Eric could have let him in. Not over the coms of course, but he could have come and granted Jinki permission.

Jinki wished he had. He himself would feel better about it, but it wasn't about him right now. He'd pulled Kibum from the brink before. Would gladly do it again. But this was different. He'd never completely shut Jinki out before. And breaking down his walls forcefully might not have the effect he wanted. If this didn't work, it was still possible he could. He was banking on that. It was one of the only reasons he was uneasily sitting on his bed and staring at the unread messages. Had been for hours now actually.

Well, he'd had to eat or his parents would have never left him alone. And done his daily morning exercises to get them off his back. But it was only a half lie when he said he was tired and wanted to go rest in the meantime. He was trying to. But the nerves in his gut wouldn't let him relax as the messages remained stubbornly unchanged. Until they weren't.

His heart thumped hard and Jinki gasped when the first one registered as being opened. He clenched his hands so hard they hurt and he had to remind himself to relax or he might damage something unintentionally. But that didn't stop him from watching as, one by one, the messages opened. And then there was silence and unbearable waiting again.

He nearly fell off the bed when someone knocked. "Coming!" he yelped, scrambling awkwardly into a standing position so that he could shuffle towards the door. Disappointment was a crushing force when his mother was standing in the doorway. "Hi, mom," he forced a weak smile to try and hide his feelings.

"Hey, hon. It's about lunchtime," she reminded him, reaching out to brush his bangs out of his face. "Do you want to eat with us or should I bring you something?" she asked, pursing her lips with a hopeful smile tugging at the corners of her eyes.

Jinki glanced back at his room. He wanted to stay but... waiting was only going to feel longer. He wasn't exactly hungry, though he wouldn't deny he needed the food. His new body took more energy and his internal organs were still mostly whole and his. "I'll come to you," he murmured, nodding once as he stepped out of the doorway.

"Great," his mother smiled, reaching down to grab his hand in hers and gently pull him along. "The doctor said you needed a few more nutrients to add into your diet and I've programmed the synthesizer to take care of it for you."

"Thanks, mom," he replied, forcing another weak smile.

Everyone was at lunch. He'd only just come home so his father had taken a couple days off. Doyun was taking leave from school too. As were Siwoo and Daejung. His mother would still go to work later that evening, but she promised she'd have a nap before she went. Jinki didn't talk much. His sisters did though, carrying the conversation even as they watched him carefully using his new hands. He would break the utensils if he wasn't paying attention. He wanted so badly to stop and check his personal page again. Not that it had changed. He would have received a notice if he had. But that didn't stop the urge.

"Do you have any plans for the weekend?" his mother asked, surprising him out of his thoughts.

Jinki shook his head and quirked his mouth to the side. "Mostly just trying to figure this out," he laughed once, gesturing with his free hand before motioning towards the rest of his body.

"Right. Of course," she agreed with a breathy laugh. "Take your time, hon."

"Will you ever be able to practice low grav gymnastics again?" Siwoo murmured quietly, chewing on her bottom lip as she glanced up and down quickly.

He shrugged and snorted. "Maybe. The doctors say I'm pretty unbreakable now," he assured her reaching to flex a hand in front of her.

"I guess it wouldn't be fair to play grav jumping then either, would it?" Doyun wondered, looking very much like she wanted to poke his arm to make sure for herself. They'd been handling him with kid gloves lately and he was glad to see they were starting to come around at last.

"Probably not," he agreed, a genuine smile finally reaching his face. If he was able to figure this out, he'd probably be stronger than even full grown Moladhi and Varium. Now if only he could make sure he didn't overdo it and break the spoon.

Ding!

Snap.

The spoon broke like a twig as Jinki gasped and whipped his head around to stare towards the front door.

"Are we expecting company?" his father asked, looking around the table before he stood up as if to check for himself.

"I'll get it!" Jinki practically yelled while he lurched from his seat and step-stumbled towards the hallway.

"Jinki!" his siblings gasped in immediate worry.

He ignored them, careening at the door until he slammed into it with both hands braced, staring at the barrier. Heart racing, breath fast in his lungs, he licked his lips and reached for the entry button.

"I can't just leave him locked in his room," Jinki denied, glaring at Eric on the screen.

"Of course you can't. I'm not asking you to," Kibum's foster father replied with a shake of his head. "I'm just asking you to wait."

"Why?" he snapped back, angry and afraid.

Eric's smile was infuriating. "So I can talk to him."

"Why can't I do it?" Jinki wondered, agitated.

"He's locked you out, Jinki. He's obviously pushing you away. Do you honestly think that forcing your way back into his life is going to solve the problem?"

"I did it before," he grumbled, awkwardly crossing his arms over his chest. It still felt weird controlling them when upset.

"You did," Eric agreed with a simple nod, mouth quirking to the side thoughtfully.

Jinki narrowed his eyes. "But?"

"It was a different problem then. And you were present more." Eric shrugged and shook his head. "You've been in the hospital for seven weeks now. Your words. Not mine," he reminded when Jinki opened his mouth to object. "My foster son has had a lot of time to entrench himself in that damn apartment. I should have sold it the last time you two left the planet," he laughed with a breathy snort as he looked away.

Crestfallen, Jinki looked down. "Then what should I do?"

"Just wait." It was not what he wanted to hear but Eric continued. "If my plan doesn't work, you can still try your way. But part of the problem is that you were his haven before. Right now, you're not. And you trying to save him from himself... it would probably be like fighting a drowning man."

Jinki laughed bitterly. Kibum didn't even know how to swim. But it wasn't a bad description. He sniffed once and nodded slowly. "And how do you plan to keep him from drowning?"

"You'll see. Or I'll call you as soon as it fails," he explained with a sideways tilt of his head. "Just give me a day to get there and talk to him. The morning after next, you'll have your answer. Deal?" he asked, one brow arching sharply as he stared at Jinki with intense brown eyes.

His lips thinned into an uneasy frown before he sighed again. "The morning after next but no later."

Jinki's fingers brushed the release and the doors whispered open. "Kibum," he gasped, heart lurching into his throat as his guts twisted. 'I'll burn the apartment myself,' he thought when he saw him.

"Jinki," his boyfriend whispered, one arm resting against the house to steady himself as he panted hard, looking like death warmed over. Deeply sunken eyes and gaunt cheeks hollowed out his sickly pale face. His clothes hung too loose on his bony frame. Messy, unkempt hair sat atop his head and painfully red eyes stared back at him. "I'm here," he gasped, nearly choking on a sob. "I'm- I'm sorry," he apologized in a voice that trembled like a leaf on a windy day. "I'm-" he started to say something else before his vision unfocused. His eyes rolled and he slow-motion collapsed in front of Jinki.

"Kibum!" he yelled, lunging forward to catch the too light body in his arms. The impact hurt his knees but he barely registered it. "Kibum!" he cried again, holding very still as he tried to cradle his boyfriend close without hurting him by accident. Feeling helpless, he looked over his shoulder and called out, "Mom!"

Chapter Thirty-Three:

It was dejavu all over again. Waking up in Jinki's bed with only a vague recollection of how he got there after freaking out. Only this time, he felt worse and he hadn't realized that was possible. Sick with guilt and shame, still exhausted and feeling like he hadn't eaten in weeks, it was easier to try and pulled the scattered thoughts of recent memory together rather than face Jinki just yet.

Kibum remembered Eric leaving the apartment. Remembered finding the strength to finally open Jinki's messages. And read them. One by one. Confused guilt bit hard and panic consumed him then. Driving him out of the room.

Vaguely he remembered Eric standing by the door. Head turning to watch him go. Sunny's face on the screen. Her voice saying something that brushed past his ears. He caught the cab that was waiting out front. For him? Didn't matter.

He blinked and Jinki's house was in front of him. Then the door. Then Jinki. Oh beautiful wondrous Jinki. Then... here.

Here being in Jinki's bed hiding under the covers and steadfastly pretending he was asleep. Or at least unconscious. Clearly, Jinki wasn't fooled.

"Hey," he called softly, tugging on the covers over his head and trying gently to pull them down. "It's just us now. You can talk to me."

Kibum pursed his lips and tried very hard to remain still.

"I know you're awake, love." The word made Kibum wince and his eyes burn. It felt like a weapon to cut him. Not an affectation as it had always been. "You've stopped breathing to hold your breath three times already."

Oh. He had been doing that, hadn't he? For a moment, he debated on whether he should try and maintain the charade, but... it wasn't worth it. He was already here after all. Might as well get it over with if Jinki was going to get mad at him or kick him out or denounce him... He forced his hands to relax, fingers unfurling from the blanket. The next time Jinki tugged at it, the cover slipped free and he had to fight not to snatch it back. Especially when he heard Jinki's quiet gasp.

Neither of them said anything. It was the silence that drove Kibum to look. To make sure that Jinki hadn't somehow disappeared when he wasn't watching him. He rolled just enough to glance over his shoulder. And froze. Mesmerized. His mouth fell open slightly and he exhaled with a shaky breath. "Jinki."

Jinki bit his bottom lip and nodded, a worried smile pulling his cheeks up. "Yeah. It's me," he laughed once, hands dancing in his lap like they wanted to reach towards him.

Mutely, Kibum sat up, moving slow due to feeling like a newborn foal: wobbly and weak. But he didn't look away. He hardly dared to blink. The only version of Jinki he'd seen for weeks had been the ruined one in the cryopod. It had haunted him endlessly. He hadn't seen his face in the hospital so hadn't known, not really, that he was better. His brows dipped and he pursed his lips. One hand hesitantly rose to reach towards the other man's face.

Jinki immediately realized what he wanted to do and nodded encouragement. "It's okay," he whispered with a watery smile. "I'm okay."

Kibum sniffed once, a tiny breath of air to steady him. He swallowed and let his fingertips brush Jinki's cheekbone. A shaky laugh escaped, a mere whisper of sound. The skin was smooth beneath his touch. Unblemished. Not burned. Not covered in blood. "You're alright," he rasped, letting his other hand rise to join the first. He traced the lines of hurt and blood in his memory but found only healed flesh. "You're really okay," he whispered, fingertips tracing Jinki's nose before his thumbs brushed the trembling lips.

"I am," he nodded, warm breath washing over Kibum's hands.

He jerked them back, surprised. And then laughed once, almost unbelieving. His hands hovered in front of him as he looked down, the brief moment of joy slipping away. "I read... the r-reports. S-saw... the video," he stammered slowly, gaze fixated on Jinki's arms and lower body. The horror of mangled flesh flashed through his mind and he winced.

Jinki took a breath and sighed before he slowly reached out both hands, palms turned up. "I was hurt, yes. But they fixed me, Kibum. See?" he offered, waiting patiently for a response.

It was almost impossible to believe. His memory couldn't reconcile what he'd seen then with what he was seeing now. Kibum stopped breathing as he reached his right hand to skittishly touch Jinki's left palm. The sensation startled him because it felt real and he jerked back with a gasp. "But I saw..." he trailed off, looking up to meet Jinki's eyes in befuddled confusion.

"They are fake," Jinki explained, looking down as he turned them over slowly, carefully. "But they're real enough. I promise."

Kibum's hands trembled as he pursed his lips again, staring at the seamless flesh before him. He blinked and took a breath, steeling himself to reach so he could rest his palms atop Jinki's. A sob came free and he smiled. They were warm and real and completely unharmed. They felt just like they had before. "You're okay," he breathed, swallowing hard as he kept his touch feather soft.

"You're not going to hurt me, Kibum," Jinki promised, partially curling his fingers around Kibum's thin wrists. He flinched but didn't pull away. "I might hurt me, but you won't," he added with a laugh.

"But I did hurt you," Kibum whispered, looking up as he held very still. He shook his head and looked down. "That's all I've done since... since..."

Jinki's fingers twitched and they both jerked. "Stop, love," he urged, frowning at Kibum when he looked up to meet his gaze.

"But it's my fault," he insisted, ready to take that blame to his grave. "Everything is my-"

"Stop!" Jinki snapped in frustration, his fingers spasming again. He let go when Kibum gave a muted cry of pain and pulled away.

"See? I'm doing it again," he rambled, hands hovering close to his chest as he stared at Jinki's. "And now you're mad at me," he mumbled, clenching his hands into fists as he kept his head down.

He heard Jinki take a breath. "I'm not mad at you, Kibum. I'm frustrated and still trying to get used to my new body, but I'm not mad at you. I never was."

"But I-"

"Do you think I would try to contact you as much as I did if I blamed you for *any* of what happened?" he demanded, his voice sharp and cutting to Kibum's ears. "Do you honestly think I'd be here right now, trying to show you, to *prove* to you that I'm okay if I really thought any of this was your fault?" he continued, giving a breathy laugh that had no mirth.

"I should have been able to do something," he mumbled quickly, desperate to get the words out.

Air whistled through Jinki's nose. "Like what?"

Kibum had no answer. He kept his head ducked and shrugged his shoulders.

"We had an accident, love," Jinki stated simply, his voice calming down again. "It could have happened to anyone. Anywhere. It just happened to be us this time." Jinki's hand moved into view to rest atop Kibum's legs hidden under the blanket. "And if you're going to insist on taking all the blame for piloting, I should take as much for the engine room disaster."

"But there was nothing you could do!" he denied immediately, shaking his head with a frantic motion as he looked up.

"Like you?" he asked simply, searching Kibum's eyes with his own. "I read the reports too, Kibum." He paused to shake his head and chew on his bottom lip. "You can run the 'What ifs...' and 'I should haves...' all you want, but the truth is that there was nothing you could do either."

Kibum's eyes watered and he whimpered, "But you almost died. And I..."

"And you were mostly unharmed," Jinki finished for him with a nod. "And I'm grateful for that, Kibum. So grateful. Really."

Kibum pursed his lips and struggled not to cry outright. "But Larad and Ercite..."

"Will be missed. Always," he confirmed leaning forward. "But don't you think they would want us to live? To keep going?"

Kibum couldn't answer. The words stuck in his throat.

"Isn't that what Larad was trying to make sure of when he rescued me? When he went back for you and Crawven? When he tried to get to Ercite too?" Jinki asked, his fingers tightening on Kibum's legs. "It's okay to be sad he's gone," he promised, sniffing once and taking a steadying breath. "I am too. But I'm so grateful that he saved me. That he helped save you. That we're here today. Like this. Because of him. And Ercite. And Crawven."

It hurt to hear their names said out loud. Agonizingly so. But it was a hurt that made him feel alive, even though it ripped his heart open and made him bleed. "I just feel like I failed them. Failed you," he mumbled, his voice thick with brimming tears.

"Kibum. Give me your hand," his boyfriend urged, turning the hand on Kibum's legs over to offer his palm in quiet entreaty. Unsure, Kibum looked at it and then back up at Jinki's face. "Trust me," he whispered, offering a small nod of encouragement.

He hesitated for a moment longer but finally allowed his hand to descend into Jinki's. Gentle fingers curled around and then pulled back, dragging his hand with it. Kibum watched them move through the space between them and then gasped when Jinki held Kibum's palm against his chest.

"Feel that?" he asked, staring at Kibum.

Kibum stared at his hand, overwhelmed by the subtle beat pulsing under his palm.

"That's me, Kibum. My heart. My *real* heart, okay? This is still yours, love. It still belongs to you. That hasn't changed," he promised, pressing harder against his chest, like in doing so Kibum would be able to remember it forever.

For a moment, Kibum just sat there on the edge of tears, staring at Jinki's waist pitifully.

"What's wrong, love?" Jinki asked, mildly confused and worried.

A whimper escaped Kibum and he finally explained, "I want to hug you but I don't know if I'll hurt you and I'm sorry." He closed his eyes and finally cried, feeling pitiful and helpless.

"Oh love," Jinki laughed once, pulling Kibum into his embrace and wrapping his arms around him carefully. "I already told you. You won't hurt me."

"I'm sorry!" he howled again anyway, face buried in Jinki's chest as he held tighter, barely able to believe Jinki was here and holding him and not mad and not pushing him away.

Jinki's chuckle was loud in his ear. "We're both a little broken, love. But that's okay. We can get better together, alright? Can we do that? Kibum?" he asked, cradling Kibum's head tenderly.

"Yeah," Kibum sniffed with another whimper. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to leave you. I'm sorry! I was just so scared. I'm so so sorry!" he mumbled, the words running into each other frantically when he finally opened his mouth to free them.

"Shh," Jinki soothed, body shaking with quiet amusement and tears. "I'm here. I've got you, love. I'm here."

It was going to be a long road to recovery for both of them. Jinki had been receiving constant care and attention since he'd been hospitalized so all he needed to work on was physical therapy. For the most part. Kibum on the other hand... His physical state had deteriorated considerably since the accident. Regaining lost weight was one of the first things he needed to do. Worse, his mental state was painfully fragile and, if he ever wanted to captain a ship again, he was going to have to get clearance from a psychiatrist first. There was no way he was ready for that kind of responsibility in the condition he was in right now.

And around all of that, there was the matter of the remnants of the Shine to discuss. It had been salvaged and was being kept in storage until Kibum made a final decision on it. That or until a lack of response became the official answer within a certain time frame. Their contract was not made null and void yet as their situation was covered under the basic insurance package they had, but they would need to make some necessary decisions before too long. The primary one was in regard to scrapping

the whole thing and starting anew or trying to rescue what they could from the wreckage and go from there.

Despite the fact it was their first ship together, it ended up being a fairly easy decision for Jinki and Kibum, once they had a chance to talk about it. "We should start over," Kibum whispered into the pregnant silence.

Jinki reached across the space separating them and grabbed Kibum's hands in his own. "I think so too."

Kibum pursed his lips and frowned slightly. "You're not against it?"

"Not at all," he laughed once, one side of his mouth quirking up. Kibum looked at him warily and a genuine smile bloomed on Jinki's face. "You're my captain. I have to go along with what you say anyway."

"Jinki," he complained with a huff, shaking his head. "This is not the time to--"

"It means I trust and support you, love," Jinki interrupted before Kibum could get too worked up. "Given what happened, I think a fresh start is just what we need too."

Kibum wrinkled his nose at the explanation but nodded once. "Then just say that next time." It was too much pressure to carry the full weight of the decision just because he was the 'captain.'

"Okay," his boyfriend responded softly, patting Kibum's hands in soothing comfort.

So the Shine was fully scrapped to help compensate for the cost of starting over. It did mean they would have to renegotiate their contract with MTV+ and add the extraneous costs beyond what their insurance covered to it, but that was fine. As long as they could fly and resume their contract runs, it would work out in the end. Eventually.

But there were other things to worry about as well, though. Like the apartment for one. Jinki was dead set on getting rid of it and Kibum was stubbornly resistant to the idea.

"We can't just stay at your parents' house and it's already paid for," Kibum reminded his boyfriend with a frustrated glare.

"Yes, but the last two times something major happened," Jinki explained as he preemptively started to dig his heels in, "you... it became your prison."

Kibum flinched at the description. "It wasn't my prison," he grumbled into the silence, looking down since he was unable to meet Jinki's eyes. And it wasn't, but that didn't mean he hadn't locked himself inside.

"I get that it's financially a good thing," Jinki agreed with a quick nod. "But... it's not good- It's not something-" He stopped and started as he obviously searched for the words he wanted to say. "When things are good and we're there together, it's okay," he admitted with a slight grimace. "But I just think..." he sighed, biting his bottom lip as he deliberated on his words. "I just think it has too many ghosts. For you," he explained, looking down and then glancing up quickly.

"Oh," Kibum scoffed, one brow raising at the statement. "You don't think I can take care of myself?" he asked archly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Jinki frowned. "That's not what I said." Kibum's expression darkened and Jinki gestured at him broadly. "You're still recovering from last time. You and I both know it takes a toll on you when you stay there for long periods of time by yourself."

Kibum stiffened as he sat up straighter, a challenging gaze in his eyes. "Well, I'm not by myself anymore, am I?"

"You know what I mean!" Jinki huffed in worried frustration. "I just think that, like with the Shine, we should get a new place for now. Or just turn it over to Eric," he added with a vague wave of his hand. "He thinks it's a good idea too."

"Hah!" Kibum barked a laugh and looked away. "So you've been talking to Eric about this behind my back then?" he demanded sharply.

"It's not like that," he retorted, shaking his head.

