

Dare to Stand

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Dare to Stand

by [rebelcongeriem](#)

Summary

A sharp intake of breath escapes Haneul's lips before he can stop it, the sound catching Chun-Woo's attention, whose head whips around to pin the ex-sky with a brief, considering look, predictably unflustered by the presence of a son he hasn't seen in years.

(Or: the one in which Tsuna finds himself reborn as a side character in an entirely different manhwa. Or, at least, he tries to be. But Lady Luck isn't too keen on letting him fade into the background.

Nor is Byakuran, for that matter.)

Notes

I've been wanting to write a **Katekyo Hitman Reborn!** fic for the longest time, and then I read **The Breaker** series, and this baby was born. I will try to stay as faithful to the material as I can, but of course, not everything will remain the same. Honestly, at this point, I just hope I do the characters justice.

Unfortunately, I don't own KHR or The Breaker series, but the writing is mine. And the plot. And any characters you don't recognize. :*Winky face*. Relationship and character tags will be added as the story progresses.

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CHARACTER CAST

Park Haneul is Sawada Tsunayoshi

I.

The first time he sees Yi Shi-Woon, the social pariah of Nine Dragons High School, he's sitting slumped against the wall, cuts and great purple welts marking nearly every exposed inch of his skin. It's such a depressing sight that Park Haneul—formerly known as Sawada Tsunayoshi, the infamous dame of Namimori Middle School—can't help the sigh that passes his lips.

It seems that no matter where he goes, bullying runs rampant through the educational systems Asia so proudly boasts of. So many of them are broken, the teachers desensitized to the sight of the various timid, downtrodden faces looking up at them from their assigned desks, deliberately ignorant of the trouble brewing behind spiteful, cruel eyes as they call for attention.

He dealt with it for years in Namimori, dragged into the rotten schemes of his fellow students by the simple edict of being weaker than them, and now it looks as though Shi-Woon has reluctantly assumed the unwanted role of dame, forced to bear the *crushing* weight of disappointment and inadequacy in his place.

(A role Haneul himself absolutely refuses to resume.

He's lived through far too many battles—taken far too many *hits* as well as regrettably killed his own fair share of assassins over the years—to ever allow himself to succumb to the naivety of youth. Not again, *never* again. It's a lesson Shi-Woon has yet to learn, obviously. But that's to be expected. Haneul possesses the mind of a twenty-seven-year-old, after all, a weary, twenty-seven-year-old mafia boss who's experienced loss on an unimaginably torturous scale.

Still, no one deserves to be treated like the worst sort of garbage, unfit even for dumpsters.)

“Um,” the former sky exhales resignedly, realizing the futility of ignoring someone in pain. That would make him no better than the schoolyard bullies who treat Nine Dragons High as their personal breeding ground for subjugation. “Do you need help?” He hunkers down next to Shi-Woon, arms dangling uselessly over his knees as he gazes attentively at him. Stupid question. *Of course he needs help.* But the real question is, will he accept a freely offered hand? A pensive frown creasing his brow, Haneul briefly considers just picking him up and carrying him to the infirmary, but his intuition—somehow, the famed Vongola Hyper Intuition followed him to this new world—tells him that the other boy isn't someone who'll easily accept his assistance on hearsay alone, even at the perceived threat of unconsciousness.

When he doesn't reply right away, however, Haneul gives a decisive nod of his head and moves to follow through with his promise of help—only to waver at the token soft grunt of protest that leaves the boy before he can even fit his arm around his back.

“N, No,” says Shi-Woon, the sound emerging as a pained rasp. “I, I’m fine.”

Haneul purses his lips and narrows his eyes, uncomfortable with the idea of leaving him to his own devices when he’s so obviously hurt. “Is there anyone I can call then?”

Shi-Woon’s eyes open into tiny slits, his expression betraying his surprise. “I—No. But thank you.” It’s glaringly obvious he’s not used to people caring enough about him to ask.

Haneul can relate—at least before his friends, as stubborn and as relentless and as single-minded as they were, stormed his life, turning it upside down and inside out...and yes, he’d loved every minute of it. “You should get that looked at.” He gestures toward the contusion stretching from the brunet’s elbow to the edge of his sleeve, specks of red staining the cuff.

(It looks nasty.

And painful.

And...it’s days like today he wishes he still carried a first aid kit around with him. For emergencies—when he was forced to go without a continuous supply of sun flames courtesy of Ryohei. And Reborn when he was feeling particularly...magnanimous.)

“I, I will.” Shi-Woon folds like a house of cards under the intense scrutiny of the unassuming first year. But only inasmuch as allowing him to point out the fact that he *clearly* needs proper treatment for the vicious beating he sustained at the hands of Chang-Ho and his gang.

At his reluctant acquiescence, the corners of Haneul’s lips curve into a bland smile. “Right. Well...I guess I’ll see you around.”

It’s feasible—the school isn’t *that* big, after all.

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II.

The next time he sees Shi-Woon, the shaggy-haired boy is running as if his life depends on getting somewhere fast, feet pounding on the faded, weather-beaten surface of the track as he barrels around the field, his breaths seesawing from his lungs, harsh and loud. Bemused, Haneul sets out after him, closing the distance in minutes. While not as athletic as Takeshi, he doesn’t tire as easily as he used to, back when he was still Dame-Tsuna. Back when it was normal for him to trip over thin air and faceplant in the middle of the classroom, much to the mocking amusement of his peers.

“What are you doing?” He asks as soon as he reaches the other boy’s side, his breathing even and his gait steady, a trick he picked up from his father.

(No, not Iemitsu.)

Shi-Woon slants him a startled glance and lifts a shaking arm to wipe the sweat from his brow. “Fifty laps,” he wheezes, struggling to keep pace with Haneul, whose gentle, chestnut-brown gaze hasn’t left him since he approached him. Shi-Woon’s face is flushed, and there’s a feverish look in his eyes that bespeaks of someone either on the verge of collapsing or seconds away from snapping like a too-taut bowstring; neither option bodes well for anyone. “I, I have to s, show him,” he pants between breaths, unintentionally veering off to the side, toward the empty bleachers. But Haneul immediately catches his arm and pulls him back onto the right path, fingers firm but gentle. “T, Thanks.”

Haneul waves off his gratitude, his thoughts already on this mysterious person Shi-Woon is trying to impress. Is someone besides Chang-Ho bullying Shi-Woon? And...what? Make him run until his body crumples like a piece of paper at the bottom of a wastebasket? That’s pretty diabolical. “Show who?”

“S, Sunsengnim. H, He said he would teach me. If I could manage. F, Fifty laps.” Shi-Woon grits his teeth, lips compressed into a grim line as he pushes onward, driven by a desperate kind of determination that doesn’t measure up to Haneul’s mental depiction of a bullied victim with no recourse. It’s impressive, in its own way. Whoever this sunsengnim is, he hopes he realizes just how lucky he is to have such a dedicated student, willing to do whatever it takes to prove his worth. Reborn would have certainly appreciated it.