"I guess you both want me to give up my ship and my home and just start with nothing then, right?" he snapped, hands gesturing frantically in front of him.

"Kibum!"

"Fine. Go talk to Eric about it then. Obviously you don't need my opinion about this one," he practically shouted as he stood up to leave their shared room.

"Kibum!" Jinki called, but he didn't try to stop him.

It was probably better he didn't. Kibum was frustrated by the conversation but more angry with himself. Part of him knew that Jinki was only suggesting it because he was worried. Honestly, so was Kibum. But that didn't make the reality any easier to accept. It was a topic he discussed with his doctor referred therapist for nearly three weeks before he came to a definite decision.

Despite the fact that it was paid for, in order to continue healing and to not regress, Kibum needed to give it up. The good memories of his childhood were not enough to outweigh the other horrors that lived there. Horrors that struck when he was weakest and not able to fend them off. It was a bridge too far to sell it off completely but signing it over to Eric to manage was a compromise he could accept. For now anyway.

And around the major decisions and rounds of physical therapy Kibum went to with Jinki and mental therapy Kibum had to tackle on his own, he had to figure out how to get a handle on the relationships he'd let languish while he wallowed in his own personal misery. In typical Moladhi fashion, Crawven held more of a grudge over the fact that Kibum hadn't come to see him after the accident, other than that one visit in the hospital. But his was an easy fix: accept what had happened and move on. He was working for Psitassi's company and was generally happy now, even if being a crewmate in the future was not on his list of things to do.

"I wouldn't be much good anymore," he shrugged when they got together in person at last. "Don't get me wrong. I can still kick your ass," he laughed, pointing one long finger in Kibum's direction,

the small feathers slightly shorter than they should have been. "But... I can't get on a ship anymore," he admitted with an embarrassed smile and a head tilt. "The last one didn't go so well. Planet side," he clarified, gesturing outwards towards where the dome would be if they weren't inside.

As for everyone else... they were a bit of a harder sell. Jinki's family wasn't happy about how he'd apparently abandoned Jinki after the accident. Oh, they were aware of the reality, but that didn't free him from their resentful discontent. "I thought they were mad at me." His memory told him they had been. Having seen the hospital video feed, his therapist assured him that was probably not the case. Jinki promised him it wasn't.

"They weren't. They didn't even blame you for the accident at the time. But..." he added with a hesitant cringe, "they did get mad at you when you kept avoiding me."

"Yeah..." Kibum sighed and shook his head. There was no getting around that.

And Henry had left him plenty of vociferous voicemails during that time too. They'd never been on the best of terms but he wasn't shy about laying it on a bit thick when Jinki had been in the hospital. Truth be told, and Kibum would never say it to Jinki himself, but Henry's messages had not helped his mental state at all. His therapist had been privy to those conversations, and how to possibly handle things after the fact. Henry was one of Jinki's best friends after all. An important part of his life. So it was equally important that Kibum make peace with him. Though that was obviously something that would take a while to fix.

As for the rest of Kibum's friends, they were more upset with him that he hadn't reached out to them. Passeri had realized something was up but she hadn't known how to approach it. And with her hands full with the twins, she'd been a little distracted. Jackson felt just as guilty for similar reasons. And Garum too for that matter, even though Kibum rarely visited the club anymore.

For her part, Psitassi chided him from afar but left the door open for him to ask for help later if he needed or wanted. "I can't work miracles yet but I've got a few strings I can pull," she promised, an evident wink in her tone.

Honestly, it was going to take months to get everything figured out and back to a semblance of normal. For the time being, they were allowed to stay at Jinki's parents' house. 'Just until you can get back on your feet,' Mrs. Lee had told them, her tone at odds with the statement. She would probably allow them to stay as long as they wanted to if Jinki asked her.

And there was the whole matter of Kibum getting cleared to fly. Not to mention needing a crew since no one else was willing or able to go with them again, Jinki notwithstanding. Kibum wasn't sure he would be able to choose a crew anyway, given what had happened to the previous one. He was grateful Jinki didn't press him on it, but if they were going to pay off their ship, they'd need to have a crew to run contract deals. That was something they were just going to have to figure out eventually. But every now and then, the universe could be known to throw something unexpected into the mix.

"Jinki! Kibum! You have a guest," Mrs. Lee called up through the communication system. Their door was habitually shut but it was easy enough to reach them through the intercom.

Kibum and Jinki exchanged curious looks. "Did you invite someone?" Kibum wondered with a confused blink.

Jinki shook his head mutely and glanced towards the door. "I wonder who it could be."

Kibum shrugged in quiet agreement and stood up so they could head out together. They heard Jinki's mother as they approached but the second voice was odd. Vaguely familiar yet not. Emerging from the hallway, they saw two figures speaking in front of the door, Mrs. Lee looking up as they arrived. Jinki and Kibum looked down. A smaller than usual Dawbn was there. They turned a simple smile on the duo as they arrived.

"Jinki. Kibum. It's been a while," they confirmed with a small wave.

Mrs. Lee looked between the three and tried to smother a smile. "I'll leave you guys to it," she murmured, waving down at the Dawbn with warm sincerity. "Thank you for coming by, Cyanite."

"The pleasure's mine," they responded as Mrs. Lee walked away.

Kibum and Jinki looked at each other in confusion. "Cyanite?" Kibum whispered.

"Cyan-ite?" Jinki echoed, emphasizing the last syllable.

Cyanite crossed their arms over their chest and chuckled as they looked up. "As quick as ever, I see. Good to see you guys again. Though I guess it is for the first time, isn't it?" they mused, tapping their finger on their bottom lip.

"You're..." Kibum started to say as he pointed at the Dawbn.

"Ercite's..." Jinki continued, mirroring his boyfriend.

"Mmm... child you could say," Cyanite responded simply, an amused smile on their rocky face as they looked between the two.

Kibum made a small noise in the back of his throat as he covered his mouth with his hand and looked at Jinki with wide eyes.

"Ercite's child?" Jinki echoed, stepping close to wrap his arms around Kibum in a gentle hug.

"Yes," they nodded in response. "And they have something they wanted to tell you."

Chapter Thirty-Four:

"Apologies for not coming by sooner," Cyanite offered as they took a seat on the recliner in the living room. Kibum and Jinki sat down on the sofa nearby in perfect sync, still staring at their guest. It made the Dawbn chuckle and wave in amusement.

"Sorry," Kibum gasped, blinking quickly and shaking himself when he realized he was being quite rude. "We just weren't-"

"Expecting me?" Cyanite grinned, tilting their head to the side and shrugging. "I don't think the rescue team was expecting me to develop after being stuck in space like I was but they should know Dawbn are made of sturdier particles." They snorted again and took another breath. "Admittedly, it did

take me longer than expected to develop enough to travel. Hence why I am so much smaller than I should be." They gestured at their body with a rueful expression on the oddly familiar face.

"You really do look like Ercite," Jinki murmured, one hand holding Kibum's carefully.

"I should. They were my parent after all. They and Larad had discussed it a couple times actually. By their count, I'm early, but such is the way it goes," they explained matter-of-factly.

"I had no idea," Kibum sighed, shaking his head sadly.

Cyanite smiled and waved off the words. "They would have told you when they were ready."

Jinki raised his hand with a curious look on his face. When both turned to him, he continued, "I have to wonder... why Cyanite? It's remarkably close to cyanide," he added with a wry twist to his mouth.

"A Terran concern, I assure you," Cyanite laughed once but then stilled. "His favorite color."

"Huh?" Kibum and Jinki chirped at the same time.

"Larad's favorite color. Cyan," the Dawbn continued with a small smile. "Ercite suggested the name once. You should have seen Larad's smile. Should've taken a picture," they murmured with a sigh, a small frown in place.

Kibum's smile hurt his face as he looked at Jinki. A similar expression was on his boyfriend's as well. But then a thought occurred to him and it slipped just a bit as he looked back at Cyanite. "Do you... remember the accident?" he asked cautiously, unsure if it was a touchy subject.

Cyanite snorted. "Ercite figured you might ask that. It's part of what I'm here about," they explained, raising one finger and pointing it between the two. "Yes, I remember the accident. And Ercite wanted you to know that they were happy. Sad that their cycle ended there with Larad, but happy that they got to spend their final moments with him. And that he got you two out. With Crawven," they added almost like an afterthought, the delay intentional and paired with a playful smirk.

It felt wrong but it made Kibum laugh once and sniff as he grabbed Jinki's hand in both of his. "They were happy? Both of them?" he asked, almost like he couldn't believe it.

"Ercite didn't blame you for anything. I doubt Larad did either."

"See, love," Jinki whispered, wrapping his arm around Kibum's shoulders and kissing the side of his head tenderly. Kibum didn't say anything but he did elbow Jinki gently in the ribs with an embarrassed smile on his lips.

"And that being said, I'm here to tell you that I won't be joining you on your next journey, but there should definitely be a next one in your future," they grinned, pointing at Kibum intently.

He frowned and looked at Jinki with a shadow of doubt. "We haven't really made any-"

"Feh," Cyanite waved off, interrupting him before he could finish. They straightened in their seat, tilted their head slightly, and opened their mouth to say, "You are Almighty Key and whatever you

put your mind to, you will make happen. So once you have decided to get your cute Terran ass into the stars again, you will do so,” in a perfect mimicry of Ercite.

It was the last thing Kibum expected to hear. The words registered but hearing Ercite come from Cyanite’s mouth took his breath away. He felt Jinki’s arm tighten around him, grounding him in the moment. It took a second, but then the shock wore off enough for the words to make sense and he laughed. Weakly at first, a broken sound more air than anything else. But once started, it built on itself, growing in intensity and duration. And it was absolutely absurd, but he couldn’t stop laughing. The situation wasn’t funny – or at least it shouldn’t have been – but he could feel himself teetering on the edge of tears and laughter was the only thing keeping them at bay. He closed his eyes to try and get a hold of himself but it didn’t really help.

“Ercit- Cyanite!” Jinki gaped, obviously looking between the Dawbn and Kibum.

“Yes, yes. I know,” they murmured dismissively. Kibum couldn’t see because he still had his eyes closed but he could imagine the Dawbn waving their hand. “Anyway, the other reason I’m here is because Ercite was working on something for when they were eventually going to leave the Shine.”

Kibum hiccupped, then choked, then grunted a response. “Huh?”

“You okay?” Jinki asked with a slightly concerned look at Kibum.

He coughed to clear his throat, patted his chest with his hand, and nodded. “Say that one more time,” he mumbled, pointing at Cyanite.

They just smiled at him and opened a pocket on their side – a literal compartment in their small craggy body. “Here,” they said, offering what looked like a data chip held carefully between their fingers.

Kibum just stared at it and the Dawbn so Jinki reached out to take it gingerly. “What’s this?” he asked.

“The base programming for an AI unit to be your Coms and Navigations officer. They added an additional function to allow it to act as the main computer in the ship as well. Needs a bit of fleshing out but the fundamentals are there,” they explained with a smile. “If they’d had time, they would have finished it for you, but we’re lucky Ercite managed to send it as a data packet before the systems failed anyway.”

The panic of hearing that Ercite had been thinking about leaving at some point faded away and a grateful smile crossed Kibum’s face instead. He reached a trembling hand to pluck the data chip from Jinki’s fingers so he could get a better look at it. “Does it have a name? The AI, I mean.”

Cyanite nodded with a wry grin. “To keep up with you, Ercite wanted it to be a talented, empathetic, and independent program. The TAEMIN program, if you will.”

Jinki laughed and Kibum had to smile as he looked at the chip. “Taemin, aye?” he confirmed, glancing over it to look at the Dawbn once more.

They confirmed with a brighter grin. “Reminder. It’s a work in progress. But I figure you know a person or two who might be able to help finish the programming.”

Kibum's brows furrowed slightly and he bit his bottom lip. He jumped when Jinki nudged him with his shoulder. "Huh?"

"Didn't you say Eric knows a thing or two about programming?" he wondered, looking at the data chip and then back at Kibum himself.

"Well... yes?" he answered hesitantly.

"Perfect!" Cyanite beamed, clapping their hands together loudly. Both Jinki and Kibum flinched at the sound. "Message delivered!" they added, crawling out of the recliner so they could walk over to where Jinki was sitting. They didn't even reach the height of his knee. "Now if I heard correctly, most of your body was replaced," they commented, poking at his leg with one finger. They gasped and grinned. "It feels the same."

Jinki laughed in mild bemusement before he shook his head and patted Kibum's hand. "Why don't you see if you can get in touch with Eric? Message or call. I'll..." he hesitated, turning to look at the Dawbn that was currently still poking at his leg. Jinki gestured in their general direction and added, "get Cyanite caught up. Yeah?"

Kibum looked between Jinki and Cyanite with a raised brow before he giggled and nodded, grateful for the easy out. He had no problem with Jinki's condition anymore but hearing about the damage done and the replacements still made him uncomfortable from time to time. He was working with his therapist to try and get past the nagging guilt but it was a struggle... "Alright. I'll be right back though," he explained, pointing his finger at Jinki firmly.

Jinki grabbed the hand in front of his face and brought it to his lips to kiss gently. "Of course," he murmured, eyes smiling over their connected hands.

"Charmer," Kibum snorted, grinning harder when Jinki winked at him before letting his hand go. Kibum pulled the data chip closer against his chest as he stood up, pausing to look down at Cyanite for a second longer. Like Eric and yet not. They could mimic the other Dawbn perfectly, but in this moment, they were anything but the Eric he knew. With a shrug, he turned away and looked down at the data chip again. "Alright Eric. Let's see what you can do with Taemin here," he smiled, gently petting the chip in his palm.

It took a couple days but Kibum and Jinki were able to get up with Eric in Sanichi to see what magic he could work. Having never been to Eric's house before, Jinki was... nervous to say the least. On the surface, it was a smaller building than his own home – one floor with standard metallic walls and several tempered windows, but at least it was a house and not an apartment like what they'd lived in before moving back in with his parents. For now. It was out of place in comparison to the other houses that more closely resembled where Kibum and Jinki were staying currently. At least until they went inside.

"Kibum!" Eric beamed upon seeing his foster son when he opened the door for them. He raised both arms like he was going to hug Kibum but then dropped them just as quickly. "You never call. You never write. But you are looking better than the last time I saw you." His smile didn't waver at all as he spoke.

Looking over, Jinki saw the hint of a smile on Kibum's face. "Nice to see you too, Eric."

"And I see you brought Jinki today. Hmm," he hummed suggestively, a particularly Terran twinkle in his eye. "Ow!" he cried and flinched away when Kibum smacked his arm.

"Oh, now you're being dramatic," Kibum snorted with a roll of his eyes, completely missing the wide-eyed look Jinki was giving him. If he had ever done that to his father, he'd have been grounded for life.

"So says the diva," Eric winked, letting the act drop just as quickly as he waved his foster son inside. "Oh, don't look so surprised," he commented upon seeing Jinki's expression. "Compared to Terran households, Varium are rather unconventional."

"That's putting it mildly," Kibum responded dryly. Turning to look at Jinki, he went on, "Remember how I told you about Moon and Young?" Jinki nodded in understanding while he sidled past Eric in the doorway, keeping a nervous eye on him. "Well, they weren't the only ones that tried to keep me on my toes," he finished, letting his gaze swing back to his foster father.

"Ah," Jinki murmured, looking between the two like he'd only just realized something that he should have a while ago. To be fair, he had known their relationship was odd, to say the least, and he was aware of Kibum's teenage years in this household, but the Eric he was seeing today was rather different from the one he'd seen not that long ago...

Almost like he could read minds, Eric clapped Jinki on the shoulder with one hand and leaned close to say, "Some Varium are more stable than others."

Kibum laughed once. "His form is stable. He hasn't changed it at all since I've known him. His personality though, is anything but."

Jinki looked to Kibum and then glanced back up at Eric who simply gave him a toothy grin in response. "I see."

"You'll get used to it," Eric promised without a second thought before he moved away and was back at Kibum's side. "So, you were saying something about a data chip that you absolutely refused to send me the information on ahead of time?"

The snort that escaped Kibum held volumes of stories but he only said, "Knowing you, it was entirely possible you'd open it and make changes before we arrived."

"Harsh but fair," the Varium agreed with a shrug before holding out his hand.

Jinki watched as Kibum raised a brow but then reached into his pocket and retrieved the data chip. He set it gently in Eric's palm and then crossed his arms expectantly.

Eric grinned, a childlike expression, and then added, "This might take a minute. Feel free to make yourselves at home. You know where everything is, Kibum," he added, already turning away to get started on his task.

Kibum waved him off and Jinki watched as the Varium approached the far wall so he could turn a small lever on the surface. His eyes widened as he saw a panel in the floor open with a set of stairs

leading down. Eric waited for the panel to open fully before descending, disappearing from sight. Not long after, a quiet hum started up. "Huh?" he asked, looking to Kibum for an answer.

"Eh. Most of the house is underground. You can go look if you want to. He'll call us when he unpacks the data chip anyway," Kibum explained, wandering over to the cabinets in the kitchen. With the ease of practice and familiarity, he pulled out two ceramic cups. "Care for some tea? He has some of the best in the solar system."

"Uh, sure," Jinki nodded, still trying to wrap his head around the new revelations. Taking a slow look around, he approached Kibum so that he could wait nearby. Albeit small, the top room at least looked like a fairly typical Terran house. It had a little kitchen much like in his own home, a small table nearby to eat at, a corner with a sofa for lounging and entertainment where a holoscreen could be activated on the wall, a doorway that likely led to a washroom, and one more that was probably to a room or a series of rooms. When he looked back at Kibum, the other man was noticeably tense and even more obviously doing his best not to look at Jinki. He took a small breath and licked his lips before he murmured, "You've never talked about Eric much."

One ceramic cup clinked as Kibum stilled, settling it against the counter harder than intended. There were tea leaves in the bottom and he seemed to be staring at them. He wrinkled his nose and cupped the glass in both hands. "I would say it's complicated but that seems like an excuse."

Jinki laughed once. "It is, but I can give you a pass."

That made Kibum smile and look over just enough to make eye contact. He looked down again, rolling the cup between his palms. "Eric's not a bad Varium. He's not even a bad foster father. He just wasn't..." He trailed off as he hesitated, debating on whether to continue or not. "He wasn't what I wanted at the time," he admitted eventually, the words small and embarrassed.

Moving closer, Jinki put his hand on Kibum's lower back and leaned over so he could get a better look into Kibum's face. "I know he's not a Terran but--"

Kibum shook his head. "It's not that. I mean, it was a little bit, but," he said, mouth quirking to the side as a breathy snort escaped him. "He's better than my father was in pretty much every way that matters." His hands flattened on the surface of the counter. "More successful. More reliable. Smarter. Galaxies, he's smarter," he added for emphasis, looking up and exhaling noticeably. "Whatever you're thinking, he was better. And that should have been a good thing, but..." he trailed off, shaking his head.

Jinki smiled sympathetically and let his hand slide further to grip Kibum's waist gently. "I think I get it. I mean to me that would be... intimidating," he admitted, brows furrowed as he looked at Kibum's profile.

"You have no idea," his boyfriend answered, giving him a sidelong look that once again spoke volumes of untold stories. "Doesn't help he's older too. I never felt like I could understand or match up or anything with him. And then he had kids around my age. Which should have been a good thing too, but you know. Varium kids," he added with a self-explanatory shrug.

"Now *that* I remember you telling me about. It was tough enough for me dealing with Hajoon. Especially when she got into grav jumping. I can't even begin to imagine what it would have been like with two Varium siblings," he laughed, scratching at his neck distractedly.

"Not easy," Kibum confirmed, taking the cup in front of him and sliding it over to Jinki. "It just needs water now," he explained, nodding towards the processor.

Jinki smiled and picked it up before wandering over to fill it with hot water. When he turned around, Kibum had followed him, cup in hand. He took it without a word and gave Kibum the full one. "Here."

"Thanks," Kibum mumbled, ducking his head with a slight flush on his cheeks.

It still always made Jinki's heart flip when he did that. He took a second to enjoy the expression for a bit longer and then took care of his cup. "You said Eric was old. How old?"

Kibum's scoff was beautifully annoyed. "He never has given me a straight answer, but he's somewhere around two hundred."

Jinki nearly choked on the sip of tea he was taking and did in fact scald his tongue. "Huh?" he coughed, holding the dripping mess away from him.

"Careful!" Kibum gasped, setting his cup down and immediately going to get a cloth to clean it up. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he winced, rather wishing the pain receptors in his hand weren't working quite so well just then. He could have turned them down but he didn't want to do that since it dulled his sense receptors too. "Just surprised."

"Imagine how I felt," Kibum added as he took Jinki's cup and patted everything down, taking special care of his hand and inspecting it closely.

Testing his tongue in his mouth, Jinki sniffed and took a breath. "He seems like a difficult person to live up to."

"Very. The one noticeable flaw he has is that he's lazy," Kibum added, still holding Jinki's hand as he looked up to meet the other man's gaze.

"The exact opposite of you," Jinki smiled, reaching up with his free hand to brush the backs of his fingers against Kibum's cheek.

"Most days," Kibum grinned.

Jinki scoffed but didn't argue. Instead, he cupped the back of Kibum's head in his hand and pulled it close so he could kiss his forehead.

They both jumped when Eric started talking directly behind them. "No wonder my ears were burning something fierce," he grinned, completely unrepentant as they turned to look at him with wide eyes.

"Eric!" Kibum snapped, stepping forward like he wanted to smack him again.

Lazily, Eric reached out to brush the hand aside and then looked askance at Jinki when he moved almost reactively. Jinki caught himself but he couldn't school the flash of surprise that washed across his face. A sly smile tugged at Eric's mouth and he said, "Looks like your replacement limbs are quite the upgrade."

"Huh?" Kibum chirped in confusion, looking between the two uncertainly.

"Anyway. Taemin's up," Eric responded, ignoring the question.

"He is?" Kibum asked, immediately looking towards the stairs. A little slower, Jinki flexed his hands and then followed Kibum's gaze. "Can we go meet him?"

"Sure. Just keep in mind he's a base program right now. Looks like your friend compiled him from several different data chips so there's a lot of room for growth in his automated learning capacities. This one's the..." he paused to scratch at his neck and think of an appropriate term. "Baby version I guess you could say."

"Oh! Let's go," Kibum grinned, snagging Jinki's hand and dragging him after.

Jinki turned his head to look at Eric for a second – the Varium was still wearing a small smile – before following Kibum down into the underground floor. "Whoa..." he exhaled, looking around in wide-eyed wonder at the technological wonderland that opened up before him. All manner of monitors, workstations, and electronics in various states of repair filled the common space. There were doors that obviously led to other rooms, but the main room, and the source of the gentle humming, was apparently a technological hub.

"Welcome to the lair of the Desert Fox," Eric greeted theatrically when he came down the stairs. Kibum groaned but Jinki looked at him in curious surprise. The Varium laughed and straightened up. "A nickname an old Dawbn friend gave to me. Their memories are better than most and this one had ancestors descending from the Earth 1.0 era. We don't have them here. Foxes. Or deserts like they did, but I liked the name. You can do your research on them later," he added with a wink before gesturing towards the hologram in the middle of the setup.

Kibum was already in front of it, staring in wide-eyed wonder. The hologram was young. It looked like a teenage boy with an innocent face that shared similar characteristics like theirs. The black bowl cut was terrible but cutely charming in a weird way. It was like Ercite had somehow managed to make the personification of innocence in a teen's body from the fragments of whatever other data chips they'd used. And rather like a child, he was smiling and looking at them with wide, observant eyes.

"Well go ahead. Introduce yourselves," Eric encouraged, coming close to clap Jinki and Kibum on the shoulders.

"Hi Taemin. I'm Kibum. It's nice to meet you," he beamed, waving at the hologram figure excitedly.

"Hello Kibum. It's nice to meet you too," he answered, the voice pleasantly soft and sweet.

"And this is Jinki."

"Hello Jinki."

"Hi," he responded with a wave, delighted by the encounter so far.

"How old are you?" Kibum asked.

"I don't know," Taemin answered, brow furrowing cutely.

"He's kind of a blank slate right now. There are data packets embedded that I can unzip and install that will give him more of a framework to pull from, but right now... Taemin's basically a child," Eric explained with a gesture at the program. "It'll take me some time and it might alter or create alternative appearances or personalities, but if you want him to become part of your ship, I can make him ready."

"Well, we don't exactly have a ship right now anyway," Kibum admitted with a grimace as he turned to look at Eric.

"We're working on it," Jinki stepped in quickly. Neither of them had been cleared to resume flights anyway so they didn't need one yet, but they'd get there. Soon enough.

"Nice. That'll give me time to get him sorted then. Looks like you've got your main ship computer and Coms and Navigation Officer in one here. Now all you need are your Weapons and Medical Officers," Eric nodded thoughtfully. "Any ideas there?"

Kibum shook his head while Jinki answered, "Not yet. We've really been taking things one step at a time. Crawven's out and we don't even know where to begin to look for a Medical Officer."

"Like you said, you've got some time. I can see what I can find too, if you'd like?" he offered, leveling his gaze at Kibum.

"No," Kibum immediately answered with a shake of his head. "This is enough. We'll get the rest of things figured out ourselves."

"Suit yourself," Eric shrugged, completely unoffended by the abrupt response.

Jinki wasn't entirely sure why Kibum was so against it but it was something he would have to ask him about later. For now, there was Taemin. "How long will it take you to get him ready?"

"Eh. That depends on you two. I have no estimate as there's no deadline right now," he admitted cheekily. 'Lazy,' Kibum obviously mouthed in Jinki's direction. "Priority oriented," Eric corrected with a tap on Kibum's head. "And since you have no ship, Taemin's not a priority yet."

"Eric..." Kibum groaned pitifully.

"What? You know how to fix your dilemma," he explained with a gesture at his foster son.

Jinki reached out to grab Kibum's hand and give it a reassuring squeeze when it looked like he was going to start saying something else. "So are we supposed to leave him here for now? We can't stay indefinitely after all. I still have physical therapy and Kibum..."

"Has things to do too," he agreed with a matter-of-fact nod before he flashed Jinki a grateful smile.

Eric nodded in easy acceptance. "Feel free to stay as long as you like. There are guest bedrooms down here too so you've got a place to sleep if you need." His expression brightened considerably as he looked at Jinki. "And if you're sticking around for supper, I have some stories I can tell about our dear Kibum here."

"Eric!" said person groaned in outrage. Jinki couldn't help but laugh and he covered his mouth to try and stifle the sound. Both heard him though. Eric's smile got bigger and Kibum looked at him in betrayed horror. "Traitor," he grumbled, freeing his hand so he could cross his arms.

"Kibum," Jinki whined playfully, shuffling closer to wrap his arms around his boyfriend and shake him gently.

"Alright lovebirds. Be careful you don't teach Taemin bad habits now," Eric warned with a mischievous smile and a nod towards the program. Both Kibum and Jinki paused and turned to look at the hologram still watching them with wide eyes and an innocent smile.

"Uh..."

"Maybe we should go upstairs," Jinki suggested, pointing towards the ceiling.

"Good idea," Kibum agreed with a shy laugh. He grabbed Jinki's hand in his and guided them both back upstairs.

Jinki was satisfied. He had about a million more questions but it was nice learning a bit more about Kibum's history. Even better that they also had a third member of their crew in waiting. All they needed now were two more and their revamped ship. Things were coming together little by little.

Chapter Thirty- Five:

The outer atmosphere suit was itchy and smelled funny – the price of buying something secondhand, but at least it protected him from the environment outside of the dome. Kibum tried to not breathe through his nose as he picked through the scraps left behind in the heaps of refuse waiting to be processed. They didn't have a large enough center yet to hold and handle all the large waste in the city yet, which was good for them. So long as they didn't get caught anyway.

Another scavenger to your right, Taemin urged over the headset.

He turned to look and noticed a similarly suited figure popping up briefly before they disappeared once more. "Thanks, Taeminnie," he responded, chewing on his bottom lip as he returned to his task. "Any luck?"

"Not much yet," Jinki answered after a brief pause.

"Not sure why we didn't ask your dad for help with this part," Kibum huffed, slightly annoyed.

Jinki's laugh over their shared intercom was soft. "He's already got a couple warnings from the last time I asked him for help with parts for the ship. Since we're staying with them, the least we can do is make sure my dad doesn't lose his job because of us."

Kibum wrinkled his nose but didn't argue. At least they knew the schedule of the collectors so they didn't have to directly worry about being caught. There were the odd patrols though since it was common knowledge there were scavengers that didn't mind risking fines or other such punishments for the goods that could be recovered here. One man's trash was another man's treasure, after all. Jinki knew that Eric would have an absolute field day if he had permission to scrounge through any of the piles like they were now. As for them, the last thing they wanted to do was add another monetary charge to their growing list of things that needed to be paid off already.

There's a weak signal over there, Taemin urged, a blinking light on Kibum's helmet giving him a direction to investigate in.

"I still don't know why we're trying to find stuff here, anyway," Kibum sighed, glaring at the blinking spot before he started walking closer. "It's not like we have a ship—"

There!

Kibum flinched when he was interrupted. "Hey," he grumbled, tapping his helmet and ignoring the whispered 'Good job, Taeminie,' he was certain he heard from Jinki.

I thought you were going to miss it, the program responded without missing a beat, otherwise unrepentant. *See! There!*

The blinking light intensified on his screen and Kibum exhaled. "Yes, I see." His frustration turned to interest though when he noticed just what he was looking at. "What kind of signal are you getting from it, Taemin?"

The AI hummed in thought and then conjured up a holo image on Kibum's helmet screen. *Oh! Patrol!* Immediately, Kibum and Jinki both fell flat and held very still as Taemin dimmed their signals, banishing the image he'd just pulled up. *Can you get into the trash anymore? I think they've spotted the scavenger near us.*

"Star shards," Kibum whispered in worried frustration. But he didn't say anything else as he wriggled himself further into the pile of metallic refuse and held his breath, waiting for something to happen. "Jinki?"

Okay for now. Shh, Taemin added in the next second.

Kibum held his breath and flinched when a sharp siren wailed far too close to them. A small avalanche of debris collapsed nearby, a couple pieces of it tumbling down to scatter over Kibum. In his periphery, he saw a helmeted figure bolting with the patrol bot in hot pursuit. A small humanoid drone, it hovered over everything and easily kept pace with the fleeing person. At least until they got out of immediate sight. And even then, the pair remained motionless as they waited for the all-clear from Taemin.

"Your responses have been getting better," he mused into the silence, a quiet smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

The last visit with Uncle Eric was very helpful, Taemin answered brightly, the sound muted but the energy unaffected.

"Uncle Eric?" Kibum snorted with a crooked grin.

He said I should call him that. Is that wrong?

"No," Kibum answered with a shake of his head. "Not even a month has gone by since he woke you up and already he's claiming you as his nephew."

"He's not entirely wrong," Jinki laughed, the smile evident in his voice.

"That's not the point."

Patrol coming back!

Everyone fell silent again as they waited for the drone to move past them. Kibum's back itched like it had an obvious target but Taemin wasn't warning him and he didn't think he had anything to give them away. It was just hard to wait for it to go by.

Okay. Taemin finally gave the all clear and Kibum and Jinki hesitantly got up into a crouching position, looking around for themselves just to make sure. *Here's the signal again,* he explained, bringing the image to life on Kibum's helmet once more. *Come closer, Jinki. I can show you too.*

"Coming."

"Isn't this just a cleaning model?" Kibum asked, frowning at the schematic of what the full mechanism would be if it weren't in pieces already. It was essentially a cylindrical tube that was apparently meant to hover with multiple arms and legs above and below for cleaning and disinfecting purposes. It wasn't much larger than a Terran but it looked like it could fit nicely into the various ducts that ran through the city.

"No. I mean, it looks like them, but this seems to be an older model," Jinki mused, looking on his own screen as he got closer. "These appendages-" he pointed on his screen and Taemin helpfully highlighted the ones on Kibum's screen, "-are meant for cleaning and disinfecting, yes. But these ones... I believe are weapon arms for neutralizing small, or possibly a bit larger, vermin."

"Huh," Kibum huffed with an uncertain furrow between his brows.

I think Eric's latest adjustments helped picked up more signals. I didn't notice this last time, Taemin explained, spinning the image for them to help the pair better understand what was being discussed.

"I still don't see how a cleaning unit is going to help us. Unless we're trying to get something for Mrs. Lee to help with cleaning around the house?" Kibum wondered, a frown still stuck in place.

Jinki laughed once but made a negative waving gesture. "She wouldn't agree to it anyway since she works around these things all day," he shrugged. "But what I meant by this being an earlier model is that the original versions had to be able to handle vermin in the city. I know you heard about the infestations of old when the dome was first erected. This thing has been here since before we'd gotten everything cleaned up and only needed actual cleaners."

"That explains why a lot of the stuff here looks so... aged," Kibum mused aloud, glancing down at the dingy metals. It wasn't rusted through as there wasn't enough oxygen for it to react with the

appropriate metals, but it didn't look new. And really, Kibum thought he knew where Jinki was going with his train of thought, but it was still a questionable idea. "So...?" he prompted, glancing at the other man and then up at the corner of his helmet as if he was expecting to see Taemin there.

It has a weapons function, Taemin beamed, turning the holo image and circling a particular spot on it like that was supposed to make everything make sense.

"This is supposed to be our Weapon's Master?" Kibum asked in disbelief, literally pointing at the image on his helmet.

"Well, not this exactly, but we could use it as a core component. Not many things have weapon functionalities in the cities anymore. We're actually pretty lucky to have found it at all since all the actual ship junk is never open to the public," Jinki corrected, sounding rather excited about the prospect of their find.

"So it's got targeting?" Kibum frowned, trying to make it make sense. The programming side of things had never been his forte. Getting his hands dirty? Sure. Electronics... they were a bit of a nightmare.

"If I'm right, it has the ability to adapt to weapons programs and can be modified with additional programming or perhaps adjusted to be inserted into a different base program. The point is, we have something to work with for our Weapon's Master... if it works at all though," Jinki explained and then hesitated as he got closer to the item in question.

It's got an active signal so something's salvageable, Taemin explained deftly, highlighting another section on the holo image to give them a direction to look in.

"At the very least, we can take it home and my mom can see if there's anything worthwhile here," Jinki urged, placing a reassuring hand on Kibum's shoulder.

It didn't feel like much of anything really. Kibum still wasn't sure they'd found what they were looking for. He knew it had been a fool's errand trying to search the junk pile anyway, but given their financial situation, it was the best they could do for the most part. They'd spent nearly four weeks looking already and had come across nothing else for a Weapon's Master or a Medbot of any kind. Better than nothing was still good, right? "Okay," he sighed, chewing on his bottom lip. "We can at least give it a try to see what happens."

"Okay!" Jinki grinned, pumping his arm in a slow victory gesture. "Let's see if we can get it out of its shell first," he had to add with another speculative look at the outer casing. There was no way they'd be able to take the whole thing back with them.

There's a panel on the back. If you lift it up, you should be able to open it and remove the processing board at least, Taemin instructed, again giving a visual aid with the holo image.

"On it," Jinki nodded, pulling up imaginary sleeves as he got down closer to the unit so he could muscle it into place. Metal bits complained and a small mountain of debris shifted around them, but eventually, Jinki was able to free the bot and turn it over so Kibum could step up for the actual removal process. "Love," he murmured with a gesture at the panel.

"My pleasure," Kibum nodded, placing his hand gently on Jinki's arm and giving a light squeeze. The other man could do brute force quite well but particularly dexterous things were beyond him at the moment. One day, he was sure they'd get it figured out, but for now, it was best if Kibum handled anything... delicate.

It didn't take them long to remove the panel and the relatively undamaged processing board. From there, it was only a matter of getting out of the junk yard without being detected – courtesy of Taemin – and then back to Jinki's parents' house to see his mom. If she was awake anyway. She still did the night shift thing so it was anyone's bet when they'd get to talk to her.

Luck favored them the following day when she woke up early just to give them a hand. "It *is* from an earlier model," she mused, peering at the board from under her visor with holo magnifying imagery. "First gen stuff," she added with a nod, looking up to peer at Jinki and Kibum with the distorted image from the magnifying glass. Jinki stifled a laugh and Kibum pursed his lips to keep from making a face. She reached out and smacked Jinki on the top of the head lightly. "See how you look with a magnifying lens on your face," she snorted, well aware of how it appeared.

"Sorry, mom," he mumbled, ducking his head to further hide his smile.

Can we use it though? Taemin asked, his holo form popping up beside them, projecting from the portable unit on Kibum's chest pin.

Mrs. Lee jumped slightly and laughed. "I forgot he could do that," she admitted, placing one hand on her chest with a bright smile. She had more wrinkles around her eyes and mouth now and her hair was graying further, the temples streaked through with silver the most. But she still had a vibrant energy about her. She scratched at her chin with her free hand and nodded thoughtfully. "I could probably update it with modern code from the latest model to make it more compatible with additional programs, but there's not much I can do about the actual weapons part." She shrugged helplessly and quirked her mouth to the side.

"Well, that's something at least," Jinki encouraged, patting his mother on the shoulder gratefully.

"Something," Kibum echoed faintly, the realization bringing him down a bit.

And something needs a name! Taemin stated with his arms raised in the air, baggy shirt lifting up as he did so.

"It's not even a thing yet," Kibum grumbled.

"Good idea!" Jinki countered anyway, turning his attention to Taemin. "Did you have a name in mind?"

Me? he asked in surprise, pointing at himself with a befuddled look on his face.

"Yes, you," Jinki grinned, crossing his arms and leveling his gaze on the program. "Isn't that right, Kibum?"

"Huh? Oh. Right," he mumbled, catching up slowly but not against the idea.

Hmm... the AI hummed, tapping his bottom lip – a sight that looked vaguely familiar to Kibum. *Well, I was made with Kibum in mind so... you should be for Jinki*, he thought out loud, pointing at the inert board.

Kibum looked over and saw Jinki beaming at the comment. It made his heart warm in that moment, even if he didn't quite know what the point of this was just then.

Jongki? No, he shook his head immediately, waving the thought aside. *Jongin?* he pondered, tilting his head to one side. *Jongout*, he followed, head tilting to the other side with a goofy smile. He waved the names away quickly and bit his bottom lip with squinted eyes. *Jongdae!* His excitement was pseudo-manufactured as he followed it with, *Jongnight*.

"Taeminnie," Kibum laughed once, crossing his arms and tilting his head to the side as he looked at the program, not missing the way that Mrs. Lee and Jinki were also smiling.

What? Words are fun! he defended himself with a childish grin. *Jong... Jong... Jonghyung?* *Maybe?* No, he continued, shaking his head with a small frown. *Jonghyun!* He gestured with a triumphant flare of his hand and clapped quickly, signaling he had decided.

"Why not Jonghyung?" Jinki asked as he finished clapping with Taemin's excitement.

Taemin wrinkled his nose and tilted his head to the side. *I like Jonghyun. Besides! If you say them fast enough, they sound almost the same! Jonghyun. Jonghyung. Jonghyun. Jonghyung. Jonghy-*

"Jonghyun it is!" Kibum interrupted, clapping once and forcing a laugh. "Now we just need to finish him," he went on, sighing at the prospect. Naming it was one thing. An easy thing apparently. But actually putting the rest of it together?

"Well, what about your foster father?" Mrs. Lee asked, directing her attention to Kibum.

He made a face and looked down. Jinki answered for him, for which he was grateful. "We asked him for help with Taemin here. It feels kind of wrong to keep going to the same source for assistance when we can't even pay him back yet."

"But family's different, love," she reminded him, petting Jinki's hair down in a very motherly gesture.

She didn't say it outright, but Kibum knew she was talking about Hajoan's help with Jinki especially. "Maybe for Terrans," Kibum nodded in acknowledgement. "But Varium aren't quite the same." Oh, Eric would undoubtedly help him if he asked. That wasn't the issue. He would invariably expect a favor later. The size of which would be determined by just how much 'help' he gave in the meantime.

"I'll admit to not understanding the ins and outs of what it means to be a Varium, but I still think family is a different story," Mrs. Lee shrugged, offering a gentle pat on Jinki's hand and a soft smile for Kibum. "That being said, do you want me to upload the code from the newer model?" She looked between her son and Kibum as she pointed at the board with both fingers.