“You’ll make it.” Haneul flashes an encouraging grin, patting the brunet on his shoulder. “My gut says you’ll succeed, and it’s never wrong.”

Shi-Woon nearly stumbles in surprise at Haneul’s straightforward praise—but then returns it with a shy, grateful smile, the frantic gleam in his eyes subsiding. *Thank god.*

Haneul doesn’t realize it at the time, but that moment marks the start of a bond strong enough to rival that of a sky and its elements.

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III.

Shi-Woon doesn’t make it.

Peering into the infirmary, Haneul bites his lip, indecision and worry warring within him. On the one hand, he wants to ascertain the boy’s condition for himself, ensure he’s relatively safe and unharmed—if not a little dehydrated and exhausted—but on the other hand, he doesn’t want to call unnecessary attention to himself. For so long, he’s managed to fly under the radar that few even realize he’s on the class roster until his name is called (and even then, he only receives the customary glance before the other students lose interest in him—*every* time, a far cry from what he’s used to), and that’s just how he prefers it. Better to keep his distance than to accidentally make known to civilians the kind of life he leads, a life that sits on the periphery of a world very much like his old one. Dangerous and competitive, secretive and

unforgivable. In the world of Murim, only the strong prosper while the weak are left to wither and crumble, consumed by their stronger brethren.

“Were you trying to kill him. If this spreads all over the internet, what will you do?” The vice-principal’s screech cuts into his saturnine thoughts, his tone high-strung as he points an accusing finger at the culprit, a grimacing dark-haired man who looks uncannily like his—

“What’s the matter?” Said man mumbles, a hint of confusion seeping into his words. Tilting his head, dark hair falls over his forehead and into his eyes, but it fails to completely hide the piercing metallic-grey of his gaze. Cold and remote, it’s the kind of gaze that belongs to a man more than capable of killing, one who would revel in the inevitable destruction of his enemies. But it’s also protective, surprisingly so, and even more inordinately possessive of those who fall under his care.

Father and warrior.

Teacher and killer.

The inconsistency between two clashing psyches continues to confound Haneul, even after years of striving to understand the dual nature of his father.

His father.

Recognition dawns, and with it resignation.

(His father...as a teacher.

As a teacher with god-awful fashion sense. Seriously, *why*? Who wears Hawaiian shirts anymore?)

He doesn’t know whether to curse the fact that Han Chun-Woo failed to inform his own son about his new job or applaud him for having the mettle to mingle so blatantly with the normal world given the...*notorious* reputation he carries so proudly in the Murim.

Pensively, Haneul stares at the man, studying every minute detail of his face to determine the genuineness of his confusion. Chun-Woo is adept at controlling his emotions, manipulating others into seeing what he wants them to see; the only reason Haneul has never fallen for his act is because he has experience on his side, experience leading one of the most powerful, influential famiglias in the mafia...and an intuition that has never led him wrong before. An intuition that has (as of this very moment) fallen quiet, not even pinging lightly at the appearance of a man strong enough to level cities if he sets his mind to it—which means Chun-Woo genuinely has no idea what the vice-principal is talking about. At least until his father’s gaze alights on the still form of Shi-Woon, and an unexpected look of panic briefly flashes across his face, his arms nearly pinwheeling as he staggers forward in a show of agitation, acting nothing at all like his usual laidback, brash self.

“Wha...what, this kid? What’s wrong with him?”

Haneul's fingers dig into the doorframe, his worry for Shi-Woon overcoming his hesitation at being noticed.

"I carried him all the way here after finding him passed out on the track," the vice-principal explains, nervously dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. "Was it not you who recklessly ordered this boy to run fifty laps around the track? Take responsibility for your actions, Han-Sunseng."

Haneul's eyes widen, then narrow, as he looks from Chun-Woo to Shi-Woon. *This* is the sunsengnim who promised to teach Shi-Woon if he managed fifty laps around the track? *Hm*. All this time, he just assumed one of the other teachers was teasing Shi-Woon, pretending to be interested in one-on-one tutoring sessions when they could really care less—some teachers, Haneul knows from experience, can be worse than the school-wide bullies they proudly profess to having authority over.

He doesn't know if this knowledge makes what's happening to Shi-Woon any better, though. His father isn't necessarily a *bad* person, per se, but Haneul definitely doesn't think Chun-Woo should be around impressionable teenagers, especially not in the capacity of a teacher.

"I—No. That's not..." Chun-Woo sputters, tension lining his shoulders as he gapes, almost uncomprehendingly, down at his unconscious student.

"The nurse said he had a heart attack and almost died."

A sharp intake of breath escapes Haneul's lips before he can stop it, the sound catching Chun-Woo's attention, whose head whips around to pin the ex-sky with a brief, considering look, predictably unflustered by the presence of a son he hasn't seen in years. In fact, he barely spares him a glance afterward, mouth quirking upward in faint acknowledgment as he allows the vice-principal to steer him toward the only door (and coincidentally where Haneul is lingering, hesitant to enter), the older man berating him all the while for his irresponsibility.

"You *will* fix this, Han-Sunseng. We can't have this getting out. Honestly, what would you have done if he actually died? Young teachers these days...No common sense..."

Haneul readily steps aside, ducking his head and subtly watching out of the corners of his eyes as his father and the vice-principal exit the infirmary and continue down the hallway, only to disappear around a corner, their voices fading with the distance.

A perplexing silence follows their retreat. What. Was. *That*. He blinks, but then, with an absent-mindedness born of the confusion clouding his thoughts, he lifts his hand to his face and rubs his knuckles on the crease between his brows, as if to oust the uncertainty reflected in the wrinkling of his forehead. Complicated relationship aside, he doesn't quite know what to make of the connection between Chun-Woo and Shi-Woon. And since there is only one thing his father is qualified to teach anyone... "Damn it, Shi-Woon-ah," he mumbles, moving to stand at the foot of the only occupied bed. "You don't understand how dangerous this world can be." Or how impossible it is to leave it once you embrace the *modus vivendi* of a true martial artist. "It will eat you alive," Haneul laments bitterly, curling his hands into fists

at his sides as he looks away. No way will he allow such a thing come to pass—certainly not while there is still breath left in his body to fight.

“One...” Shi-Woon mutters then, low and hoarse, scrunching his nose.

Haneul’s gaze, guarded and assessing, snaps back to Shi-Woon’s face, and he leans forward, straining to hear better.

“Show him...” The muttered words sink into almost inaudible whispering, cracked lips forming short, concise sentences that extend from the soul, trickling into the atmosphere. “From now on—On...Only twenty-five laps left...”