"Yes, please," Jinki answered quickly, giving her a bright smile and leaning close to hug her carefully.

"Mm," she sighed in contentment. "I think that's your best hug yet," she murmured, winking at him before framing his face with both hands and smiling brightly.

"Lots of practice," he answered with a nod at Kibum.

Kibum smiled shyly and ducked his head with an abashed shrug of his shoulders.

Lots of practice, Taemin echoed with an emphatic nod.

"Taeminnie!" Kibum gasped, mouth open in surprise. A glance at Jinki in his periphery showed him to be blushing. And his mother was trying to hide her amused smile with a hand over her mouth. "it's not what it sounds like," he explained, gesturing at Mrs. Lee with both hands in a mildly embarrassed panic.

She laughed a little more and then waved her hand in reassurance. "it's fine, dear. The stars only know how many 'practicing' moments this one and his siblings caught my husband and I in," she added with an unrepentant smile leveled on the now scarlet Jinki.

"Mom!"

"It's really not what it sounded like," Kibum tried to correct with a helpless laugh, not sure whether he should be mortified, amused, or some combination of the two.

But you do have lots of practice, Taemin insisted, crossing his arms and looking at the group in frustrated confusion.

It took them all more than a minute to eventually compose themselves. Mrs. Lee was the first to recover and she wiped the tears at the corners of her eyes with an unrelenting smile. "Okay then. I'll take the processing board for now to see about updating the coding. If you need it back sooner, let me know. Until then, good luck," she encouraged, snagging the board with one hand and using her other to cup the back of Jinki's head so she could kiss his forehead.

"Thanks, mom," he murmured, wrapping his fingers around her wrist gently for a second before letting her go.

"You too," she added, giving Kibum the same treatment, much to his always surprised delight.

"Thanks Mrs. Lee," he whispered, genuine gratitude coloring his voice.

Her smile softened as she looked down at him before nodding once. "Don't give them too much trouble, Taeminnie," she warned with a firmly motherly tone, aiming a finger at the hologram image with a half-smile tugging at her mouth.

I don't, he defended himself with a pouty frown.

"Bye boys. You know where I'll be if you need me," Mrs. Lee reminded them, raising one brow at Taemin's answer before she exited the room, still chuckling to herself.

Kibum looked at Jinki before he swung his attention to Taemin and laughed once. "You are terrible, Taeminnie!"

Still confused, Taemin shrugged. "What? You *are* always hugging," he defended himself, counting down the places on his fingers. "On the couch with TV. In the kitchen with food. When you're standing close enough for it. Sometimes on the bed. Almost always when you sleep. And maybe when you don't sleep at night but I don't know what happens when you leave me in the bathroom," he admitted with a far too innocent shrug. Coming from anyone else, Kibum would have had doubts, but considering his programming, it was entirely probable he really was that innocent still.

"Your speaking skills are getting better, but your tact is not," Jinki laughed, thoroughly amused by the answer. Taemin just shrugged helplessly with a rather lost expression on his face. "Still. We do need to figure out what to do about the current possible program."

Kibum knew they did but he didn't want to. "Ugh," he groaned, slouching on the chair and hanging his head with a scrunched-up face. He heard Jinki get off the bed and shuffle over before arms slide around him and held him close.

More practice!

"Taemin," Jinki shushed with a gentle warning note to his voice. "It's alright, love. We can start asking around the Hub and see if anyone has any leads?" he suggested, patting Kibum's back with light taps.

"We could," Kibum nodded, stifling a sigh. "I just don't want to openly advertise that we're nowhere near being ready to get back on our feet with the fate of our contract hanging in the balance." His shoulders slumped just a bit more and he quietly admitted, "I don't think I can start from the ground up again."

"Kibum," the other man sighed, cupping the back of his head tenderly as he cradled him close.

It wouldn't be from the ground up. I'm here this time, Taemin grinned, drawing their attention with speculative looks.

"What do you mean, Taeminnie?" Kibum asked, a small, fragile seed of hope struggling to take root.

He shrugged first, suddenly aware that he was on the spot to provide an answer. But then he tilted his head to the side with a speculative look on his face. *I'm not saying I have all the answers. Or can find all the answers. But right now, I'm a standalone program. If you give me access to your personal browser, I can help,* he explained, pointing at Kibum's chest.

"Isn't that illegal?" Jinki wondered hesitantly, a deep furrow between his brows.

Not exactly, he hedged with an innocent shrug. *Looking around is fine! What happens after you find something...* he trailed off, hands drifting to either side as he looked down.

Kibum snorted at the implication. "That *has* to be a remnant of Ercite."

"Agreed," Jinki laughed, a genuine smile on his face. "Or possibly Eric."

"That would fit too," Kibum nodded. "Okay. I'll give you permission to look around," he confirmed with a level look at Taemin. "But *if* you find something, you have to let us know first thing. Got it?"

Yes, *sir!* Taemin beamed, giving him a quick salute.

"I can't tell if this is a terrible idea or a brilliant idea," he admitted, looking up at Jinki with the uncertainty he couldn't hide.

"Maybe a bit of both," he responded with a hesitant smile. "I guess it'll depend on what he finds, if anything."

"Fair enough," Kibum agreed with a slow nod. "Now... how do I give him access to my personal browser?"

Jinki opened his mouth to say something and then stopped, one hand raised but motionless. "I don't actually know. We could try to look it up but that might be too obvious," he admitted with a slight frown.

They both glanced at Taemin who seemed to expect them to know the answer by the excited look on his face. When they turned to look back at each other, they murmured together, "Eric it is then."

Chapter Thirty-Six:

Apparently, there was a process that one could use to grant an AI program a type of citizenship which would allow them their own personal access to the web. However, it was also a long process that invariably costed money and required a great deal of time and effort to make it official. The shorter version was essentially allowing the program to 'piggyback' on Kibum's personal access. It created a ghost account of sorts. Fine in theory and harmless in reality, up to a point.

Considering their purposes weren't nefarious, their situation would allow them to escape the worst of scrutiny even if they were 'caught.' But an AI, especially a young one, didn't have the same limitations and self-imposed restrictions a typical Terran had. And giving one relatively unfettered access was like a Pandora's box. You never knew what was going to come out until you opened it.

Which was how, a few days later, Jinki and Kibum found themselves meeting up with the friend of a coworker of an employee who worked with Crawven for Psitassi's parent company: the Syrinx Conglomerate. Their meeting place was innocuous enough: one of the many eateries that peppered the bottom floor of the corporate district. And it didn't feel like it should be anything worth being nervous about, but Kibum and Jinki couldn't shake the sensation entirely.

I don't know what you're both so worked up about, Taemin commented from his usual invisible vantage in Kibum's shoulder pin. In public, he remained invisible, though in private, his holo form could appear at will.

"Well, anytime you start working through the friend of a friend of a friend..." Kibum mumbled with a quick look around. Lots of business types here, though he did see a few casuals peppered throughout at least.

It's the friend of a coworker of a-

"It's okay, Taemin. We know," Jinki smoothly interrupted with a smile and a reassuring pat on Kibum's shoulder. "It can just be a little hard to trust a stranger for something like this."

He's not-

"He's a stranger to *us*," Jinki interrupted again, gently explaining when he knew what the next question would be.

Well everyone you don't know starts off that way, Taemin reasoned in his defense.

Kibum had to laugh at the response. He wasn't wrong but he wished life was as simple as that. "Right. And how are we supposed to know him?" he wondered, glancing around as he nibbled on his bottom lip.

Taemin made a quiet sound that was probably supposed to be a shrug. *He said we'd know him when we saw him.*

"That's helpful," Jinki laughed first, reaching out to give Kibum's hand a light squeeze.

Oh! I bet that's him, Taemin suddenly gasped with a helpful blinking light in Kibum's visual overlay.

It startled him as it always did and Kibum flinched. "Please stop doing that, Taeminnie," he gasped, hating the way it made him feel when he had no control over such a simple thing. It was one of the side effects of him piggybacking on Kibum's browser but it wasn't easy for him to get used to.

Sorry, Taemin apologized quickly, dimming the flashing but leaving a very faint marker to remind him.

"I think I see who he's talking about," Jinki murmured with a sympathetic look at his boyfriend.

"Oh?" Kibum perked up, turning to confirm for himself. "Oh." That was possibly one of the brightest and definitely one of the shortest Moladhi he'd ever laid eyes on. Brilliant rainbow hues were visible on every part of his feathered form that was uncovered. He appeared to have a slightly longer beak than average and slightly more energy too if the bounce in his step and the sheer aura around him was any indication.

Said Moladhi approached the pair confidently, his height not quite matching Kibum or Jinki's, and pointed at the Kibum after a brief moment of hesitation. "Taemin?"

"Taemin?" Kibum asked, directing his question at the program on his pin.

I had to give him someone to look for, the AI responded quickly, a shrug obvious in his tone.

"Close enough," Kibum nodded, his expression neutral as he continued to appraise the newcomer. He wasn't outright threatening which was nice, but he was equally unreadable. And that was odd for Kibum, considering all the time he'd spent around Moladhi at work and at school.

"And you are?" Jinki asked deftly, leaning closer to Kibum so the newcomer would not miss the fact they were together.

"Ceyxin," the Moladhi preened, short feathers fluffing up at the name. Obviously he was proud of himself.

"I'm Kibum and this is Jinki. Taemin's my AI program," he explained, gesturing at the pin on his chest.

Ceyxin's feathered brows rose, making his black eyes much larger than normal. "Fascinating. I thought there was something a bit odd about our interactions. I figured he was just a Varium or Dawbn on the net."

Our interactions were not odd, Taemin grumbled in Kibum's ear, making him fight not to smile.

Jinki did at least allow himself to chuckle before he gestured at the counter. "Would you like to order something or are you better off with continuing the discussion?" he wondered, turning to focus his attention on the shorter Moladhi.

Ceyxin waved off the suggestion and a slightly troubled look came over his face. Eventually he gestured, "I'd like to continue our discussion but... I need to make sure you're aware the scope of my and my backer's intentions have widened a bit."

"Your backer?" Kibum said at the exact moment that Jinki spoke up, "Widened?"

Ceyxin looked between the two in mild surprise. "Did Taemin not mention anything?"

Kibum looked at his pin and Jinki frowned. "Taemin?" he mumbled, exhaling slowly.

I thought... you might not agree... if you knew who... the backer was, he answered hesitantly, the mental image of an uncertain child shining through.

"Who's the backer?" he asked, glancing between Ceyxin and Jinki to let them know he was asking Taemin and not them.

Hmm... he hummed hesitantly, obviously not eager to explain. I'd like you to know that you have a lot of possible contacts through your connections. Did you know that Jackson knows a techie on Earth 3.0 and she comes here fairly often? And that Henry has a friend in the shipping industry that might be able to give you a heads up on contracts in the future. Oh! And your former boss, Garum, knows a whole slew of-

"Taemin," Kibum interrupted him once, his voice firm but soft.

The program was quiet for a moment before he finally murmured, *Psitassi*.

"No," he shook his head immediately. "We've talked about this."

"Kibum?" Jinki asked quietly, reaching out to place his hand on the other man's shoulder in a reassuring gesture. When Kibum leaned close to whisper who it was – he didn't want to attract unnecessary attention with a big name like hers in this area, he opened his mouth in silent understanding. "You could just hear him out, though," he encouraged, slightly tightening his hold on Kibum's shoulder. "There's no harm in listening."

Kibum glared at Jinki for half a second, a flash of frustrated betrayal shooting through him. But it was gone just as quickly. As he'd said earlier, there weren't many people that could help them with their situation without asking for an arm and a leg in the process. The fact that it was Psitassi meant she wouldn't be requesting money, most likely, but that didn't mean the end price would be cheap... "Fine," he relented after a long pause. "We'll hear what... your backer has to say."

"Wonderful!" Ceyxin beamed, clapping his hands together excitedly. "Should we move somewhere a bit more secure then?" he suggested, gesturing towards the door he'd come in from.

"Do we need to?" Kibum asked, glancing at Jinki with some doubt.

"For the second part, yes," the Moladhi confirmed with no hesitation.

"*Second* part?"

"Let's just hear him out, love," Jinki soothed, adding his other hand to grab Kibum's arm so he could pat it consolingly. "We can still decide once we've listened."

It didn't sit right with Kibum, but Jinki wasn't wrong either. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before he wrinkled his nose and regarded Ceyxin once more. "Fine. We'll listen but to be clear, I haven't agreed to anything other than listening."

"Of course," the Moladhi smiled, taking a step towards the entryway. "We've got a hover taxi waiting outside if you'd like to head out now?"

"Taxi?" Jinki wondered with a bemused smile.

"It draws less attention than the usual limo or ominous black cars the corporate types are known to travel in," Ceyxin laughed with a shrug.

"That's true," Kibum agreed, going along reluctantly. Though he didn't say it, he was definitely going to have to have a talk with Taemin later.

There was no physical driver in the taxi, as expected. To give them room, Ceyxin hopped into the front passenger seat while Jinki and Kibum got comfortable in the back. The ride to the official corporate building wasn't long, but it was nerve wracking for Kibum at least. He'd been to this part of the city a couple times, and none of them had been for any good reason. Furthermore, the building they were heading to now was literally the Syrinx Main Office in Yonichi. There might have been one in each of the dome cities for all he knew. The only other thing he was certain about was that the actual HQ of Syrinx was stationed on Earth 2.0 since it had been the friendliest in terms of setting up interspecies business relations back in the day.

"I always forget how big this place is," he whispered, looking up and down at the multistoried building.

"Have you ever been here before?" Ceyxin wondered, turning around to peer at them over the back of the seat. Kibum shook his head and Jinki followed suit. "That's actually not that surprising. Mrs. Psitassi hasn't been in her position all that long after all."

"I'd heard she was moving up after she got married," Jinki nodded to himself, brow furrowed as he obviously tried to fill in the gaps.

Youngest of five children, Psitassi Syrinx married the youngest son of the interspace shipping magnate Tyton Guild who owns the Kettle Guild. She is set to oversee the merging company on Yonichi with her husband Strigid Guild, her first real foray into business and politics, Taemin helpfully answered, obviously reading something he'd come across.

"She's got her work cut out for her, but she's learned a thing or two since she went to University," Ceyxin mused, his expression thoughtful as he regarded Kibum and Jinki smoothly. "None of her siblings ever thought she'd want to get into the business. But you know how the baby of the family is. Her father couldn't say no," he shrugged with an amused laugh.

"That explains it," Kibum nodded in understanding. Personally, he thought it was rather Passeri's influence that had the most impact on Psitassi but he hadn't been keeping up with either of them as well as he could have...

"Indeed! But here we are!" Ceyxin grinned as the taxi came to a stop at one of the many elevated drop off points. He got out first and waited beside the taxi for his guests.

Jinki grabbed Kibum's hand lightly with a reassuring smile and led the way out first. The shining building was one of the marvels of technology in the city. Made almost completely of the same kind of material as the protective dome, the walls were see-through on demand, and the doors were comprised entirely of nanobots. Well, minus the first floor which had the standard safety and security protocols in place. It looked like something out of a museum though: pristine and not a building the average person should be in.

Nano barriers washed over them, the sensation not unlike walking through a water curtain, and the interior appeared before them, as sterile and intimidating as the exterior. The only difference was that there were far more Moladhi inside. Kibum could see a couple non-Moladhi, but on this floor at least, they were few and far between.

Ceyxin led them easily through the identical walls and waved at nearly everyone he came across. Apparently he was a known figure in these parts. On either side of them, he pointed at opaque rectangles set within the walls that looked as if they were probably doors of some kind. It seemed as if he was counting more than anything else. Before they reached the end of the hallway, the Moladhi ducked into an offshoot pathway and then stopped in front of an opaque door that seemed exactly the same as every other one they'd passed.

"Here we are!" he announced, gesturing at the door. When all he got was uncertain looks from Kibum and Jinki, his brows furrowed, narrowing black eyes in the process. They widened comically when a thought occurred to him. "Right! Terrans can't see the markings on this floor. Apologies!" he said, clapping his hands together and nodding his head towards them.

Want to see what he sees? Taemin asked quietly, the voice in Kibum's ear making him jump.

"You can do that?" he whispered back, glancing at Jinki who simply shrugged.

Instead of answering, Kibum's viewing screen came up, the surface blank but see-through. Then it shimmered, like a filter had been put in place, and the heretofore unseen image on the door abruptly appeared. He gasped at the fluorescent holo image that stood out regally on the surface of the door. It was an exact image of Psitassi, but her colors were even more spectacular than usual. The

usual hues of her teal, gold, and red had added shades or took on entirely new colors under Kibum's modified vision. He felt cheated at the lack of vibrance in his everyday vision for just a moment.

"And in we go!" Ceyxin announced as the door swung open.

Taemin dropped the filter as soon as he did and Kibum felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. He could feel Jinki's concern and he squeezed his hand reassuringly. "Is that how Moladhi see all the time?"

Most of them anyway, Taemin answered affirmatively.

"I'll tell you later," he promised, turning his attention to Jinki as he took a steadying breath. He needed it too, for as soon as they stepped inside, the Terran-vision-pale-in-comparison Psitassi was waiting for them, perched on top of her desk with one leg crossed over the other.

"Kibum! Jinki!" she greeted excitedly, hopping up and prancing over to them excitedly. "it's been too long!" she added, grabbing both of their hands in hers as she looked at them from a slightly higher vantage.

"Hey, Psitassi. You look well," Kibum greeted, somehow managing to smooth his features into a mask Almighty Key might wear. It was honestly the only way he could interact with her just then, given the comparison he'd seen a moment ago.

"So do you. Both of you!" she added, looking each Terran up and down with a genuinely happy expression on her face. "I'm sorry I couldn't go see you in the hospital, Jinki. I was just so busy during that time," she admitted with a pained grimace.

"It's fine," he assured her with a shake of his head. "I got your gifts and it was the thought that counted anyway."

"And you," she continued, giving Kibum's hand a small shake. "You should have called or said something. I'm still mad at you for not accepting my calls," she chided with a glare that should have been intimidating.

For Kibum, who was fairly well versed in Moladhi facial expressions and mannerisms, it was an honest showing of concern. "Yeah," he admitted after a slight pause.

"We're working on that," Jinki promised, grabbing Psitassi's attention so that the expression shifted to one of polite interest.

"Slowly apparently," she snorted, glancing at Ceyxin who was watching intently but staying respectfully silent. "You should have called me first, or at least early on," she amended, gesturing her hand at the room around her, "when you were having trouble finding... crew members I guess."

Kibum wrinkled his nose and he saw Jinki raise a hand as if to temper his words. "You ask friends for reasonable amounts of help. If I'd contacted you immediately, it would have seemed like abusing your position or our friendship or both," he explained as plainly as he could. And all of it was true, but his biggest concern was not being in anyone's debt. He had a hard enough time not feeling like that with Jinki, much less anyone else.

“Still,” she complained, waving one hand at him with a small frown on her face. For a second, she paused and then turned her attention back to the other Moladhi in the room. “Ceyxin. Could you go get the android from the back room?” she asked, gesturing towards the rear of her office.

“On it, your Ladyship,” he saluted quickly and scampered off, disappearing into a well-hidden door.

Kibum suspected it was another vision thing, but his focus was on Psitassi instead. “Android?”

“Yes,” she nodded simply. “It’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about. Ceyxin filled me in on your weapons master situation. It’s a pity about Crawven really, but understandable,” she mused, tapping at her beak lightly. “He is recovering nicely, but I don’t think he’ll ever leave the planet again. Though maybe one day,” she shrugged, gesturing at the air as if to say anything was possible.

The door in the back made a soft whispering sound as Ceyxin returned leading a humanoid android that was taller than him. He was wearing a simple black bodysuit that did little to hide his toned physique beneath it. His face was stoic but handsome with full lips, bright brown eyes, and a fall of wavy black hair that covered the top half of his head. In perfect sync, Kibum and Jinki pointed at the android together.

Psitassi giggled and covered her mouth with one hand. “This is Ming. Or so he says. And it’s the name that is etched on every identification marker in him,” she admitted with a shrug, a slight note of uncertainty in her voice.

“But why is he here?” Kibum asked, glancing between the two and feeling a surprising thump in his chest when Ming’s dark eyes settled on him for a second. He was attractive. Too attractive for anything they’d need in the ship.

“He’s a medical android,” Ceyxin answered with a wide grin.

“Eh?” Kibum and Jinki chirped.

“To be fair, he was previously a companion bot at one of the establishments my grandfather shut down. He’s been in a storage unit for quite some time actually. I only recently discovered him when I was going through some of our property to see if there was anything useful for me,” she admitted.

“So how do you know he’s a medical android?” Kibum demanded, tearing his gaze away from the humanoid so he could look at the Moladhi again.

“Despite his appearance, he has so many subprograms of medical code built into his hardware that it’s the only thing he could be. At least that’s what the programmers here said anyway,” she explained, reaching out to brush Ming’s hair down where one piece was sticking up more than it should have been.

He deftly reached out to catch her hand, patting it in a genteel manner and offering a seductively sweet smile in response. “Allow me,” he encouraged, releasing her hand so he could brush his hair back himself, the act almost a show as he composed his expression with a smirk and narrowed eyes while he combed his hair with long, slender fingers. Though he only spoke two words, his voice was resonantly deep and... sensual if Kibum had to describe it.

"He does have a tendency to follow his most recent protocol from time to time," Ceyxin commented with a raised brow.

Thoroughly confused and very distracted, Kibum glanced at Jinki and then at Psitassi. "What do you...? I'm... I'm not sure what your intention is right now," he finally admitted, forcing himself to stop looking at Ming as he turned his frustration to Psitassi. He didn't exactly miss the way that Jinki was looking between him and Ming as well either.

"About that," she started to speak, clapping her hands together and directing her attention to him. "I'm aware of your financial situation and, given my last attempt to pay for Jinki's hospital bills," she added, glancing at Jinki herself, "I'm relatively certain you would have a similar reaction in regards to any funds I might offer."

"You would be right about that," Kibum confirmed with a nod as he crossed his arms.

"I'd like to propose an exchange and present a proposition to you," she went on. "Now, I can't have a direct hand in configuring your weapons master program, but it can be done," she explained, gesturing at Ceyxin.

"I can be the go-between for the various departments it would need to travel to for the full overhaul," he promised, raising one hand like he was taking a vow.

"As you're probably aware, the process is generally costly in time and funds. And I'd have to bend a few rules to make it happen so that my father and my husband don't hear about it too. The fewer people in my family involved, the better," she laughed, shaking her head with a rueful smile, the response almost too flippant to Kibum. "So, what I would like is two things in exchange," she reasoned, holding up two fingers. "One, you do me the favor of taking this..." she hesitated as she gestured at the now composed Ming beside them, "medical android with you. He's wasted here amongst Moladhi. His primary processes are all geared towards Terrans anyway."

Though he knew they needed a medical person for their ship, Kibum didn't entirely trust the setup. "Why?" he asked, a suspicious gleam in his eye.

Psitassi crossed her arms and laughed once. "I don't know if you're just very suspicious nowadays or that you're actually better at reading people."

"Probably a bit of both," Jinki smiled, patting Kibum on the shoulder with a knowing look.

"Hey," he grumbled, glancing at Ming and then looking away when he thought he saw a tiny smile on the other man's lips.

"Okay. I know you need a medical assistant for the ship, but I also think there's more to Ming than we're seeing. The programmers explained it as him having black spots in his data. They're not empty but they are apparently coded or locked or something. They could probably figure it out given enough time and energy, but none of them thought it worthwhile. If you must have a better reason, feel free to chalk this up to my curiosity," she nodded, gesturing at the android with an elegant hand. "But in all honesty, I'd like you to work with him to see if anything interesting happens with him. As I said, the programmers couldn't tell me anything useful, and I could be wrong, but I am curious to see

what you might find in his company,” she explained, expression turning thoughtful for a second. “There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with him or to otherwise worry about.”

Kibum took a small breath and looked Ming up and down quickly. “Okay,” he frowned, turning his attention back to Psitassi. “If, and I do mean if, we agree, what’s the second thing you wanted in exchange?”

“Now this you might consider a win-win for both of us,” she preened, feathers rising up in her excitement.

“Oh?” Jinki prompted, looking at Kibum with a slightly excited expression.

“Yes! Once you get out there, the only thing I ask is that you keep me in mind for any new information, scrap, products, or things that might otherwise be useful for a growing business partner in a challenging world,” she admitted, exhaling heavily as her feathers flattened with some of her exuberance dissipating. “I’m not asking you to break your current contract,” she assured them both, waving her hands in their direction to banish the thought. “I’m only asking for you to be my eyes and ears and occasional salvagers when the opportunity arises. I can and will compensate you fairly.”

Kibum suddenly felt lightheaded at the offer. That was a lot. It seemed almost too good to be true and that was an immediate red flag for him.

You okay? Taemin asked, obviously monitoring Kibum’s vital signs.

Kibum nodded to let him know and took a slow breath. He glanced at Lee again and then shifted his attention to Ceyxin and Psitassi. Feeling a bit lost, he turned to focus on Jinki who seemed pensive but had an otherwise open look on his face. “Thoughts?” he asked, desperate for some kind of feedback.

Jinki wrinkled his nose and looked at the people in the room once. “I’m interested,” he admitted, gaze lingering on Ming for a second longer, a tiny furrow appearing between his brows. “But hesitant too.”

That was reassuring for Kibum at least. “Same,” he admitted, licking his lips before biting on the bottom one. “Can we think it over first?” he asked, directing his attention to Psitassi.

“Of course,” she nodded. “Would you like me to send you the tentative contract so you can read it over at your leisure?”

“You already have a contract drafted?” he nearly choked.

“Absolutely.” She gestured at the space they were in and shrugged, “I’ve learned you must be prepared for just about anything, especially if you want to make something happen.”

“Ah,” Kibum mumbled, embarrassed by his lack of eloquence. “Then yes. Send us the contract. We’ll look it over shortly and let you know.”

“Wonderful,” she smiled, the expression seeming to be genuine, but Kibum had the suspicion it could also be an act. Not unlike the ones that he’d put on in *The Stars Aligned*. It really did seem too good to be true at first blush.

"Would you like to stay to check it out or do you want to go back first?" Ceyxin asked, making a motion at Psitassi as he pointed at his wrist like there was a watch there.

"Oh. Right. I have a meeting coming up soon," Psitassi explained, taking a breath and pulling herself up to her full height. The shift was definitely something she had probably picked up from Passeri; Kibum had seen the other Moladhi do it often enough to recognize the same mannerisms.

"Then by all means," Jinki encouraged, gesturing at the door to let her know to go if she needed to.

"We'll look over the contract and get back to you soon," Kibum promised, licking his lips again as he managed to keep himself from looking at the medical android once more.

"Please do," Psitassi smiled, leaning closer to grab their hands again, giving them a comforting squeeze. "And if we all have time, I'd love to catch up sometime. Maybe we can get together with Passeri and Jackson and the chicklets," she suggested, for a moment just the University Moladhi she'd been when they first met.

"I think they'd like that," Jinki smiled politely, glancing at Kibum who gave him a little nod. "As would we."

Psitassi's smile widened just a touch and then she sighed as she glanced at Ceyxin once more. "Ceyxin will show you out. But thank you both for coming in today. It really was good to see you again," she promised.

"You too, Psitassi," Kibum echoed, nodding at her once and then waving when she stepped away to smoothly head out the door.

After she'd left, Ceyxin turned to them and grinned. "That went well, I think."

Well, that was one way of describing their meeting.

Chapter Thirty-Seven:

As soon as Kibum and Jinki received the contract later that same day, they started poring over it with a desperate intensity. Kibum was suspicious but a part of him really wanted to take it at face value. As for Jinki, he was hopeful; it could be the answer they were looking for and he was just afraid Kibum wouldn't give it a chance.

They spent days reading and rereading the lines and clauses and fine print and everything related to them. Jinki asked Taemin to look up the terms and regulations they weren't familiar with and made copious notes and comments to consider for later or potentially ask Psitassi when they saw her again. There would definitely be an again, but how it ended up remained to be seen.

At Jinki's urging, they sent a copy to Eric so the more experienced Varium could take a look at it and perhaps field it to the right people if something caught his attention. Kibum was fine with Mr. and Mrs. Lee weighing in too, but neither of them were the most versed in the legal field. And as much as Doyun was getting into that area of expertise, she had only a cursory understanding of the finer points of contracts and legalities.

“Give me a few more years and I can be your legal representative for sure!” she promised him with a bright grin, holding her pinky out. “Until then... I’m not the one to ask,” she admitted with an apologetic smile.

Hajoon probably knew people that could give additional insight, but Kibum and Jinki both felt she’d helped a great deal already. Neither were inclined to try and ask her to help them tip the scales in their favor again. Besides, she was busy in a different dome and sometimes traveling between planets as well for matches and training at this point.

On the other hand, they did know some people locally that could maybe bring a fair second opinion to the table. And since it was written by a Moladhi – or several Moladhis, Kibum also figured it would be a good idea to get an actual Moladhi to look at it. Worst case scenario, it was a great excuse to visit Passeri, Jackson, and the chicklets.

“Oh! Look at them!” Kibum cooed as he fawned over the twins when they finally managed to set up a time to meet with Passeri. “They’re getting so big!”

Passeri laughed daintily as she nodded and gestured for Kibum and Jinki to have a seat. “Citrea has been eating better lately,” she explained, gesturing at her daughter with similar gray and yellow markings like her mother, but also grayish-blue feathers up and down her arms. “Leio has never had such a problem so he’s doing fine as well,” she preened, gesturing at her son whose coloration featured a gray head and yellow feathers extending down most of his body. He was more noticeable due to the white rings around his eyes too. Neither looked much like Jackson yet but apparently it could take time for that kind of genetic splicing to mature, if at all.

“I swear, the last time we saw them, they were this big,” Jinki laughed, holding his hands apart so that only a Moladhi-sized egg would fit between them.

“A sign you should come by more often, no?” she gently teased in response, reaching out to brush the backs of her fingers against Kibum’s cheek when they noticed him look down. He opened his mouth to say something but she shook her head with an understanding smile. “We each have our own challenges to face. I wanted this,” she mentioned, nodding at her children, “but it is demanding.”

“Is that why Jackson isn’t here right now?” Jinki wondered, moving close to sit next to Kibum as he played with the chicklets. They were just over a year old now but most of their vocalizations were chirps and half-formed words. The universal translator wasn’t able to pick up on them yet since they were still learning Moladhi so it all sounded like gibberish but it was adorable.

“In part,” she agreed with a nod. “We’ve been taking turns at The Stars Align. Parenthood is a wonderful thing but it does require a fair bit of funds.” Her expression was amused as she looked at her children again. They noticed her attention for a second and literally beamed up at her, beaked mouths opening with a delighted caw of sound emerging as they waved at her with awkward limbs, all gangly grace. “You just ate, you little gluttons,” she clucked, reaching down to caress their heads with one hand each. Her attention shifted back to her guests and she offered, “Should I move them to the other room? I know they can be a bit distracting.”

Kibum made a noise in the back of his throat and shook his head. “It’s fine,” he promised her, tickling at their feathers to catch their attention so they’d look at him again. At this age, additional

coverings were entirely optional but they did have little blankets nearby in case they got cold. The room was warm though so they were unbothered as careful small beaks nibbled at Kibum's hands. He positively beamed at the sensation.

Jinki felt his heart melt all over again at the expression. It had been a while since he'd seen such a smile on Kibum's face. That alone was worth the visit. Quietly, he slipped an arm around Kibum's waist and held him in a gentle embrace. The look he got in return would have made him cross the entire universe if he had to just to see it again. "Happy?" he asked, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it for himself.

"Very," Kibum whispered in response, leaning into Jinki's chest as he kept playing with Citrea and Leio.

Soft fingertips patting the back of Jinki's head made him look over at Passeri. Her motherly approving smile was also validating in a different way than his own mother's was. She didn't say anything but it was obvious she was grateful. For what, he didn't entirely know, though he could make some educated guesses. And although she could have brought up the contract much sooner, Passeri chose not to initially. She retrieved refreshments and offered snacks, letting Kibum sneak tidbits to the little ones while she pretended not to look.

Only when the twins started getting fussy from needing to sleep did she intervene. "Okay you two. Nap time," she soothed, reaching down to pick up the chicklets and cradle them against her body as she wandered off to their room to set them down. She returned shortly with a tired but satisfied look on her face as she gracefully collapsed on the floor beside them, lounging against the chair nearby for support.

"Are you okay?" Jinki asked with a concerned chuckle.

Passeri nodded in mute response. "Just catching my breath," she added with a wink, letting her attention settle on Kibum at last. "And as for you, chicklet," she said, waiting for him to look at her first. "I took a look at the contract you sent me. Pretty straightforward for a Moladhi contract," she mused with a shrug. "But I didn't see anything to be truly concerned about."

"So there's nothing unusual about it?" Kibum pressed, a skeptical look in his eyes.

The Moladhi laughed and waved her hand in front of her face. "For a Terran perhaps. For a Moladhi, not at all. It's almost certain she has an ulterior motive in requesting the 'first voluntary rights to intergalactic finds of the physical and / or intellectual nature' but I don't believe there's anything nefarious or malicious behind it."

"What about the medical android?" Jinki wondered. Having read the contract himself, he had thought it odd the android had been included, but considering it was part of the deal, it did make a certain amount of sense. It had just seemed wordy at the time.

"Oh. There's definitely something there too," Passeri conceded with another nod. She tapped her beak and sighed. "I don't know *what* exactly but I imagine she suspects there's something in his programming to make further investigation worthwhile. Considering her position, it makes sense she can't keep him around her like she might prefer. A Moladhi android perhaps, but a Terran one... that would be frowned upon in the circles she now travels in," she explained with an annoyed gesture.

"Even though it's a medical android?" Kibum wondered, one brow raised.

Passeri laughed once. "For Terrans. The bigger problem is the previous program he was operating under: companion bot. For a married Moladhi of her stature, that's especially problematic," she explained, eyes wide as she shook her head at the implications. "I can't say I'm not curious how that might affect your own situation, if your reactions to that title are any indication," she mused with a far too perceptive gaze.

Kibum shifted uncomfortably beside Jinki and he had to do his level best not to do the same. They'd had that conversation already and it had been slightly... awkward but good in the end. "He is attractive," Jinki confirmed with a small grimace. "Not that this is a bad thing if he's actually good at the medical side of things like we hope."

"We're just worried about his 'most recent protocol' tendencies..." Kibum trailed off with a snort. "As Ercite would have said, he's pretty much a Casanova."

Passeri tilted her head in some confusion. "I do not know the name but I'm pretty sure I understand what you mean."

"We had to look it up too," Jinki said with a reassuring nod.

She smiled in response. "All things considered, it does seem like a worthwhile contract. Minus the lack of a time frame under which she would be able to continue to claim voluntary rights to all the things you find. I'd ask about that..." she stated firmly, tapping her finger on the table in front of her. "And what she hopes to gain if something about Ming's possible nature does come to light."

"Eric said as much too," Jinki confirmed with a shrug.

"Oh. Have another expert, do you?" she teased in response, clearly joking.

Kibum made a face. "Well, when you know a two-hundred-year-old Varium who's been around..."

Passeri flinched and placed her hand against her breast. "I forgot your foster father was that old. Definitely more the expert than I," she admitted, thoroughly amused.

"It might have been nice to ask Cyanite too," Jinki added, nudging Kibum's shoulder with his.

"Yeah," he agreed after a very long pause. "They're just not the same, you know?" he whispered, looking up at Passeri and Jinki as if he was seeking validation or understanding.

"How is Cyanite doing?" Passeri asked, sidestepping the question entirely.

It was done with such a sincere sound that it worked to distract Kibum and he smiled faintly. "Well so far as I can tell."

Passeri sniffed at the brief answer and then looked around the room as if something was missing. "I've also heard of another companion you usually have with you of late. Where is he?"

You mean me? Taemin asked, suddenly popping into view when the opportunity presented itself.

“Galaxies!” Passeri laughed upon seeing the holo image appear before her in all his young Terran glory. He still had the bowl cut of hair and baggier than necessary clothing but he was all smiles when he popped into visual existence.

“Taeminnie,” Kibum chided with no heat.

“So you’re the AI that was snooping around not that long ago,” Passeri giggled, tracing the outline of his face with her fingertips like she was trying to etch him into her memory.

I wasn’t snooping on you, he corrected innocently, looking at Jinki and Kibum as if he’d been caught doing something wrong.

They all laughed at his response and the Moladhi nodded. “Not on me, no. But I did hear about some of your adventures. Especially how you’re the one responsible for the contract we’re considering now,” she reminded him with a finger pointing at his nose.

Yeah...

“It’s pretty good though. I think we’ve almost decided, haven’t we, love?” Jinki encouraged, nudging Kibum in the shoulder again as he looked at him with a sideways glance.

Kibum ducked his head and took a long slow breath. Eventually, he looked up and gave a small nod. “I guess we have, haven’t we? But we still have to figure out how to get the rest of the ship-”

It’ll be easier when we have a crew assembled, Taemin reminded him brightly.

“He’s right, you know,” Jinki followed up. “The Hub will be much more hospitable when we can say we’re ready. We just need the finished ship to make it happen.”

For a moment, Kibum struggled with something, his face crumpling as he pursed his lips and clenched his hands in his lap. Jinki reached out to cover them with his hand, giving a light squeeze as he looked at Kibum’s face with gentle encouragement. “What if we-” he started to say before stopping, looking down again. “What if *I* can’t do it?” he whispered, tension writ taut in his face.

“Kibum,” Jinki sighed at the same time Passeri murmured, “Chicklet.” They looked at each other with sympathetic smiles and he nodded.

She took it as permission to continue and reached out to press her fingertips to his closest knee. “Do you remember when you first started performing at The Stars Align?”

A laugh whistled through his nose and he couldn’t quite hide the smile that tugged at his lips. “Kind of hard to forget.”

“You knew you loved the spotlight but you were so awkward on the stage, weren’t you?” she pressed, amusement woven into her tone.

His smile widened and he actually laughed aloud then. “Yeah. I kept falling and sliding off the pole and tumbling with those damn boots,” he admitted, wiping at the corner of his eye in reaction.

“Do you remember what you asked me back then?”

Kibum stilled and his expression turned neutral. After a moment, he licked his lips and nodded. "What if I can't do it?" He swallowed hard and sniffed once.

"And what was my answer?" she asked, gently prodding as she rested her hand firmer on his knee.

Jinki watched as Kibum looked up from under his bangs to make direct eye contact with Passeri. "You told me-" He had to pause to swallow again and take another breath. "You told me only I could decide if I could do it or not."

Passeri looked at Jinki quickly and then back at Kibum. "And what did you do?"

He sniffed and laughed breathily, a raw quiet sound. "I did it," he croaked, wiping at the corner of his eye again.

She reached out to wipe a tear from his cheek with the back of her finger and smiled warmly. "Whatever you decide to do, chicklet. We'll still love you and be here for you," she promised, shifting her hand to cup his cheek in her palm.

"Exactly," Jinki agreed, leaning close to press a kiss against the side of Kibum's head.

For a moment, Kibum ducked his head to cover his face with both hands. His shoulders jumped once as he hiccupped quietly. Then he took a quick breath and wiped at his face quickly with one hand. "I'm such an idiot," he mumbled with a forced laugh, wiping at his eyes again when the tears wouldn't stop.

"Oh love," Jinki murmured, reaching out to pull Kibum close as he tucked the other man's head under his chin and held him tight. In his periphery, Taemin looked lost and confused. Fortunately, Passeri was there and she gestured for the AI to have a seat while she quietly explained Terran emotions as best she could.

It took Kibum several moments to compose himself. Jinki just held him, rocking them both back and forth gently while Passeri talked with Taemin. Eventually though, Kibum grabbed Jinki's hand and held tight as he took a deep but shaky breath. "I don't know that I can say I'll do it right now," he whispered, voice low and muffled since he was talking into Jinki's chest. "But is it okay to say that I want to try?" he asked hesitantly, turning his head so that his voice was loud and clear.