There is silence, subdued and speculative and brief. Then—

A shaky laugh catches in his throat, and he shakes his head as disbelief, tinged with relief, sweeps over him. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you?” Haneul muses aloud, more convinced than ever of the brunet’s impending initiation into a world few would ever thinkingly describe as lax or stable.

And one day, you’ll take Murim by storm.

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IV.

Later that evening, Haneul wearily slides his house key into the deadbolt, turning it to unlock the door. “I’m home!” He calls out as soon as he crosses the threshold into the living room, waffling over what to tell his mother, Jina. She’ll probably want to know about Chun-Woo accepting a teaching role at his school despite not actually qualifying for it. “Jin—Mom?” He immediately corrects himself, fighting back a wince. (He’s had sixteen years to adjust to calling another woman mother, and he *still* finds himself fumbling over her label occasionally, reverting to friendly acquaintanceship. Even stranger, she doesn’t seem to notice. Suppose she’s a bit like Nana in that regard.)

“Hello? Mom?” Dropping his bag by the coffee table, he scans the room for any sign of the woman. “You home?”

Not even three seconds later, a frazzled Jina pops up behind the kitchen counter with a plate of tea cookies, a smudge of red paint streaking her cheek. “Hey, kiddo,” she greets, flashing him a welcoming smile. “How was school?”

His lips twitch at her bedraggled appearance. “Oh, you know. Same old, same old...*Abeonim* took on another disciple,” he says casually—like he’s talking about the weather.

“Oh?” Her smile chills several degrees as she sets the plate down with a sharp *clang*. “He’s back then?”

Haneul eyes her warily, recognizing the sullen undertone for what it is—her attempt at fishing for information. “I guess.” He doesn’t know the whole story, has only been able to piece together a basic outline stemming from what Jina has accidentally let slip over the years. But he knows enough to deduce which topics are considered off-limits. An ex-fling who can’t even be bothered to drop a text every now and then? *Check*. It doesn’t seem to matter to her that technically, they were never a thing. (Or that technically, Haneul is the only common denominator between them.) And he absolutely refuses to be the one to tell her. Might as well keep that particular cat in the bag, at least until she can say his name without blowing a fuse.

“What’s the disciple like?” She asks abruptly as she leans against the counter, nibbling absently on a tea cookie. Indifference practically saturates the air, but her gaze holds a certain gleam of intensity that sends a prickle of warning shooting down his back.

Don’t lie, his instincts say.

So, of course, he listens.

“He’s...interesting,” Haneul admits softly, flopping sideways onto the sectional sofa. “He has a bit of a weak constitution and is frequently targeted by Chang-Ho and his gang. But there’s this unshakable resolve in his eyes whenever I see him, and he’s stubborn enough to keep going even when he knows he shouldn’t...It nearly got him killed.” A slight grimace passing over his features, he wraps his arms around the gray, oval-shaped throw pillow and hugs it to his chest. “I can see why he caught Dad’s attention.”

“Hm.” She grins around the cookie, a definite flicker of amusement showing on her face. “You like him.”

It takes a minute for her words to register, but when they do, a blush suffuses his cheeks, and on impulse, he buries his face in the pillow, thinking only of hiding the evidence from her. Twenty-seven-year-old mafia bosses shouldn’t blush...or easily and stupidly fall victim to embarrassment. “He’s got potential, okay?” A defensive note creeps into his tone, his voice muffled by the pillow. Despite knowing that Jina doesn’t mean anything by it (that she’s only teasing him by trying to provoke a reaction out of him), he still falls for it—hook, line, and sinker. “I just want to see how far he can go.”

Humming thoughtfully to herself, she finishes off her cookie, then immediately pushes the plate aside. “Think he has any chance of surpassing the idiot?”

Haneul raises his flushed face from the pillow and directs a long, measuring look at her, answering honestly, “I don’t know.” Idiot though he may be, there’s no denying that Chun-Woo is strong—Reborn-strong, with just a hint of Fon half-hazardously thrown into the mix to make a powder keg of tremendous battle prowess and extraordinary talent. *Goomoonryong*, they call him, and for good reason. “Honestly? I think Shi-Woon will shake things up.”

A lopsided smirk graces her features, giving her a mischievous look. “Keep me updated, will you?” She asks in such a way that he knows better than to treat it as anything but a demand. “And remember to take lots of pictures.” Stepping around the kitchen counter, she moves

toward the sofa where Haneul currently lay, trying to blend unsuccessfully with the upholstery. “We’ll need the proof.”

“Proof of what?”

At his innocuous question, vindictive pleasure lights up her brown gaze, a snicker escaping her. “Proof of the idiot’s misery,” Jina reveals cheerfully.

A shudder washes over him as he slowly sits up, unconsciously tightening his grip on the pillow—because, well, in that moment, she reminded him of his sadistic tutor, a man who positively thrived on chaos. Who systematically and mercilessly dismantled piece by piece the life he resigned himself to leading as a no-good, lazy son with no prospects or future goals.

(Terrifying.

But also vital to his growth. How can he possibly resent the hitman after everything they endured together? *He was—is; will always be—family.*)

“His arrogance won’t be able to accept that his student has managed to do the unthinkable. Just imagining the look on his face the first time your boy succeeds in knocking him flat on his cocky ass...It’s giving me *shivers*.” She rubs her hands together with unabashed glee, cackling. “We’ll need pictures to forever document this monumental occasion.”

“He’s not *my* boy,” Haneul immediately denies but then lets out a quiet groan when he realizes what she’s essentially asking him to do. “Mom, your *scary* is showing again.”

She giggles and pats his head, her fingers smoothing down his gravity-defying, brown hair, or at least trying to. But unfortunately, it’s a lost cause; it has been for as long as he can remember—in both this life and the last. “I know, baby boy. I know.”

Chapter Notes

Wow! You guys. Thank you for all the kudos, comments, or both you sent my way. <3 I honestly wasn't expecting the first chapter to be so well-received. Now let me post the second before I lose my nerve or find something else to edit. (๑_๑)

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CHARACTER CAST

Park Haneul is Sawada Tsunayoshi

Byakuran is Byakuran (Parallel worlds and all. xD)

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

V.

Sometime in the near future.

“Hearst Burger. Day Three. Car trunk,” a lackadaisical voice echoes around the dark, cramped space, a paradoxical reaction to the kind of situation known to embody eerie and terrifying. A situation that under the most normal of circumstances is best avoided. “We—that is, Sul-Sul and I—have been locked in this trunk for a long, *long* time. It’s dark and cramped and even if I knew where my beloved marshmallows have gone, it wouldn’t even matter because this god-awful stench has done the unthinkable and ruined my appetite,” a purple-eyed, sulky Byakuran grumbles into the Samsung Galaxy X25, a top-of-the-line, slim device he bought as a reward for himself when he managed to win a bet against one of the elders of the Sun-Woo clan, Jeon Jang-Il. He brings it closer to his mouth as he rolls over onto his side to face an equally sullen-faced So-Sul. “Seriously, what did they keep in here—a bag of moldy, old gym socks and Limburger cheese? It’s so repulsive that if I had to choose between Vindice Prison and having to endure this stench for even a second longer, I’d welcome their chains every. Single. Time. Seriously. *Ew.*”

Just then, as he’s about to go off on another tangent about stench and cruel kidnappers and misplaced marshmallows, the car suddenly bounces over a large bump in the road, displacing him with an irritatingly hard jerk.