Jinki smiled brightly and kissed the top of Kibum's head, giving him a squeeze. "Of course, love. We can definitely try," he promised, kissing the top of his head again.

And this time you'll have me and Jonghyun and Ming too! Taemin chimed in excitedly, full of youthful exuberance.

Kibum snorted once and looked at the AI. "We don't even know what they're going to be like."

Taemin shrugged and responded, *Then you'll still have me at least.* He smiled and framed his face with both hands, placing his chin in his palms like he was imitating a flower.

This brought a laugh to Kibum and Jinki and even Passeri grinned at the gesture. She reached out to smooth Kibum's hair down on one side and touch his cheek with her fingers once more. "You've got this, chicklet. Whatever you decide," she added with a quick wink.

Kibum smiled and took another breath before he finally pushed himself into a sitting position. He looked at the various people around him, bit his bottom lip like he was going to cry again, and then nodded firmly. "I guess we should let Psitassi know then, shouldn't we?" he asked, voice tight as he fought back tears.

I can do it! Taemin volunteered quickly, raising his hand as he spoke.

"Alright, Taeminnie," he sniffed, giving him a permissive nod. "Go ahead and set something up."

Jinki grabbed one of Kibum's hands in both of his and cradled it between his palms. "Good job, love."

Kibum looked like he was going to say something for a second. Then he frowned with pursed lips. And finally, he forced his face to relax and offered a tentative smile. "I'm trying," he admitted, swallowing hard and staring at Jinki as if he desperately needed a positive answer.

Jinki was more than happy to provide it. "You're doing great," he promised, leaning close enough to kiss Kibum's forehead tenderly.

"So are you, love," Kibum responded, turning his head up enough to give Jinki a quick kiss on the lips before hugging him tightly around the shoulders.

They like practicing like that, Taemin whispered conspiratorially to Passeri who just smiled at his words.

And honestly, Jinki didn't know if Taemin was still saying that because he was stuck on that point or because he knew it would make Kibum laugh. Because it did. Kibum laughed and ducked his head against Jinki's neck, hugging tighter as he did so. He was personally leaning towards the second option, but either way, he was happy in that moment. Jinki did know that Kibum had been making progress with his therapist – the conversation they were able to have today was proof of that, but there were some things one needed to hear from certain people at the right time. It hurt a little bit that he knew he didn't always count because he was too close, too biased, but as long as it worked out in the end, he would be okay with that.

Because at least it meant that Kibum was healing too. And if Kibum could finish healing or at least keep doing so, then so could Jinki.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

It took a few days to be able to fit into Passeri's schedule. Once something opened up though, Kibum, Jinki, and Taemin found themselves back at the Syrinx Main Office in the same room they'd met her in previously. Ceyxin was their guide once more though he did bow out upon leading them to the office. Surprisingly, Ming and a compact data disk were waiting in the room as well.

"Kibum! Jinki!" Psitassi beamed, moving closer to them so she could grab their hands in hers once more, like she had before. "I'm glad to hear that you've made a decision." With practiced ease, she pulled them deftly back towards the table where Ming watched them with speculative eyes. "I took

the liberty of preparing the Weapons Master program in the interim," she explained, letting go to gesture at the data disc on the table.

"But-" Kibum started to say, raising one hand in objection.

Psitassi winked as she turned. "I know. You had some questions and some tweaks to add to the contract, correct?" Her question was more a statement of fact than anything else.

Kibum glanced at his pin and mumbled, "Just how much did you tell her?"

Everything we discussed that was in reference to the contract, he answered proudly, obviously thinking he'd done a good thing.

Really, Kibum couldn't blame him exactly. Taemin had done what they'd asked – or rather what he'd volunteered for. Kibum had just wanted to field a few things himself. He quietly coughed into his fist and nodded. "Yes."

While he was thinking about what to say next, Psitassi gestured for them to have a seat as she pulled up another contract. "Here. I've made some alterations and this is the new version." She immediately scrolled through it to the points they'd discussed previously in regards to length of time for the contract and information concerning Ming. "While I would personally prefer this to be a lifetime arrangement, I realize that might not be the most agreeable for a Terran," she admitted coyly.

"Lifetime?" Kibum and Jinki gasped at the same time.

Psitassi's smile widened in delight and she waved a hand at them. "I changed it to a 20-year limit instead. How's that?" she inquired with a subtle shift in her tone.

Jinki gasped and Kibum's guard went up immediately. "2 years," he stated firmly, eyes narrowed slightly.

"Oh, come now," she responded, taking a small breath. "Fifteen."

She is changing her tone, Taemin commented curiously, catching on to what Kibum had suspected almost immediately.

"Psitassi," he warned while he pointed at his throat and glanced at hers before meeting her eyes again.

She ducked her head in immediate acknowledgement and raised a hand. "Recently acquired habits," she explained in a softer more neutral voice.

In Kibum's periphery, Jinki shook his head and frowned slightly at the Moladhi. "5 years he finally offered, sniffing lightly as if that was a worthwhile gesture.

The edges of Psitassi's mouth pulled taut and she exhaled. "I realize the times seem long but I do wish for this to be mutually beneficial for both of us," she explained, gesturing between them. "10 years."

Kibum and Jinki exchanged wary glances. "That's all well and good but long contracts feel like traps," Jinki reminded her. "Especially since we don't usually live as long as Moladhi." She tilted her head in acknowledgement but didn't offer any new number.

"7 years. And that only because we're friends," Kibum conceded with a guarded expression.

"With the possibility of renegotiating at the end of it?" Psitassi asked with an excited tone and one finger raised in a very Terran manner.

Once more, Kibum and Jinki exchanged looks. *No vocal manipulation this time*, Taemin explained quietly.

The pair nodded slowly before turning their attention on Psitassi once more. "7 years with the possibility of renegotiating at the end of the initial contract," Kibum agreed.

"Wonderful!" Psitassi clapped once, obviously excited about the agreement. She made a quick change on the contract, pausing so both her guests could see, and then gestured at the medbot. "Insofar as Ming goes, I'd like for the same time frame to apply. To keep it simple. Though I must admit to hoping you might be agreeable to simply keep me in the loop well beyond should anything else develop," she admitted, struggling to keep her voice neutral.

For one moment, Kibum felt a degree of pity for her. Psitassi had never been one for much vocal manipulation when she'd been in the University. Accidentally when she'd been excited of course, but intentionally for her own gain... that was a new development. And he was almost certain it was likely because of her new position and whatever she was trying to do in her new life. It mattered that she still cared enough to try and moderate herself in their presence so on this... he was willing to go out on a short limb at least. He glanced over at Ming who gave him a wave with a smooth smile. Kibum still had reservations about the quality of the medical programs on the medbot but he was in no position to be a choosy beggar, however.

"Agreed," he finally stated, looking at Jinki who nodded in approval as well.

By her sigh, it was obvious that Psitassi was relieved about his answer. "Fantastic," she smiled, turning to make another adjustment on the contract. With a wave of her hand, she brought it before them so they could see. "Were there any other questions you wanted to ask?"

You should ask her to help with the ship, Taemin encouraged in Kibum's ear.

Kibum frowned and shook his head as he glanced down at the pin.

"No?" Psitassi wondered, obviously a little surprised.

"Actually," Jinki spoke up, hiding his smile when he realized what had happened. "We were wondering how much the reprogramming would cost," he explained, pointing at the data disc on the table.

Psitassi's smile was enigmatic. She hummed thoughtfully and tapped her bottom beak before explaining, "Two dinner gowns, a full-body aesthetic prep session, two feather dying appointments, and a reserved full-course dinner meal at Adhi's Delight."

With each new item, Kibum's mouth fell open a little more until he forced himself to close it to hide his surprise. That... was a lot actually. He could tell by Jinki's slightly confused frown that he had no idea of the actual value of everything listed but having spent more than enough time around Passeri, who'd done quite a few of those things when he'd still worked at The Stars Align, he had a general idea of how much it would cost on the lower end of the spectrum. And honestly speaking, Adhi's Delight was one of the most exclusive restaurants in Yonichi. He could only dream of actually ever going there.

"You know... seven years doesn't seem so bad anymore," he admitted half-jokingly.

"See?" Psitassi gestured at him with a pleased smile.

At Jinki's still confused look, Kibum waved at him once and whispered, "I'll tell you later."

"Ah," he nodded in acceptance, smoothing his features out as he glanced at Ming. In return, he received a wave and a smile much like he'd given Kibum. "So... once we sign - the contract - what then?" he asked, gesturing at the data disc and Ming.

Psitassi turned thoughtful and rubbed at her bottom beak like a Terran would their chin. "The contract timer starts and they're yours for the taking." She gestured at the disc and the medbot but kept her attention on Kibum and Jinki. "Though considering my investment, I am hoping you can get your ship up and running soon. I can help..." she offered, extending her hand towards them with a small shrug.

Kibum immediately shook his head and swallowed. "We've asked or accepted too much of you already," he stated with a guilty look at Jinki. Immediately, the other man reached out to grab his hand and give it a reassuring squeeze.

"You do realize I'm free to say no if I wish, correct?" she asked in a teasing manner, one feathered brow raised archly in an expression Kibum himself had worn on various occasions.

The look made him laugh once and some of the guilt bled away, though not all of it. "I'm aware," he answered with a nod and a sigh. "But this part we should be able to handle through MTV+. Now we just need to get to the Hub to make it happen," he added, focusing on Jinki. There was a ball of worrying dread sitting in the pit of his stomach as he spoke and could only hope that Jinki would know how he felt.

Again, there came a reassuring squeeze from Jinki's hand and he smiled harder. "We can handle it from here," he said, the words meant for Kibum but he did finish them by turning to look at Psitassi.

"Fair enough," she conceded with a shrug of both hands. "I might not be able to help as much in the future, but this should be a good start, no?"

"Yes. It is," Kibum confirmed, trying to settle his uneasy stomach. "So? Shall we sign?" he went on, nodding towards the still floating contract.

"After one more once over," Jinki agreed, glancing at Psitassi with a crooked smile when she feigned hurt at the suggestion.

"You don't trust me?" she whined in mock offense, putting on an air of injury that quickly faded to amusement as she shook her finger at them. "Smart. It's always good to read anything legally binding at least one more time," she agreed with a spectacular roll of her eyes and a suffering sigh.

"Mm. Hajoon almost got tripped up with that in her first contract," Jinki explained. "Nothing too crazy but I'm glad mom made her send it to an attorney first before she officially signed it."

"Ah." That explained it. Kibum vaguely remembered hearing something about that but for a while there, he hadn't been in the right headspace to fully appreciate everything he'd been catching up on. "Shall we then?" he asked, taking a seat as he pulled the contract closer so they could both read it over once more.

For at least a week after signing the contract, Kibum and Jinki spent the majority of their time at home, closeted in their shared room with Taemin, the new Weapons Master AI Jonghyun, and the medical android Ming. Having gone through the process once himself, Taemin walked Jonghyun through the steps of creating his own appearance so he could present a visual front for everybody else.

Like mine! Taemin grinned, popping into the visual sphere.

A short moment later, another AI popped into view, but its initial appearance made everyone gasp. Except Ming of course. He was, as yet, unflappable. That being said, Jonghyun showing up with a humanoid frame and a blank face was otherwise disconcerting. *Like this?* the program asked, lower face moving like it was talking but with no visible mouth.

Eh...

"You have a body but no form yet," Ming commented, framing his jaw with his thumb and index finger. "You could model yourself off of Kibum's delicate masculinity--"

"Delicate?" he scoffed.

"-Jinki's genial comeliness--"

"Eh?" he grunted in confusion.

"-Taemin's innocent childishness--"

Hey!

"Or my own devilish handsomeness," he finished explaining with a confident smirk as he eyed Jinki and then shifted his attention to settle on Kibum.

Ah, Jonghyun hummed in apparent understanding as the body immediately started to shift in front of their eyes.

Slightly unnerved by Ming's attention, Kibum looked away a bit reluctantly but was more fascinated by the fluid changes he was witnessing on Jonghyun. A mass of hair sprouted first, going through different styles, colors, and lengths in a seamless cycle. At the same time, facial features appeared with a similar fluctuation pattern. Eyes, nose, and mouth all took different forms

simultaneously. Furthermore, his entire body started to elongate and then shorten, bulk up and smooth out, add feathers and rocky surfaces and then back to hairless skin as he tried various permutations. It was rather like watching a character creation screen from a video game in real time and it was far more jarring than Kibum had ever thought it might be.

Ming started making comments about points that looked good almost immediately. Then Taemin, who overcame his surprise at the situation relatively quickly. Eventually Jinki and Kibum joined in too, laughing when a combination came out as odd or strange and nodding in agreement when Jonghyun shifted to something nice after the fact or despite their first approval.

This, Jonghyun announced with his arms out and a look down at his own sexless but masculine body. He seemed to be a smidgeon shorter than most of them with a physique of a similar nature as the rest of the crew. A crown of black hair covered his head in wavy medium length strands. And when he finally looked up for them to see with a tentative smile on his high cheekboned face, he had thick eyebrows, brown eyes, and a mouthful of straight white teeth framed by full bottom lip and a thinner top one.

"Looks good," Ming nodded in agreement with a speculative tilt to his head.

Hmm. You should change your hair color. We all have the same color, Taemin semi-complained, almost immediately applying the same idea to himself. The black bowl cut shifted to grown up and lighten into a white blonde that framed his eyes and face to just below his cheekbones.

"Oh," Kibum hummed in surprise.

I see, Jonghyun commented, looking around the room and then glancing upward. Lightening from black, he phased it out to bleach blonde again and lengthened the strands to his cheekbones, mouth quirking to the side when Taemin complained.

Hey!

The bleach blonde shifted to a softer carnation pink and the hair shortened, the longest strands just touching the tops of his ears and gently covering his eyebrows. *This*.

He got a small series of applause from the trio with physical bodies, and Taemin grinned in appreciation. *Nice!*

"Now you just need clothes and we'll be good to go," Jinki encouraged, sliding his arm around Kibum's waist as he got closer.

"Or a more anatomically correct form," Ming suggested with a sly look towards Jinki and Kibum.

Kibum flushed with a coughing noise. Jinki managed to keep most of his composure though his voice was a bit rougher than usual when he explained, "That's fine if he wants but also clothes."

"Very well," he conceded gracefully, the smile on his lips more natural but with a hint of amused satisfaction.

"Are we sure he's an android?" Kibum asked, glancing at Ming and then at Jinki for reassurance.

“According to Psitassi,” he responded with a shrug, though he did pull Kibum a little closer almost reflexively. Ming’s smile was unchanged as he turned his attention to Taemin and Jonghyun instead, apparently aware that he was being a little much or perhaps just losing interest.

“This is going to be interesting, isn’t it?” he wondered, looking into Jinki’s eyes before he appraised the rest of their crew.

“Always,” Jinki agreed, grabbing one of Kibum’s hands and raising it to his lips so he could kiss the other man’s fingers.

Getting to know the crew was one thing. Getting their ship back up and running was something else entirely. Now that they had a full crew for the size of the ship they desired, the Hub was the next place to go to see what they could work out. With Ming accompanying them in person, Taemin riding along with Kibum, and Jonghyun traveling in a pin on Jinki, they went to visit the MTV+ office in the city center. The MTV+ representative they got in touch with was happy to break down their options regarding renegotiating their contract and having a new ship built to replace the Shine.

With the insurance payouts after their accident, a new ship would cost roughly half the amount of the first one, especially with the modifications and adjustments they were hoping to include. The one non-negotiable point for Kibum was the boosters of the ship. He could not abide by ones that rotated as they had previously on the Shine. He would not risk that malfunction happening ever again.

It took them several days to hash out the details but eventually both parties came to an agreement. More or less. “That being said, our records show you haven’t been cleared for flight yet, Captain Kibum. We can certainly start putting her together with the core components, but there won’t be much point in finishing it if you can’t even fly.”

It was upsetting but Kibum couldn’t argue the point. It was just difficult to swallow. Harder still to come to terms with. “I want to fly again, Jinki. I do,” he explained to the other man, a desperate edge to his voice as he stared at his palms. “I’m just scared.” He closed his hands into fists and pursed his lips.

I can help you with the flying! Taemin spoke up quickly, his voice emerging from the pin before his image shortly followed.

Kibum smiled at the exuberance but shook his head. “Not for reinstating my manual flight captain’s license,” he sighed, shoulders slumping at the realization that he would need to put in the time and effort to make this a reality.

“You’ve got this, love,” Jinki encouraged, grabbing both fists in his and tugging on them so Kibum would look at him.

“We can help you as well,” Ming reminded him, gesturing between himself and Jinki specifically.

I am here for support, Jonghyun finally chimed in, appearing into view with a white t-shirt and black pants. He raised his hand as if he was volunteering for something but offered a smile in response.

"I can help *you* too," Ming added, focusing his attention on Jinki, one open hand gesturing at the other man.

"Me?" Jinki chirped, obviously caught off guard.

"Jinki?" Kibum asked, looking between the two as if he was missing something.

"Captain Kibum's challenge is more obvious but you still need to work on your hand dexterity, no?" Ming inquired, gaze all too perceptive as he focused on Jinki's hands.

"Is that true?" Kibum wondered, immediately holding Jinki's hands himself as he searched his boyfriend's face.

Jinki gave a slightly embarrassed smile as he looked down. "At least a little bit."

"You should have told me," Kibum whispered, cupping Jinki's cheek with one of his hands. "You've been so good with me lately, I had no idea."

"I didn't want to worry you," he admitted with a hesitant shrug.

"Well, it seems as if we have our work cut out for us," Ming commented as he crossed his arms with a smugly satisfied smile. "In the process, I can also ascertain your health preparedness for returning to space at a physical level primarily. I am also able to give suggestions based on mental and emotional responses as well, though those are not my areas of expertise," he disclosed with a single nod.

Kibum frowned slightly but then took a steadying breath and nodded as if to himself. "Okay then. Where do we start?" he asked, looking around the group with a hopeful smile and a belly full of nervous tension.

Two months, three weeks, and five days. That was how long it took the crew to get ready so they could actually get final approval on the construction of their new ship.

Weeks of stress tests and simulations for Kibum led to numerous panic attacks, emergency sessions with his therapist, and lots of manual rehabilitation with Ming – literal massages to force him to relax, and Jinki – cuddles. So much cuddling. He logged pages of hours working with Ming especially as the medical android sat with him, monitoring his vitals and grounding him when he practiced flight simulations. Countless more hours were spent at Jinki's side or in his arms, talking things out and working through sticking points he was having trouble overcoming.

It was also weeks of Jinki practicing complex hand movements with Ming as the medical doctor observed and made notes. He was an ideal partner for such practice since his synthetic components posed no risk of actual injury if Jinki accidentally went too hard. Though he would be expensive to repair if something did happen to break...

There were weeks of Jonghyun and Taemin familiarizing themselves with the blueprints and plans for their prospective ship. Between the two of them, they could run simulated programs in a controlled environment and go through the possible problems and solutions as many times as they wanted.

And amidst everything, there was still Doyun coming in from time to time to pester her big brother and his various friends, demanding help with her homework. More versed in legal terminology, she wasn't quite ready for University yet and was still getting ready to apply and head off to try her luck in the world of law. Since Kibum and Jinki had already done it once, she was bound and determined to use them as sources of help.

It hadn't taken Siwoo long to discover Ming's capacity for medicine. Her interest was still geared towards coaching but she was considering shifting to an athletic trainer or physical therapist. Needless to say, she demanded his attention or absconded with him as often as she could get away with when they were all in the same vicinity.

And Daejung had apparently hit upon a gold mine of possibilities when he realized he could take Taemin and Jonghyun with him using the attachment pins. Still dead set on becoming a famous holo gamer, who better to practice with than actual AI programs? Of course he could have ordered some to work with him, but why spend money (or get his parents to pay) when there was a free option instead?

While such things could have been distractions, though sometimes annoying, Kibum found Jinki's siblings to be welcome in that arena. They were loud and imposing and frustrating at times, but they also absolutely kept him from isolating himself or pulling away or getting mired in his own failures. Of which there were many along the way.

He saw the same for Jinki as well, who struggled with his own rehabilitation in ways he hadn't allowed Kibum to see before. Kibum saw that Jinki was much stronger than he'd been previously. He could break things with ease and lift heavy objects that would have been beyond him before. But for all that power, it was an equally terrible curse. If he wanted to work in the engine room, delicate movements and nimble dexterity were musts. And galaxies forbid if he panicked or had an adrenaline rush that pushed him to react too strongly. So some evening embraces were as much for Jinki as they were for Kibum.

And when the time finally came for Kibum himself to take his flight test again, with the clearance of his psychiatrist and therapist, he froze the first time. Panic set in and he couldn't shake it, leaving him to fail before he could even begin. But a second attempt a couple weeks later brought him closer. He didn't pass on a technicality and a sloppy landing, but it was a massive step in the right direction. Still hard to swallow the loss but close was better. A couple weeks after that, the impossible happened.

Kibum passed his flight test and was able to have his Captain's license reinstated.

With that, MTV+ was able to continue commissioning his new ship so that they could get up and running. "We should be able to pull everything together within a month or so at this point," their representative explained with a proud smile. Smaller ships took less time to prepare. A small blessing that.

But Kibum and Jinki knew from previous experience that the work didn't end there. If they had a ship, they could accept contracts. Now they just needed to find one or two to have on deck for when they could head back into the stars.

Chapter Thirty-Nine:

One month and counting down. The first week, the crew spent their time scouring the Hub for possible leads and contracts. The market was as slim as ever for relative nobodies trying to break back into the field, and most things were a bit too short notice for them to make a bid for anyway. There were plenty of people happy to keep them in mind for later, though Kibum and Jinki knew they were polite platitudes more than anything. Some of their previous clients were more open to the possibility but they didn't have anything available that Kibum and crew would be able to take on in the short term anyway.

While they didn't have much success initially, it was also a good opportunity to look for final touches for their ship. They interspersed their search with shopping trips to add a personal touch to the new vessel. It was mostly for Kibum and Jinki as the only living crew, but Ming did have a couple requests for his medical station and both Taemin and Jonghyun were interested in physical form options for later. The latter was taking some time to warm up, his personality being very stoic and bare, but he was starting to follow Taemin's example. It was no surprise since he had previously been a cleaning and maintenance AI. Personality wasn't a requirement. But the new learning algorithms were hard at work and the time he especially spent with Daejung were starting to infuse him with a certain lively energy.

The second week rolled around and they started reaching out to friends and previous contacts for additional input and potential possibilities. Following up on Taemin's earlier comment regarding Henry, it was a prime opportunity for Jinki especially to catch up and maybe find a new lead.

"Jinki!" Henry beamed, flinging himself at his best friend with utter abandon.

"Henry!" Jinki responded with equal energy, both bouncing in place excitedly.

Kibum felt a tiny twinge of jealousy and quickly stamped it down as he waited for their introductions to taper out.

"It's so good to see you! Video calls don't do you justice," Henry continued, stepping back to look Jinki up and down with a bright grin.

"The same to you," Jinki retorted, patting the other man's wrists before shifting up to rest on his shoulders.

"You act like you haven't seen each other in weeks," Kibum laughed with a crooked smile a raised brow.

"Not in person," Jinki shrugged, removing one hand so he could open himself up to draw Kibum closer.

"And you," Henry chided, shaking his finger at Kibum with a less than pleased expression. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, finger shaking harder, but then he glanced at Jinki again and took a visibly calming breath. "There are a lot of things I'd like to call you right now, but Jinki wouldn't like it so I won't. For now. Jerk," he did throw in with a grimace with a quick once over of Kibum. "You do look better though," he couldn't help but add, looking away to focus on Jinki, his expression brightening once more.

Why does Henry seem mad at you? Taemin asked, the childlike voice apparent this time.

Kibum laughed softly once, an amused but bitter sound, and turned to wave Ming in. "He's mad at me for Jinki's sake." He kept his voice low so it wouldn't carry.

Why? That from Jonghyun, a smooth tenor humming in his ear.

"Henry. You might have heard about our medical android. Meet Ming," Kibum interrupted the two as he pushed the taller humanoid forward lightly.

"Oh!" Henry gasped, at least slightly taken aback.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Henry," Ming introduced, extending a hand as if to shake, his usual suave expression in place.

Kibum turned his attention back to the AIs. "Because Jinki won't blame me for his injuries but Henry gladly will. Especially when I wasn't the best at helping either of us get better," he exhaled with a regretful sigh. He'd spent many a session talking about Henry with his therapist – for various reasons – but he had finally figured out a thing or two about himself and his relationship with the other man.

But that was months ago, Taemin murmured, clearly confused.

The response made Kibum snort. "Time doesn't matter with some things." His attention shifted when Henry turned to call inside the house – yes, he'd bought a small house on the outskirts of the city center sometime since they'd last met up.

"Lorelai! Come here for a sec, hon."

Right. They were still together, weren't they? He hadn't really thought they'd last. According to Jinki, Henry tended to have a hard time staying in a relationship. That had been true even before they'd met in University.

"Oh, my. He's... handsome," Lorelai commented as soon as she came within view.

"My lady," Ming immediately responded, bowing forward and extending his hand in a genteel gesture very reminiscent of his previous profession.

"Ming," Jinki chided, pressing the hand down and turning his attention back to the pair. "It's good to see you again too, Lorelai." Kibum waved in quiet greeting when she responded as much, taking him in as well and eventually greeting Ming in a more casual manner.

Lorelai had put on a little weight since Kibum had last seen her, but it looked like there might have been a reason for that when he noticed her belly bump. It was confirmed when Jinki saw it too and got all excited.

“Congratulations!”

Happy energy swarmed around Kibum before they were finally ushered inside. And he was happy for them. But he didn't really know how to bridge the distance that had come between them. It wasn't like he'd ever been super close to Henry himself, but he was Jinki's best friend so he'd tried. Now though...

What's wrong? Taemin and Jonghyun asked at nearly the same time.

Kibum was trying to think of how to answer when a hand pressed against the middle of his back, too high to be Jinki, and it startled him. “You should go join them,” Ming suggested, looking slightly down at him.

“I know,” he mumbled, not answering the AIs yet. But while he was deliberating about how to do so, Jinki looked around and noticed he wasn't nearby. He met Kibum's eyes and a flash of concern flickered through them. Kibum could almost hear the unspoken question: ‘You okay?’ “Dammit,” he forced a quiet laugh and a weak smile. Plastering a more welcoming smile on his face, he stepped close to join the conversation with Ming walking along beside him, hand still lightly pressed against his back.

So maybe the visit wasn't as easy or fulfilling for Kibum as he hoped it could be, but watching the way Jinki's face lit up while interacting with one of his best friends was fair compensation, if nothing else. And visiting with Lorelai wasn't for naught either. She still adored Kibum and was happy to reminisce about his times as Almighty Key.

“The Stars Align is simply not the same without you. And it's really changed now, what with Passeri and Jackson taking a step back and all,” she murmured, hands drifting to rest lightly on her lower abdomen. “Though I can understand why.” Her wistful smile turned into one of warmth and wonder and Kibum's lips shifted to echo her expression. He really should visit Garum before too much more time passed.

And though Kibum and Jinki seemed to have two entirely separate conversations, intermixing only briefly and often with the unobtrusive intermediary assistance of Ming, they were able to find what they were looking for. Due in no small part because of the keenly listening ears of Taemin and Jonghyun anyway.

Kibum sighed as he collapsed on their shared bed back home. ‘That was exhausting’ was what he wanted to say, but all that came out was, “It's good to be back.”

Jinki chuckled and sat down beside him, gently combing his fingers through Kibum's hair. “Did you have a good chat with Lorelai?” he wondered, bracing one arm on the other side of Kibum so he could look down at him more directly.

“Mm,” he nodded once, turning his head to face Jinki clearly. “You?”

Jinki's smile was answer enough. “Thank you,” he murmured, tracing a stray strand of hair from Kibum's forehead.

A confused furrow appeared between Kibum's brows. “For what?”

"For today," Jinki answered. "For agreeing to come with me. For trying," he followed up, thumb tracing Kibum's cheekbone from under his eye.

An embarrassed flush dusted Kibum's cheeks. "I am supposed to be the captain and all. I was just following a lead."

Jinki's eyes danced in amusement. "Of course," he agreed with a dazzling smile, letting his gaze linger on the other man's face.

"Now this would be where you kiss," Ming interjected with a sly grin as he motioned between the two of them from his corner in the room.

"Ming!" the pair groaned in unison as they looked at the android who simply shrugged. "But he is right," Kibum agreed, using one arm to pull himself closer to Jinki and the other to push off the bed so he could steal a quick satisfied kiss on the lips. Jinki grinned and moved his arm so Kibum could sit up and then leaned close to plant another kiss on his boyfriend's cheek. It was a struggle not to become bashful and Kibum only just managed it when he took a quick breath and called out, "Taemin! Jonghyun! Report!"

Finally! Taemin beamed, popping into view with Jonghyun right behind him. *I thought you were never gonna ask!*

I was curious to see what was going to happen next, Jonghyun admitted, tilting his head to the side as he viewed Kibum and Jinki. They flushed and furtively glanced at each other before clearing their throats and smoothing their expressions once more.

"Now that would be nothing for the eyes of such youngling as yourselves," Ming chided in obvious amusement. "Though I however could be relied upon to give suggestions."

"Ming!" Kibum grumbled, feeling a mortified flush threatening to wash over his body.

"Taemin. You were saying?" Jinki asked, his voice tighter than usual as he struggled to shift the direction of the conversation.

Huh? Right! he clapped, immediately pulling up another screen to showcase the information he'd gleaned from their visit with Henry and Lorelai. True to Taemin's earlier assessment, Henry did indeed have contacts, albeit indirect ones, with two vendors and one other possible client who might be interested in working with them.

"Ah, the friend of a friend contact," Ming voiced with an amused lilt.

"It's better than nothing," Jinki countered. "And he'd be willing to vouch for us if need be."

"You at least," Kibum admitted with a self-deprecating shrug. Jinki frowned slightly at Kibum and he looked down with a nod.

And we can still follow up with Garum too, Taemin reminded them.

Lorelai mentioned him! Jonghyun announced with obvious excitement at being able to contribute something.

It had only been in passing and not directly related to what they were discussing but it was true enough. "I think it'd be nice to see him again," Kibum commented, looking up to meet Jinki's eyes.

He has his fingers in everything! Taemin explained, arms gesturing wide.

"Not surprising for a bartender. Even less so for the owner of a bar," Ming agreed, blinking slowly. When Kibum and Jinki turned to look at him curiously, he allowed a smug smile to cross his lips and added, "Such positions offer many a rare glimpse into often forbidden avenues." The way he elegantly placed his fingers against his own chest with a playfully coy look told Kibum and Jinki there was obviously a story – or many stories – there.

Kibum knew he'd have to ask Ming about them later though. "Okay!" he exhaled forcefully, balling his hands into fists as he sat up straighter. "Jinki. You should follow up on Henry's leads and I'll go talk to Garum."

"Shouldn't we go together?" Jinki asked in response, a small furrow settling between his brows.

Kibum wrinkled his nose. The answer was probably yes, but he really did think it would be better if Jinki followed up on Henry's leads alone. There was no telling how much of their uneasy relationship would have been conveyed to the possible contacts and... "I think you'll have a better chance of convincing them if things don't go as well as hoped."

"You're not bad at it either, you know," Jinki reminded him forcefully, the frown turning determined.

"Yeah," he laughed uncertainly, not feeling that sentiment at all. "But this way we can cover more ground and try to have something lined up before the ship is ready. And you can take Ming to help back you up," he added, gesturing to the android.

"Captain. Are you trying to pawn me off?" Ming asked, his voice artfully wounded though his expression held a hint of amusement.

Kibum scoffed. "You can be charming when you want to be and it's helpful with persuading people. Plus it doesn't hurt confirming there's medical personnel in person." His answer seemed to please Ming whose lips turned up into a sly smile. "Likewise, you should take Jonghyun too."

Oh! the AI chirped excitedly.

Jinki looked at Kibum long and hard for a solid minute before he took a breath and obviously relented. "I don't like it exactly, but you make a good point about covering more ground. And you do know Garum better, after all. But next time, we go together," he insisted, pointing his finger at Kibum firmly.

"Next time," Kibum agreed without pause, a small smile tugging at his lips and the corners of his eyes.

What about me? Taemin openly whined, looking around the group as if lost.

It earned an amused huff from Kibum. "With me, of course. Silly boy," he chided, shaking his head endearingly.

Taemin grinned in response and danced around. *I'm going with the captain! I'm going with the captain!*

Jinki reached out to pet Kibum's head before sliding his hand down to cup the other's man cheek in his palm. "Well. Let's see if we can make some magic happen. Right, Captain?"

"Right," Kibum answered, the smile that followed genuine and bright.

It took them a few days of corresponding with the desired parties before contact was actually made. Jinki had more success early on since he had names to work with already, but response time was a bit spottier. And working with the desired associates wasn't always easy due to general wariness about scams, being busy in general, and hesitancy to work with relatively no-name individuals.

As for Kibum, though he had a slower start, he had marginally more success because, as Taemin had stumbled upon, Garum *did* know a fair few people that might have information to share or potential jobs to offer. When Kibum asked him why he hadn't said anything before, the answer was simple. "You never asked, so I never had cause to tell you otherwise."

Unfortunately, most of the contacts he could suggest were looking for larger ship captains and bigger contracts. Kibum and his crew fell under neither category. Not that he didn't try to see if he could work something smaller out. Or ask about other clients looking for smaller scale help. The problem with the small-scale stuff was that there were dozens of such ships and crews looking for work like that. Unless you had a large or rich backer, pretty much everyone started off small.

After a week of such efforts, both Kibum and Jinki were tired and frustrated and feeling a little down. "I should have known it would be harder to get back into the field than it was to start in the first place," Kibum exhaled pitifully.

"Well, you *do* have a record now," Ming shrugged nonchalantly.

Kibum glared at him sharply and would have said something but Jinki patted his leg and shook his head. "Not a record so much as a history," he corrected. "We just need to find our lucky break is all," he promised, giving a reassuring nod.

But all my suggestions have failed, Taemin mumbled sadly. *I have failed my captain!* he cried forlornly, head tilting back as he became the picture of defeat.

It was a sad sight for sure, but it only served to make Kibum laugh once. "And I thought I was dramatic."

Hey! Taemin chirped, pouting in Kibum's direction.

"Usually, you are," Ming teased with a sly smirk.

"Hey!" Kibum grumbled, his glare returning as he focused on the android.

Off to the side, Jonghyun's head swung from side to side as he took in all the people in the room with a neutral expression on his face. *I don't see how this is supposed to help our situation,* he admitted with a confused look washing over him.

"It's not," Jinki confirmed with a heavy sigh. He raised his hands in mute surrender when Kibum turned to look at him instead, a milder glare in place.

Ah. The single word response was all Jonghyun gave.

"You are both inordinately tense. As your medical advisor, I would highly recommend some massage therapy," Ming stated, raising both hands as if to offer his services.

Kibum took a deep breath and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in the process. "We should take a break," he announced suddenly, looking up and around the room with a more relaxed expression.

"Huh?" Jinki murmured in surprise, and even Ming looked slightly taken aback.

"Ming's right. We're all tense right now and stressing like this isn't going to help any of us," Kibum explained, gesturing at the medical android with one hand. "I suggest..." he started to say, one hand balling into a fist as he steadied himself. "No. I order you all to take the day off tomorrow. As your captain," he added awkwardly, shoulders jumping in a nervous shrug.

Jinki laughed and leaned over to sling an arm around Kibum's shoulders before he kissed his cheek and then rested his forehead against Kibum's head. "Good idea, love. Captain," he amended with a brighter smile when Kibum turned just enough to look at him out of the corner of his eyes.

"I agree," Ming voiced before raising his hands once more. "I still recommend massage therapy, however."

"Ming..." Kibum and Jinki groaned at the same time, turning to look at the medical android together.

"Doctor's orders?" he wondered, a playful gleam in his eye as he focused on Kibum specifically.

"Copycat," Kibum snorted. But he smiled when Ming did and finally took a breath that didn't feel quite so heavy.

The day off didn't fix the core issue but it did break the tension they'd been carrying around for long enough. And two days after, Kibum got a message from Cyanite.

Hey Kibum! I haven't seen your name in the listings yet of commissions or contracts on the Hub and thought I'd see if I can help a bit. Maybe. It has been a while but my third ancestor – not Ercite or Zoicite – Malacite actually, used to know a... special dealer on Earth 3.0. They're a mod-Terran, or at least they were the last time memory serves. Haven't checked if they're still alive, but they were known for working with smaller ships from time to time. I can give a recommendation from Malacite. Let me know if you're interested!

"Well that's interesting," Kibum hummed as he read the message on screen so everyone else could see it too.

"Agreed," Jinki responded, head moving up and down with his answer.

"Interesting that Cyanite is keeping tabs on you or that they might have someone that can help us?" Ming wondered curiously.

"Both," Kibum laughed once. "At this point, it can't hurt to try though."

"And it would be interesting to meet a long-term mod-Terran as well," Jinki added thoughtfully. "There are plenty here that have had minor work done, but if this one is still alive, they're probably well past the natural extension point and would have to be a brain transfer candidate."

"True. Might be worth it alone just for that," Kibum agreed with a grin.

"Is that something so interesting to you?" Ming wondered, glancing between the two.

"I don't actually know," Kibum answered with a shrug. "Can't say I've ever met one yet so I'm curious if there's any difference."

"I'm with Kibum on this one," Jinki added, raising his hand.

I wouldn't know either, but I'm in, Taemin piped up, raising his hand like Jinki. He reached over to brush at Jonghyun who hadn't said anything yet.

As if on command, Jonghyun followed Taemin's example and added, *Me too.*

"Alright! Let's give it a try!" Kibum cheered, pumping his fist into the air.

Chapter Forty:

Cyanite's recommended contact wasn't exactly what Kibum had been expecting. In the holo image before them, Zhu Yilong was elegance incarnate. Of a similar height to Ming, he looked as if he might have stepped out of a fantasy vid if the cerulean robes and the ruler-straight waist length midnight hair were any indication. His artfully pale face was flawless – obviously a product of modification to an extent, but though he had to be relatively ancient by now, he had a youthful softness to him that shone from his stardusted brown eyes and appeared in his relaxed and welcoming smile.

One loosely sleeved arm gestured towards him smoothly. "You must be Captain Kim Kibum." It was not a question but the quiet melodious sound could have easily turned it into one.

Kibum thought his tone could probably rival a Moladhi and figured he'd had additional modification done there as well. "I am," he answered unnecessarily, resisting the urge to look at Jinki for reassurance or support. He had no reason for it, but there was definitely something about Yilong that left an unsettled feeling in his stomach. Or perhaps that was too strong a word, but it was more than nerves and the twisted rush of desperate hope that worried at him.

"And your crew it seems," Yilong added, obviously modified eyes taking in the rest of the group, including Taemin and Jonghyun, their holo nature obvious by the way their feet hovered a hair above the ground.

Shaking himself free of whatever was bothering him, Kibum nodded once and gestured to those nearby. As if Jinki could tell something was getting at him, he edged closer, nearly enough to touch but not quite. Kibum could still feel the warmth of him though and it was enough. Introductions were easy to make from there and then they moved into the heart of the matter.

"I'll not bore you with trivialities," Yilong smiled, the expression enigmatic this time. "Malacite explained your situation to me." He steepled his long fingers together in front of him as he regarded the crew with quiet judgement.

Kibum let the other man's gaze wash over him and then took a quick breath, stepping forward with what courage he could muster. "Then can you help us?" Not the most diplomatic approach, to be sure, but Yilong made him oddly uncomfortable. It was almost as if there was something unsettlingly familiar about him but Kibum couldn't pinpoint it. Nor did he understand why he might think so.

Almost mystical eyes shifted back to him with a slow blink. He didn't answer immediately, the weight of his gaze heavy and all encompassing. "You remind me of someone," he mused, one hand rising to his face so he could tap his cheek with his first two fingers. A quiet chuckle escaped and he nodded once, ignoring the confused frown that blossomed on Kibum's face. "I have no *actual* need for a ship captain's services. But—" he added, forestalling the immediate sense of disappointment that was ready to crash down on Kibum.