He thwacks his head on the roof of the trunk—*ow*—jarring his skull hard enough to make stars explode (very briefly) behind his eyes. But at least the pain is manageable enough to continue with his recording. “Oh, no. What if I have a concussion? Should I ask them for a collateral damage fee?” He asks in his most sincere, gravest tone, using the muted light from his phone screen to study So-Sul’s face, searching for signs of an injury. Finding none, he lets a toothy grin take over his face. “You know, I’m honestly impressed they managed to compact us into a trunk of this ridiculously tiny size without giving into temptation and dismembering us. I was even prepared to lose a toe...”

“Byakuran,” his precious half-sister of fifteen years monotones, distracting him from his one-sided monologue. *What are you doing?* Her large, doe-brown eyes seem to demand. Shadows cling to her face, hiding her oddly expressive eyes in the enveloping darkness, but he doesn’t need to see them to know what she’s thinking.

The girl reads like an open book, riddled with plot devices, metaphors, and vivid imagery. Still, her poker face is quite remarkable for her age.

(She would do well as a casino dealer.)

“Shh. Shh. *Shh.*” His tone grows hushed, a trace of mischievousness seeping through. “I’m recording our misadventures. There’s just *so much* to say.”

So-Sul pins him with a familiar look he’s learned not to ignore on pain of death. Or something very close to it.

(A Look that positively screams *you’re so childish. How are we even related?*)

A Look that deserves to be capitalized. And underlined. Several times over.)

“What?” Pouting, he presses the red button to pause his recording then slides the phone back into his pocket, not wanting to risk losing it. “I’m bored, and the idiots forgot to search my pockets. Can you blame me for taking advantage of their oversight?”

At her silence—deliberate, skeptical silence that possesses its very own atmosphere and gravitational pull (yikes! That’s some powerful stuff)—Byakuran frowns. “Ugh. Fine! I’ll behave. But in return, you’ll have to find another way to keep me entertained.”

She huffs out a breath, the intensity of her glare speaking volumes through the darkness. It’s so adorable how she thinks a little thing like that carries enough weight to muzzle him.

“Ah.” He gives a sage nod. “This is about our alleged kidnapping and not using my phone responsibly, isn’t it?”

So-Sul cuffs his shoulder in sharp rebuke. “You’ve had plenty of time to inform the Sun-Woo Clan, Byakuran! But instead, you decided you’d rather—” Her breath suddenly catches in her throat, a painful rasp spilling from her lips as she clutches at her chest, tears coursing down her cheeks unchecked. “It—it—” So-Sul can barely get her words out, her pain almost palpable as she bites her lower lip in a futile effort to stifle her whimper.

A growing sense of concern gnawing at his consciousness, Byakuran immediately wraps an arm around her shoulders, using skin contact to push some of his unique, regulated ki into her body. It isn't a perfect solution, but at least it'll alleviate the worst of her condition for the moment. "Shh, now. I've got you, So-Sul," he murmurs consolingly.

So-Sul presses her cheek against his shoulder in silent appreciation, before slowly raising her head to fix him with yet another glare, this one softened by the gratitude in her eyes.

"Awe. How adorable. What on earth did I do to deserve such an adorable sister?" He pinches her cheek lightly, a chuckle leaving him when she swats his hand away. *So. Cute.* And defensive. Defensively cute...like a kitten—a sputtering, white ball of fluff whose glare perfectly exudes admonishment for daring to treat her like a child. It makes him want to pinch both cheeks just to see what she'll do.

His amusement wanes, however, the moment he realizes the car is gradually decelerating, progressing into a smoother transit.

"Oh—hey, we're slowing down," Byakuran observes with a casual air that belies the somberness lining his features. There's no telling where they are or which member of the *Martial Arts Alliance* ordered their kidnapping (although he has his suspicions) or even what they plan to do with him as the resident tag-along. He's not so much worried for himself as he is by the thought of leaving So-Sul in the company of such audacious enemies, alone and anxious and beset by uncertainty, coercively confronted by the greedy, self-entitled nature of man. His poor, delicate yeodongaeng doesn't deserve that.

When the car finally rolls to a stop, he raises a finger to his lips and casts the girl a fond smile when she responds with a nearly imperceptible nod. Together, they wait, tense and still, until finally (after what feels like an eternity but is at most twenty-five minutes), a *snick* sounds and the trunk pops open, revealing two silhouettes—a man with a long, messy ponytail and a boy So-Sul's age, maybe a little older. Two strangers who appear rather startled at their find, their wide eyes and slack mouths bringing an amused smile to his lips.

Unfurling himself with a soft grunt of relief, Byakuran bestows a bow of gratitude upon their unsuspecting rescuers. "Finally." He waggles his fingers in greeting, ignoring the way So-Sul stares at him. He's grown so used to her reproachful silences over the years that he worries incessantly when she breaks routine. "Would either of you upstanding gentlemen mind watching over my beloved sister for me? I have a call to make." With that said, he retrieves his cell from his pocket and presses the function button to turn it on. "He's going to be *so* put-out that I missed our date."

The two share a bemused look, but then the younger one shrugs and offers a hand to So-Sul, who merely turns her nose up in a rather remarkable rendition of a snotty heiress. "You have my undying gratitude, gentlemen," the blond murmurs absently as he swipes his finger across the screen to unlock it. "And since you *did* rescue us from perpetual boredom, I feel justified in saying this—the *Alliance* will eventually fall, and when it does the two worlds will collide in an indisputable way. But I suppose it's for the best. The *MAA* is in dire need of a serious overhaul." A small grin curving his mouth, he ignores their gaping and taps the green phone icon, inputting a number that is both familiar and not. He then excitedly presses the phone to his ear, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet as he hums along to the phone's ringing.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ri—

“Tsu-kun!”

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VI.

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bed, Haneul nibbles on the end of his pencil as he studies the math formula highlighted in his notes. He may find school a little easier to navigate this time around, but logarithms and monomials still tend to boggle the mind, even one who’s experienced firsthand the evils of paperwork—and they probably always will.

Ring.

Startled, Haneul drops his pencil and stares at his cell as if it’s a pit viper, primed to attack.

Ring. Ring. Ri—ng.

Slowly reaching for the sleek, black device—a present from his scatterbrained mother who decided on a whim to buy him something just to see him struggle with it—he takes a deep breath and says, “Hello?”

Ring.