"But what?" Kibum prompted, his stomach twisting into a tighter knot. It was the closest they'd gotten to an actual positive and to have it hanging there before them so precariously was agonizing.

"I do have a job I can offer. Nothing big," he explained, with a shake of his head, but then his hand rose as if to hold their attention. Not that he needed to. Even the smallest job would have been welcome at this point. Anything to get them back into the stars again and on their feet once more. "It could, however, be the beginning to more."

He tilted his head and settled his eyes on Kibum again, apparently waiting for a response of some kind. Kibum glanced to either side, catching the same curious expressions on his companions' faces. They gave hesitant nods and shrugs as was their nature and Jinki at least grabbed Kibum's hand to give it a reassuring squeeze. He wondered if the other man would ever know how much he helped to ground and center him.

"We're listening," he finally answered, focusing his gaze back on Yilong, blinking once when a satisfied smile lit his face up.

"Very well. I was planning on having my usual agent transport a small package from Star-Seeker's Rest. I can request that you bring it to me instead," he explained, folding his hands into his sleeves with a pleased smile tugging at his lips.

Kibum frowned. He wanted the work, but it seemed strange that anyone would cancel an established service on a whim. "Why?" he couldn't help but ask, the tension in his belly returning.

"I have something else I can assign them to," Yilong answered quickly, his expression unchanged. "This is just a trial run for you, remember?"

Kibum looked at Jinki again, a small uncertain crease between his brows. "Too good?" he wondered quietly, still unable to shake the vague worry the whole exchange was giving him.

Jinki's mouth quirked to the side and he shrugged subtly. "Maybe, but it's the best we've got so far. And I don't think Cyanite would send us to somebody *too* shady." An embarrassed cringe

appeared as he ducked his head with a quick glance in Yilong's direction. You had to be careful around modified Terrans.

An amused laugh was the modified Terran's only response. "I take no offense. But if you don't want my contract, it does not bother me."

Kibum flinched when another hand landed on his shoulder and he turned his head to see Ming looking down at him. "There are no tells to indicate he's lying or a threat." The medical android focused his gaze on Yilong as if to dare the other man to contradict him.

Instead, Yilong's eyes narrowed slightly before his brows rose just a hair. "Another mod Terran. Interesting," he murmured, an intrigued glint in his eyes.

"He's not a mod Terran," Kibum corrected with a shake of his head. "Ming's a medical android."

Yilong looked Ming up and down once, eyes moving slowly and deliberately. "If you say so," he conceded without arguing. Even more confused, Kibum looked at Ming again, but only got a reassuring pat on the shoulder from the android. "That aside, shall we agree upon a contract or not?"

It almost felt like the other man was trying to put Kibum on the spot. He was well aware of the illusion of pressure and lost opportunities. Worse, it was working. But honestly, despite his misgivings and general uneasiness about the other man, he didn't have a real reason to turn it down. And if he did, there was no telling when they might find something else. And maybe it was just because he really needed a direction, needed something to do or work towards... He wasn't sure he could take just sitting and waiting and searching all that much longer. Not when everything in him was geared to trying to make it happen again. If he lost that feeling, that momentum... he was afraid he'd never get it back this time.

"I guess not," Yilong started to say when the silence went on.

"We'll do it." Beside him, he could practically hear Jinki's relieved breath and he felt Ming's hand tighten just so on his shoulder – a tiny, satisfied squeeze.

"I'll send you the contract this afternoon then," Yilong responded without missing a beat.

"Huh?" Caught off guard by the seamless return, he flinched in surprise.

"I can't very well send it to you now," the other man snorted with a shake of his head. "I have to make some changes after all. But you're welcome to review it at your leisure and send it back to me when you're ready. There's no real rush," he explained, his hand flippantly gesturing in the air.

Kibum heard the tone, though. Moladhi were famous for practicing double speak – saying one thing on the surface but meaning or implying or inferring something else entirely at the same time. This very much felt like one of those instances. "Thank you," was all he said. It wouldn't do to press his luck and they'd still have ample time to look over it themselves when Yilong sent it to them later today.

"You're welcome. Now. I really should be going. Ever the busy shopkeeper," he explained innocently with a flourish of his hand and lengthy sleeve. Without another word, the call ended, leaving them to their thoughts in the holo communication cell.

"Well that was interesting," Kibum exhaled, feeling as if he'd run a race or something.

“Quite,” Jinki chuckled, squeezing Kibum’s hand again as he gave him a bright smile on his right side.

“But also successful,” Ming reminded them, offering a smile in turn on Kibum’s left side.

We have a contract! Taemin cheered enthusiastically, bouncing in place.

Taking his cue from the other AI, Jonghyun followed suit. *Yeah!*

The contract was pretty straightforward. No obvious loopholes and it appeared to be a simple delivery run to Earth 3.0 where Yilong’s shop was. Or at least Kibum assumed it was his shop. That what the registry said anyway. But... “Did anyone else think Yilong was a bit... odd?” he asked, struggling to pick his words with care.

“Definitely not your average Terran. Even for a mod Terran,” Jinki agreed, a thoughtful expression on his face.

I liked him, Taemin chimed in, popping into view with ease. *He was really pretty. Maybe I should try long hair too!*

Jonghyun grunted in agreement with a single nod as he manifested into view too.

Kibum could find no fault in their answers, but it didn’t feel like it was enough. “What do you think, Ming?” he asked, shifting is focus. “You’re the expert on these matters.”

For a moment, Ming didn’t respond, an unfocused look in his eyes. Kibum was about to ask again when he perked up and shrugged, his mouth quirking to the side. “He was extensively modified. I could register no original Terran parts on him. Only his brain activity was authentic. Though that could explain part of your unease with him, Captain,” he went on, openly processing out loud.

“Oh?” Kibum hummed, head tilting curiously.

“It is likely a remnant of the Uncanny Valley effect,” he posited, one finger resting on his lips. “He is supposed to be Terran and he is, but the form is no longer actually of Terran composition, hence giving the effect of an artificial being that is like a Terran. Such a contradiction could cause many Terrans to feel uneasy,” he finished, though there was a wrinkle in his forehead that wasn’t usually there.

Kibum made a face and sighed. “So the contract is solid and Yilong himself seems in the clear too. More or less,” he added with a slight frown. All his reviews on the site were good. Well, there were always some negative ones but the positives far outweighed them. A quick search didn’t even find any general controversies around him. Kibum wouldn’t say he was squeaky clean but there were no glaring marks against him either.

“We can keep looking if you’d prefer,” Jinki offered, pushing the contract back to give Kibum space.

But- Taemin started to say until Jinki looked at him. *Fine.*

It made Kibum laugh. “No.” He took a breath and squared his shoulders. “We already agreed not to look a gift horse in the mouth. At the very least, this should let us get our foot in the stars.” Even as he said it, he was filled with a roiling sense of uneasy and nervous excitement. It felt as if everything he was meant to become really did hinge on this moment and that was both exhilarating and terrifying. But... with a look at Jinki’s warm face, he knew he wasn’t alone. His glance extended around the rest of the group and they all seemed to realize he was thinking something as they offered smiles all around.

“Ready when you are, Captain,” Ming said, hand gesturing towards the still seated man and the floating contract.

“We got this,” Jinki agreed, reaching out to grab Kibum’s nearest hand in his, giving it a careful squeeze.

Kibum looked between his first mate and medical doctor before taking in his navigation and comms and weapons and defense AIs. The latter two were grinning at him expectantly. He gave a breathy laugh and rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. “Alright crew,” he hummed, reaching out to pull the contract back towards him. “Let’s do this.”

With the contract signed, all that was left was to get the ship finished up and cleared for takeoff. Really, she’d nearly been ready at the time of the contract anyway. And she was quite a sight to behold, sitting in the shipyard before them. Of a similar size to the Shine, she was sleeker this time around, with stationary boosters set into an omnidirectional unit on each wing. That newest addition had been the most expensive upgrade but Kibum felt it was well worth the price if he didn’t have to worry about what had happened the first time ever again.

The pilot’s cabin and main deck still extended in the front and the belly was as boxy as before since it could hold a similar amount of storage. Both had additional reinforcement this time around though. Kibum was determined there would be no repeats. Again, the cost had been added to the overall bill, but since he figured he’d be paying for it for a good long while, what was a bit more for the added peace of mind and security?

There was just one problem...

I still think the Shine is the best name, Taemin volunteered, having reviewed the previous records so he could project the name on the side of the ship.

The sight tugged at Kibum’s heartstrings and his gut twisted in memory. It was hard to catch his breath for a second. “Considering our typical runs, the Courier might be more accurate,” Ming chuckled as he crossed his arms.

“The Courier’s already a ship,” Jinki explained with a wave as he leaned close just enough to nudge Kibum’s shoulder.

Shaking himself free, he literally laughed when Jonghyun seriously suggested, *It should be the Fight or Flight. What?* he wondered when amusement filtered through the group. *Is that not what Terrans do?*

“He’s not wrong,” Ming added with a nod in the AI’s direction.

"Eh. We do but that hardly sends the right message," Jinki countered, waving that off with a hard shake of his head.

Kibum was listening but he was only *just* paying attention as other options ran through his head.

What about Kibum's Nest? That from Taemin.

The Juggernaut. Then Jonghyun.

"I don't think our ship qualifies for either of those," Jinki laughed.

"Kim's Crew?" Ming suggested.

"Maybe? But it still doesn't seem right," Jinki added, an obvious shrug in his voice.

Oh! How about-

Kibum stepped forward and paused right next to Taemin, stalling the flow of words that would have followed. "Pull the Shine back up please," he requested, pointing at the side of the ship.

Huh? Okay, Taemin chirped, turning back to the ship and holo projecting the name again.

He raised his hand to trace the letters and then scribed new ones with a thoughtful frown on his face.

"What are you thinking, love?" Jinki asked, stepping close to wrap his arms around Kibum from behind, perching his chin on the other man's shoulder.

Kibum pursed his lips and then placed his hands atop Jinki's. "It's silly, I know, but it just feels like we *are* the Shine. But different now. Changed," he sighed, chewing on the inside of his bottom lip.

So... like Shine 2? Taemin suggested, projecting the number at the end.

Immediately, Kibum and Jinki wrinkled their noses and he was pretty sure Ming did too in his periphery. "Not exactly," Kibum answered gently.

There is II, Jonghyun offered, gesturing at the name. The 2 was replaced with II instead.

"Uh uh," Kibum shook his head. "Way too generic."

"It could be Shine with two I's," Ming suggested, gesturing towards the I in the middle by slashing his finger twice.

Taemin obliged and ShIIne appeared on the side. "Eh," Kibum and Jinki answered at the same time, exchanging looks with a laugh.

"That isn't it, but I do think we're getting close," Kibum murmured, waving the second I away and then tracing the name again before lingering in the space just past the last letter. His finger drew another e. "Can you add one more e please?"

Like this? Taemin asked for clarification, adding one more e to become Shinee.

“So Shine?” Jinki wondered, trying the name on his tongue before he shook his head. “Shine e?” he tried again until his eyebrows rose in excitement and he blurted, “Shiny!”

Kibum laughed with a grin. “Shinee.”

Oh! Taemin and Jonghyun cooed in agreement at the same time.

Ming just chuckled under his breath. “I didn’t realize you were such a poet, Captain.”

“Huh?” Kibum chirped, completely lost.

“You started off as an uncut gem with the intent to shine,” he explained, focusing on Kibum intently. “Now, seasoned from the first leg of your journey, you’re starting to become a polished gem,” he explained, gesturing towards the ship. “Shinee.”

Kibum’s throat closed as Ming’s explanation sank in. He pursed his lips and tried to take a shaky breath as he looked at the ship with new eyes. The thought hadn’t even occurred to him but now that it had been voiced out loud... it fit. Emotion filled him, threatening to burst at the seams and all he could force out between trembling lips was, “That’s beautiful.”

Jinki cupped the side of Kibum’s head and kissed him softly on the cheek close to his ear so he could whisper, “It’s perfect.”

Kibum’s fingers tightened on Jinki’s arm and he nodded quickly, pursing his lips again so that the emotion wouldn’t spill out further. His breath was still shaky when he felt Ming’s hand on his shoulder, a firm, steadying presence. And off to the side, Taemin and Jonghyun were happily cheering.

I like it! Shinee!

The Shinee! Yeah!

With Jinki’s arms around him, Ming at his side, Taemin and Jonghyun nearby, and the Shinee on standby, something inside Kibum finally clicked. He had his crew. His family – especially Jinki but the others were starting to feel like it too. And his ship. His new home. It was all here. Everything. “I think... I’m finally ready,” he whispered, licking his lips and blinking rapidly to keep the tears at bay.

“We’re ready, love,” Jinki corrected gently, hugging Kibum closer.

“We all are,” Ming agreed, squeezing Kibum’s shoulder before he let go and drifted towards the Als. “Alright, alright. Yes, we’re all excited about the Shinee,” he chuckled, drawing their attention so they’d quiet down.

Kibum took one more steadying breath and turned his head just enough so that he could see Jinki’s face. “Thank you,” he whispered, leaning his head against Jinki’s.

Jinki laughed softly and nuzzled Kibum’s head back. “Where you go, I go, love. What makes you happy, makes me happy. No thanks needed,” he promised, arms still firmly wrapped around the other man.

“Still. Thank you,” Kibum repeated, soaking up Jinki’s endless support and warmth. “For everything.”

"Thank you, too. For everything," he mirrored back without a hint of hesitation in his response.

Their launch day came sooner than Kibum thought it would. He was sure that even though he was ready, and knew it, that he'd never actually feel ready. But after the congratulatory party the night before and the seeing off party on the day of, when Kibum walked into the shipping yard to see the Shinee, that concern at least melted away. With the new name blazoned on the side, she was ready and waiting for them to take her into the next leg of their journey.

Kibum felt rather than heard Jinki come up beside him, his presence a palpable feeling. "How you doing, love?" he asked, fingers brushing against Kibum's for a brief moment.

"I'm good," Kibum answered, taking a breath and pulling his shoulders back to at least pretend to have the confidence he wanted to feel.

"Me too," Jinki followed up, hooking his fingers lightly around Kibum's.

Kibum gripped tighter but kept the contact tenuous. He knew if he held on too hard, he'd be rooted to the spot and he needed for that not to happen. If Jinki got on the ship first, he could – would – follow. He looked over at the man that had been by his side since his second semester in university. A lot had happened since then, and changed, but he didn't know what he'd done to deserve such a person in his life. Honestly, it shouldn't matter, and right now it didn't, but at least he'd have time to figure it out when they stepped out into the universe again, together.

"You okay?" Jinki wondered, giving Kibum's fingers a little shake.

Kibum laughed once, a breathy escape of air from his lungs. "Yeah." He made sure to focus on Jinki and forced a smile into place. "I just... need a minute, I think. Can you... head in and make sure things are good to go?" he asked, taking the Taemin pin from his chest and holding it out to Jinki.

Jinki smiled and accepted it without question. "Sure, love." He leaned close to steal a quick kiss on the lips, fingers lingering in Kibum's as he did so. "Don't take too long, okay? I might have to come back out to get you if you do," he winked, keeping his tone light and playful but Kibum knew he was serious.

"Sure," he nodded in easy agreement. With reluctance, he let Jinki's fingers slip from his but kept the smile on his face as the other man walked into the Shinee. The Shinee. His ship. *Their* ship.

He was startled when Ming spoke next to him, arriving undetected. "You ready, Captain?"

"As ready as I'm going to be," Kibum responded, taking a breath and letting it out slowly. "Are you?" he shot back, pulling a grin as he turned to look at the doctor. He was surprised when Ming was looking at him already.

"I am," he answered, his gaze holding steady. "But Captain. If I may?" he added, tone rising up in inquiry.

"Of course," Kibum nodded, granting immediate permission.

Ming frowned for a second, as if he wasn't entirely sure about speaking up. But then the hesitation disappeared and his expression smoothed out. "Please call me Minho from now on."

"Minho?" Kibum echoed to confirm. When Ming nodded, he went on, "Any reason?"

Ming shook his head with a tiny furrow between his brows. "I've been Ming for a long time now. But... I used to be Minho. I think it's my original name."

"Your original name? Not a model number?"

Ming shook his head. "A name. Minho. Choi Minho. I should have had a model number, but I do not recall it."

"Oh," Kibum chirped in surprise as he searched the medical android's face. "Well. I don't see any problem with it," he decided after a moment. "Doctor Minho. Doctor Choi?" he tried out, expression uncertain when he used both.

"Just Minho," the doctor answered with a low chuckle. It was eerily reminiscent of a Terran.

"Minho then," Kibum agreed, smiling broadly at the android.

"Thank you, sir." He moved like he was going to head inside and then stopped, attention focusing on Kibum again. "Do you need another moment or...?" he trailed off, leaving the question unfinished.

Kibum bit his bottom lip and took a breath, looking around the area as he did so. He had no reason to stay out there. His farewells had been given, the ship was as ready as it was going to be, his crew was waiting, and all that was left was to get onboard. He turned to look back at the entrance of the shipping yard, the opening seeming both familiar and foreign at the same time. Looking through the busy portal, his mouth quirked to one side. His future wasn't here. He didn't know where it was meant to be but Starseeker's Rest was not it. At the very least, Yonichi wasn't it. He turned back to the Shinee where Jinki, Taemin, and Jonghyun already were. There. That was where his future was. Wherever it took them.

"No," he responded with a gusty exhale. "I'm good. Let's go, Minho," he added before taking the lead to step onboard.

Doctor Minho peeled off towards the medical bay almost as soon as they entered, leaving Kibum to head to the main deck by himself. It didn't take him long to move from the entrance to wander through the cargo hold and up to the main hallway leading past their sleeping quarters and into the pilot's cabin. *His* cabin. Behind the copilot's chair, Jinki was waiting, hands resting on the shoulders but turning to beam at Kibum as he entered.

Without a word, Kibum grinned back and waved at the seat, gesturing for Jinki to strap in while he moved towards the pilot's chair himself. It felt odd settling into place once more. The straps secure but comfortable. The seat familiar but foreign. Everything an echo of what had been before but new. He rubbed his hands on the armrests and then traced his fingers over the edge of the control panel. Butterflies swarmed in his stomach.

With a flip of the switch, he powered the Shinee up. Lights burned bright in the cabin and the ship hummed with life. Kibum took a steadying breath as he snuck a quick look at Jinki. His first mate, engineer, boyfriend gave him a blinding smile in return. He could do this. Taking a deep breath, he sat up straighter in his chair and called out, "Crew of the Shinee. Report."

"First mate and engineer Lee Jinki. Ready to go, Captain," Jinki answered immediately, extending his hand so that Kibum could take it, holding tight.

Communications and navigations officer Taemin. Ready to go! the AI announced excitedly.

Jonghyun followed suit. *Weapons master Jonghyun ready to go, Captain.*

"Medical personnel and ship's doctor Minho, ready to go," the android announced in turn.

"Minho?" Jinki whispered in quiet curiosity.

"I'll explain later," Kibum whispered back with a wink. Jinki nodded with a shrug in easy acceptance and Kibum turned his attention to the last step. He reached out to push the external coms button. "Captain Kim Kibum of the Shinee to Yonichi flight control. Requesting clearance for takeoff." He couldn't help but look at Jinki while he waited for the response. The other man's presence was steady in a way that nothing else could be.

"Captain Kim Kibum of the Shinee. This is Yonichi flight control. You are cleared for launch in t-minus three minutes. Please wait for transfer to the launching bay."

"Thank you, Yonichi flight control," Kibum answered in response, feeling his heart hammer in response. It was both the longest and shortest three minutes of his life. Mutely, he reached out for Jinki's hand and support and got it without question. Strong warm fingers wrapped around his, molding together like they were meant to be there.

"Shinee. You are clear to takeoff."

Kibum laughed and looked at Jinki. "You ready, love?"

"Yes. Let's go."

Kibum's fingers splayed wide on the navigation board as he gently slipped his hand from Jinki's. "Crew of the Shinee. This is Captain Kim Kibum. We are taking off in three...

...two...

...one."