Oh, right. The green icon. Shaking his head at his own ineptitude for this world’s technological advances, he cautiously swipes his finger over the icon and repeats his earlier greeting, praying his intuition is wrong just this once.

“Tsu-kun!”

A quiet groan escapes him. But of course it isn’t. When is it *ever* wrong? “What do you want, Byakuran-san?” Call him paranoid all you want, but it rarely means anything good when a wild Byakuran appears. “And how did you even get this number?”

“What, no excitable, long-drawn-out *hie!* for your bestest friend in the whole wide world?”

Haneul mentally facepalms. He can almost hear the pout in the former Gesso’s voice.

“You’re still not mad about the whole world domination thing, are you? Technically, I can’t be blamed for what my counterpart got up to in that other world.”

“No,” Haneul replies. “No, I’m not.” He isn’t exactly lying, as he overcame his anger over the whole *future that never was* debacle long ago—especially upon realizing that Byakuran willingly suffered through a change of heart and chose to ally with the Vongola rather than challenge their right to the title of strongest famiglia.

“Good.” Byakuran’s relief comes across loud and clear, the audible pout melting away like snow. “I was worried there for a hot second. So...uh...Shoot.” When the sounds of revving motorcycles and screaming tires and loud expletives and angry shouts fill the silence that follows his words, Haneul unconsciously leans forward, straining to hear more. “Any chance you’re free to play hero to a very distressed damsel?”

He wants to say no, tempted to ignore the rather strong sense of anxiety emanating across the line, but his heart (that irritatingly tender, conscientious organ) advocates an even stronger sense of probity. A rush of air leaves his lungs in a resigned sigh. “Where are you?”

“You’re such a good friend,” Byakuran states happily, a giggle bubbling up in his throat. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Byakuran.”

“Right. Right. I’ll just send you the coordinates. See you in ten!”

“Wai—”

Click.

Haneul stares disbelievingly at the phone, the soft *ding* heralding a new text message. Resigned, he skims over the words, easily able to make out the coordinates, thorough and practicable, followed shortly by a winking face emoji. (How typical.) Still, despite waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop, his intuition isn't sending him any warning signals—just that Byakuran's current location isn't too far from the apartment, so an hour should do it. Time is irrelevant as long as he's home before Jina gets back. Otherwise, he'll have to lie to her face about his whereabouts, and she hates that. “Damn intuition,” he grumbles as he flops onto his back, throwing one arm over his eyes as he considers, deeply and gravely, the ramifications of ignoring Byakuran’s overly cheerful cry for help, so at odds with the alleged seriousness of his situation.

A sudden grimace steals across his features as memories of a sulking, winged Byakuran stalking him through the streets of Namimori, popping up in the most unlikely of places only to fall dramatically to his knees and beg for forgiveness while clutching a new bag of funmallows to his chest like a lifeline, play like a broken record over and over in his mind. *Yeah, No*—never going through that again.

With another sigh, Haneul types a quick, one-worded response before shutting off the phone:

Coming.

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“I’m home!” Jina’s tired voice rings through the apartment, breaking the utter stillness of a room that doesn’t look or feel as though it’s been used in quite some time. Which is strange considering how often her son is seen working on his homework, lazily stretched across the sofa while the television is blaring in the background. A frown pulling at the corners of her lips, she plops three large, overstuffed paper bags on the kitchen counter and calls out, “Haneul?”

(Nothing but silence.)

Until a pointed cough fills it.

Tensing, she grabs a carving knife from the cutlery block, mentally preparing herself for the possibility of having to invest in a few gallon bottles of Clorox bleach in order to tackle any potential bloodstains that may or may not find themselves splattering the floor and walls. She doesn’t much care for the idea of spending the afternoon *cleaning*, but needs must.

One eyebrow shoots up, however, when a tall, lanky stranger with spiky, blond hair and mischievous, purple eyes bounces up to her, lips tilted up into a secretive smile. “Thank you for letting me spend the night, ajumeoni. Haneul was too embarrassed to ask you himself.”

Her frown deepens at the familiarity with which the boy speaks of her son, her protectiveness flaring. Given how strongly Haneul attracts weirdos from all walks of life, she has reason to be concerned. “Who are you?”

“A friend,” another voice—a gentle, imploring tenor—hastens to reply, stoking her suspicions to even greater heights. “From school.”

Her eyes narrow, taking in the slightly fidgeting hands and faintly nervous energy surrounding her son. “Why am I just now meeting him then?”

“That’s my fault,” the purple-eyed stranger happily admits. “I don’t have many friends, you see, and I was worried about meeting you for the first time. Parents aren’t too fond of me—they usually take one look at me and immediately label me a thug. Which kind of hurts, but whatever. And my father, proud, aloof man that he is, is constantly reprimanding me for my mischief-making ways, but I just can’t help but want to tease Haneul every time I see his face. I mean, just look at it.” He unabashedly takes her son’s face in hand and squishes his cheeks together, the sight of his bright red, scowling, chubby-cheeked face coercing a Cheshire cat grin from the stranger. “See? Precious.”

Jina can’t help but agree, but that doesn’t mean her suspiciousness abates. If anything, it only grows stronger the longer she locks eyes with this boy who looks older than her son by at least three years. “Are you some kind of kook magnet, Haneul?”

Haneul immediately shakes his head—in *denial*, are we?—all while struggling to escape the tentacle-like hold his newfound friend has effortlessly inflicted upon him, a petulant pout forming on his mouth. “Ish not my fault.” His words sound garbled and slurred, as if his mouth is full of cereal.

The blond gives a small, wicked chuckle before finally detaching himself from her boy, patting his cheek fondly. “Don’t worry, comeonim. I’ll protect Haneul.”

How curious. She almost believes him. “Yes, but who will protect him from you?” Jina casually fingers the handle of her carving knife, drawing their attention to the fact that she’s armed and dangerous and not afraid to spill blood on her pristine kitchen floor. Haneul blinks, all color leaching from his face, but the real interesting reaction comes not from her son but from the boy who dares refer to her as mother-in-law. He merely smiles, placid and unrepentant, as he eyes the knife with curious deliberation.

“How like a tigress,” he murmurs. “You’re so lucky, Tsu-kun.”

Haneul hastily clamps a hand around the boy’s mouth and hisses, “Enough, Byakuran.”

Byakuran. Well, at least now she has a name to go with the face of someone she may very well have to hunt down in the future if he persists in clinging to her son like a burr. “As long as you understand.” She fixes him with a pointed look, before returning the knife to the cutlery block and reaching for the brown bag closest to her. “Lights out at midnight, kiddos,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand, deciding to give this Byakuran the benefit of the doubt.

(And ~~when~~ if he ruins it?

Well, she'll be ready for him.)

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VIII.

“So, let me get this straight.” Haneul is currently lying on his stomach, legs crossed at the ankles as he watches Byakuran curiously rifle through his movie collection. “You and your sister were kidnapped by the *Martial Arts Alliance* as leverage against the Sun-Woo Clan for having political clout equal to—no, *greater* than—them. But then you were rescued by Shi-Woon and some suspicious-looking man after being locked in a trunk for god knows how long...but not before having to fight your way through some gang called Torrent Clan?” He props his chin in his palm, a thoughtful furrow appearing between his brows as he considers the enormity of a situation that only came about from the irrational fear of decline. Much like the Estraneo Famiglia, who used children as guinea pigs to create special weapons in order to regain some of their lost glory. (It destroyed them in the end until there was nothing left of their famiglia but foul memories hidden within broken smiles.) “But in reality, my father had to intervene and save the day, and somehow you thought it was okay to let your own sister take off with strangers instead of protecting her yourself?”

“Of course,” Byakuran says matter-of-factly, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world to do. “You picked a good one, Tsu-kun. Shi-Woon actually let himself be dragged behind a

motorcycle for miles and probably would've died if not for dear, old dad stepping in like the monster he is."

Haneul stiffens and slowly sits up, trepidation clutching at his heart with icy fingers. "What."

Byakuran flutters his eyelashes innocently. "Oh, did I forget to tell you?"

"Byakuran." He throws a stern look at the older boy, silently demanding an explanation.

"Okay, okay. Keep your hair on. He's alive, isn't he?" Byakuran's shrug is casual, as is the air he gives off—like he doesn't have a care in the world, which is actually a pretty common state for him. "Whatever ass-kicking lessons Daddy Dearest has agreed to teach Shi-Woon is doing wonders for the kid's fighting spirit. You should have seen how far Bug Eyes flew when he kicked him. It was truly inspiring. It even impressed my little sister, and she's a hard nut to crack on a good day."

Exhaling an exasperated groan, Haneul rubs a hand over his face, ignoring the other when he plops down beside him and nonchalantly slings an arm around his shoulders. "Don't despair, Haneul." The casual use of his given name in this life manages to distract him briefly from his concern for someone who—from an outsider's point of view—is more than an acquaintance but less than a friend. (Who is decidedly more important than their current relationship status should allow.) "He's strong and his control over ki is quite remarkable for someone who's only been at it for, like, three weeks. Some might even go so far as to call him a prodigy...just like another cuddy buddy we both know and love and who you like to pretend is meek and ineffectual."

At the conspicuous look Byakuran slants in his direction and the way he knowingly nudges him, Haneul rolls his eyes, unused to seeing this side of Byakuran but somehow not surprised by it. It's just that he doesn't remember the blond being quite so...tactile and affectionate. "Well—at least you know So-Sul is safe with him."

"Uh-huh." Byakuran leans more heavily against him, practically snuggling into his side. "That's not what you *really* wanted to ask, though, was it?"

"What do you mean?"

A smug smirk twitches at the corner of his mouth. "You want to know if *they* made it here."

Haneul fidgets, tempted to shove him right off the bed, but a gleam of hope and anticipation springs into his eyes at the thought of seeing them again, so he refrains. "D, Did they?"

"That, my precious Tsu-kun," Byakuran pauses dramatically and waits only until he has the brunet's full, undivided attention before bussing his cheek—a loud, smacking sound that prompts Haneul to shove him away, a flush of embarrassment creeping up the back of his neck. "Would be telling."

Haneul swallows the harrumph that rises to his throat and throws himself back onto the bed, muttering under his breath, "Should have seen that coming."

Chapter End Notes

Hearst Burger. When a burger is missing its patty. Just another fun way to say kid.napped.

Yeodongsaeng. Term for younger sister.

Ajumeoni. Term for a middle-aged woman (IE: ma'am, aunt, lady, etc.)

Eomeonim. Term for mother and in some cases, mother-in-law.

Chapter Notes

Still rated T. for strong-ish language? and violence. All I can say is it's finally starting! Yay!

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CHARACTER CAST

Park Haneul is Sawada Tsunayoshi

Byakuran is Byakuran (Parallel worlds and all. xD)

Hyuk Dae-Hyun is Hibari Kyoya

IX.

A few days later.

“Goomoonryong?” Surprise flickers across Hyuk So-Chun’s face, his calm reserve fading away like dye under a scorching sun. “You saw him?”

Kang-Sung, the current president of the *Martial Arts Alliance* and a respectable, powerful figure of Murim, eyes the young genius of the Heavenly Way School over the rim of his cup, a slight tenseness in his expression. “No, we haven’t determined his exact location yet. But we know he’s in the vicinity, and we would very much appreciate it if Chundomoon lent us his support in the pursuit of Goomoonryong’s capture.”

“Certainly,” So-Chun concedes, nodding politely. “Please allow us to take part in this.”

Kang-Sung dips his head in acknowledgment, setting his cup down next to a manila envelope that must contain all the information the man's informants managed to gather on one Han Chun-Woo, and leans forward, steepling his fingers under his chin. “This will be a dangerous venture, Hyuk So-Chun-ssi. The Murim fought long and tirelessly to bury the legend of Goomoonryong, especially those who are in perpetual denial of his very existence—so terrifyingly overwhelming are his skills. With that said, it will take an unwavering heart and

an even stronger will to face the kind of danger this man represents. Do you believe yourself to be in possession of either of those traits?”

So-Chun swallows nervously, clenching his hands to keep his fingers from trembling. From fear or excitement has yet to be determined. “I’m prepared to put my life on the line for this, Sammoonryong-nim. And you, Dae-Hyun?” He casts an inquiring look in the direction of his blank-faced cousin, who hasn’t spoken a single word since the meeting started. So-Chun is rather curious as to why the other boy agreed to join them in the first place when he can’t stand even the possibility, no matter how minuscule, of being crowded and has a tendency to react violently to anyone who endeavors to claim authority over him. Thankfully, their master finds him amusing rather than disrespectful and is often known to turn a blind eye to Dae-Hyun’s more volatile nature unless it directly impacts the distinguished reputation of their school. “Will you be joining us?”

A ki-inforced tonfa suddenly flies past his face, missing his cheek by a mere millimeter, and lodges into the wall with a loud *thud*, causing the two suited bodyguards to flock to the president’s side, instinctively dropping into defensive stances on either side of a still seated Kang-Sung.

“That isn’t my name,” declares the self-proclaimed skylark of the Heavenly Way School.

“Oh my.” A faint half-smile tugs at one corner of Kang-Sung’s mouth as he covertly gestures toward the doorway, not even waiting for his bodyguards to return to their former positions before offering Dae-Hyun a cup of tea—who surprisingly declines with a curt shake of his head. So-Chun stifles the urge to stare incredulously at his cousin; Dae-Hyun’s fondness for tea is well-known, which is why he doesn’t expect him to refuse the offer.

“So this is the illustrious cousin I’ve heard so much about. Your master wasn’t exaggerating.”

So-Chun rubs his temples in practiced circular motions, trying in vain to ignore the bloodlust emanating from Dae-Hyun. His uncle has often ruminated on his son’s hatred for a name that bears such integrity and honor. But when asked, Dae-Hyun simply refuses to give a proper answer, merely citing that the name doesn’t belong to him. “Please forgive my cousin’s actions, Sammoonryong-nim. This matter is a personal one. It in no way reflects our decision to cooperate.”

Kang-Sung’s chuckle is quiet. “No matter. Personal matters should never be publicized.”

Humbled by the understanding nature of such an imposing, powerful Murim-in, So-Chun bows his head in silent thanks.

“Now then.” The president claps his hands together, gaze somber as he slides the manila envelope across the table toward him. “We still have much to discuss.”

Thus the meeting continues.

X.

They say breakfast is the most important meal of the day. But for Haneul, he prefers grabbing an apple from the crisper drawer of the refrigerator and eating it on the way to school. It's simple and quick and a sufficient use of his time—and doesn't turn his mother into a raging ball of vindictive competitiveness on account of poor cooking skills.

(If it isn't microwavable, she can't do it...and god knows she tries. Tries so many times that the fire department has a picture of her face hanging on the wall of their lounge as a pre-warning to newcomers. He knows only because the fire chief himself has personally visited their residence a grand total of four times to ask that she leave cooking to the professionals.

In fact, she's something of a celebrity to the department and takes great pride in that fact.)

Making quick work of the deliciously tart fruit, Haneul maintains an unhurried pace, an aura of lazy contentment surrounding him. He tilts his head toward the blue sky, watching as white, fluffy clouds slowly drift across it. So naturally, when the sun filters through a break in the clouds, bright and warm, he contemplates begging off for the day—maybe hitting up a PC bang and treating himself to some ice cream—but soon realizes the futility of doing so.

(Because he isn't alone.)

"Is there any particular reason you're following me?" Haneul steals a quick glance over his shoulder, curious despite the suspicion clouding his brown eyes.

Byakuran shrugs, his longer strides eating up the distance between them in no time. "I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't walk you to school," he says as he loops his arm through Haneul's, a slow smile working its way across his face at the experimental tug Haneul gives his arm. But he's quick to give up when Byakuran traps it against his side, holding it prisoner with practiced ease. "You'll be a good boy and stay out of trouble, right?"

"What are you, my dad?"

Byakuran squeezes his arm in slight reproach. "And have your Goomoonryong knock my block off for poaching his territory? No thanks."

"Don't," Haneul says, a note of caution emerging. "Don't say that name. You never know who could be listening." Even Jina, who once created a chant and dance combination in order to curse Chun-Woo's taste buds so that everything he ate would taste like tofu—that is to say, nothing at all—knows not to mention his name in public lest the fact that she's acquainted with him gets back to the wrong people.

But Byakuran doesn't seem all that worried about it, his expression shifting from faint interest to amused in the span of a heartbeat.

"Awe, are you worried about little, old me?" He playfully bats his eyelashes at him before suddenly releasing Haneul's arm and giving him a slight nudge toward the front gate of the

school. "I'll call you later, Tsu-kun. Make sure you don't block my number *this* time, ne?"

"That was an accident," he grouses, awkwardly ducking his head at being found out. Truth be told, after he received Byakuran's call the first time, Haneul searched the internet for ways to block numbers on a smartphone and somehow managed to succeed—but only after the third try. However, he never expected the blond to stay the night...or take his phone hostage while he was asleep.

(Clearly, he should have.)

"Tsk, tsk," Byakuran makes a clicking noise with his tongue. "Such an adorable, little liar you are."

Haneul sighs, raking his fingers through his hair and tousling it even more—turning it into an even more serious case of bedhead. "Yeah, well, whatever you're up to, please keep me out of it."

Byakuran gives a jaunty salute. "You got it, boss."

"I mean it."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm serious."

"Really? Can I be Grim then? It has a particularly nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"..."

"..."

"You're just going to ignore me and do whatever you want anyway, aren't you?"

"Absolutely."

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XI.

It's during lunch when Haneul catches Shi-Woon sitting under a tree in the courtyard, staring off into space while mumbling to himself about forms and inner strength and power distribution techniques. There's a scratch on his cheek, barely noticeable—the only evidence left to show that he faced down a biker gang...and lived to tell the tale. A warm wave of relief flows through Haneul upon seeing the other boy in one piece, and he instantly relaxes, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. (He doesn't realize until now just how nervous he was feeling about meeting Shi-Woon again, even if they've hardly exchanged a few words in the

weeks they've attended the same school. It's liberating in a way, finally being able to shrug off the weight of the worry and uncertainty that spent the better part of a week wrapped around him like a boa constrictor, gripping him tightly and making a mess of his composure.

Shi-Woon truly is his father's disciple.

Both so stubborn.

Both so favored by the god of protagonists.

Better him than me, he isn't ashamed to think.)

Once he reaches the brunet's side, Haneul presses a cold can of mango-flavored milkis to Shi-Woon's cheek, his curious gaze drifting to the thick, hardback book propped open in the boy's lap: the modernized version of the *Muyejebo*. (Chun-Woo must think highly of him if he willingly parted with that book.)

"Yi Shi-Woon, right?"

Shi-Woon startles at his sudden appearance, unconsciously accepting the drink with a flustered expression. "Uh—yeah?" He stares almost uncomprehendingly at the can. "Um, how did you know I like this flavor? I've never told anyone. Not that I'm accusing you of anything, of course, but people generally don't hand these out for free, and...Uh. Right. Yeah. I'm Shi-Woon," he rambles on into the awkward silence, his cheeks pinkening slightly as he puts the can down next to his backpack—a shabby, gunmetal-grey bag that has seen better days. "And you're Han...eul, ne?" There's a touch of hesitation in Shi-Woon's voice, fingers drumming against the open page of the book, a rhythmic tapping that draws Haneul's attention.

"Good guess. So...what are you reading?" He flops down beside Shi-Woon and peers at the elegant, concise text scribbled across the page with genuine interest. Even modernized, it exudes sophistication and enlightenment and archaism. No wonder so many fought over its possession hundreds of years ago; even to this day, Murim-ims tend to argue over ownership rights, using clan prestige as a good enough excuse to watch over it.

(It once belonged to Un-Wol.

Who then passed it down to Chun-Woo.

It must *really* gall the old fools to realize just whose possession it has fallen into.)

Shi-Woon's hand stills as if just now realizing what he's doing. It's a book belonging to the Murim. Only an idiot would ignore the consequences of sharing such information with an alleged civilian, and Shi-Woon's no idiot. Conscientious of its value, he very slowly and carefully closes the book as though it's an antique hand mirror on the verge of cracking before deftly maneuvering it into his bag until it's safely encased between two textbooks. Out of sight, out of mind, apparently. "It's...uh...for extra credit."

“Extra credit,” Haneul parrots back, glancing at Shi-Woon and making a soft, amused noise in the back of his throat. Now that he’s heard what has to be one of the worst lies in the history of lies, he can almost understand Byakuran a little better now—understand his proclivity for teasing him...*almost*. But instead of giving in to the urge to tap into his inner-Byakuran (gods forbid), he decides a change of topic is in order. “Are you feeling better now?”

Grimacing, Shi-Woon raises his hand to his cheek. “It’s nothing,” he says, sounding a tad defensive.

“You sure?” Haneul quirks an unimpressed eyebrow at him. Kyoya used to ignore his injuries too, refusing medical attention under the belief that he was more than capable of healing on his own. He often had to wrangle the cloud guardian into the infirmary and stand watch over him to make sure he didn’t escape through the window before Ryohei could arrive with a surplus of sun flames. (He didn’t always succeed—Kyoya was difficult to handle on a good day, never mind the frustration and indignation his wounds would unceasingly provoke. To make matters worse, that was usually about the time Mukuro would bait him, resulting in the violent destruction of a good portion of the right wing of the Vongola Manor and the countless monetary reparations that came about from their many squabbles.

Good times.)

“You were out for a week, Yi Shi-Woon-ssi. I know we’re not close, but I was worried something might have happened to you.”

A look of surprise crosses Shi-Woon’s timid features. “You were?”

Haneul offers him a soft smile in return. “Is that so surprising?” Shi-Woon is obviously not used to someone caring enough about his well-being to verbally acknowledge it, but Haneul is determined to change that. (Starting now.) A tiny dimple playing at the corner of his mouth, his hand drops to Shi-Woon’s shoulder and he gives it a comforting squeeze. “You know, you’re not as alone as you might think.”

“No,” Shi-Woon admits, tone soft and reflective. He reaches for the can of milkis, cradling it in his hands as though it’s a precious, one-of-a-kind gift. “I suppose I’m not.”

(There.

Mission accomplished.)

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XII.

It isn't until after the final bell rings, signaling the end of classes, that Haneul spots Shi-Woon again, chestnut-brown eyes zeroing in on that familiar mop of shaggy, sandy-brown hair moving through the crowd. There's a look of intense concentration on Shi-Woon's face, fists raised in a rather decent imitation of an inner power technique as he absentmindedly cuts a path through a throng of students gathered in front of the entrance gate. Haneul doesn't hesitate, choosing to follow him rather than wait for Byakuran to make an appearance as his most recent text message alluded to, his hyper intuition urging him to pick up the pace—

—Urging him not to lose sight of Shi-Woon in the crowd.

(He makes it easier, what with being so distracted by the fine, intrinsic complexities of whatever techniques Chun-Woo has filled his head with that he's practically moving at a snail's pace, his mind elsewhere...failing to pick up on the fact that he's being tailed.

But if his father has his way, it won't be long before Shi-Woon learns to overcome that particular weakness. The man doesn't exactly give you a choice, nor is he above pounding the lesson into your skull until you can reenact it in your sleep. It's simply his way of teaching.

And probably why he doesn't have any other disciples waiting in the wings.)

As he draws closer to Shi-Woon, however, Haneul does a double take the moment he recognizes the faint tendrils of energy snaking around the other boy's fists, emanating protection and resolution and the potential to surpass the limitations of the human body.

Inner ki.

He's already capable of controlling ki to that extent? "Byakuran was right," Haneul murmurs, deliberately maintaining a safe distance of five feet so as not to accidentally give away his position. "You really are something." (Something special, something beyond what the Murim has any hope of controlling.) Instincts don't lie; they only disclose what the senses manage to pick up, and he has already begun to glean the scope of Shi-Woon's power, a power he didn't have access to weeks ago. It stirs his curiosity—makes him question if perhaps fate had a hand in instigating their first encounter, after all.

Nothing else makes sense.

Seriously, of all the students for his laidback, apathetic father to accept, he chooses Shi-Woon? If that doesn't point to divine intervention, he'll eat his favorite shirt.

"Hey, Yi Shi-Woon-ssi! Wait up," he starts to call out, only for his voice to trail off when Shi-Woon's head abruptly snaps up, energy sizzling and crackling around him as fury, primal and sudden and cold, permeates the air, sending his instincts tipping into overdrive. The feeling is so sharp and so *raw* that a chill sweeps through him, cold enough for goosebumps to erupt across his skin and for the hair on the back of his neck to prickle warningly. So, when out of nowhere, Shi-Woon takes off across the street—toward the dark mouth of an alley littered with trash and smelling strongly of urine and stagnant water, where the entrance to an abandoned warehouse is located—he wastes no time in shadowing him like some ridiculous tertiary character out of a b-rated spy flick, unable to shake the sense of unease from briefly

glimpsing Chang-Ho's contemptuous face in the shadows of the alley, luring Shi-Woon into what can only be a trap.

Told you so, Haneul's inner voice gripes when he nearly stumbles into the back of one of Chang-Ho's cohorts, his gaze assessing as he takes note of the girl kneeling in a pile of discarded papers; she has her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her wild-eyed gaze flitting from one smirking face to the other, never stopping long enough to make eye contact, before ultimately landing on Shi-Woon, a strangled sob of relief escaping her lungs. (If he's not mistaken, her name is Sae-Hee and she's Shi-Woon's classmate—one of the few people who's willing to stand up for him, even against bullies who have no qualms about raising a hand against her.

And now she's paying the price for that loyalty.)

"You stupid bitch," Chang-Ho spits, malice twisting his features as his hand suddenly cracks across her face, snapping her head back from the force of the blow. Haneul sucks in a sharp breath, positively seething with indignation, hands clenched at his sides as he takes a step forward. "Do I look like a fucking joke to you? You think *he's* going to be enough to get you out of this situation safely? Want to die that badly, huh? You and that bast—"

"Enough!" Hisses Shi-Woon, his tone thick with icy demand—so thick, in fact, that everyone freezes at his outburst, all save for Haneul who makes it to Sae-Hee's side in seconds, his hands gentle as he drapes his blazer over her bare shoulders from where her blouse ripped from their rough handling. "Are you okay, Sae-Hee-ssi?"

"I—I—" Tears course down her cheeks unchecked, a red mark standing out in stark relief against the sickly pallor of her skin.

"Shh. It's okay. You're safe now," he whispers, shifting to block Chang-Ho's view of her. Not that it matters, seeing as he only has eyes for Shi-Woon.

"What? You want to hit me now? *You*? Well, fine. Go ahead." Chang-Ho bares his slightly crooked teeth in a parody of a smile as he spreads his arms wide, inviting Shi-Woon to throw the first punch. "I'll be sure to show your girlfriend a good time after I take care of you. Her and that pansy-looking dill weed sitting all pretty on the sidelines—"

"Shut up!" Shi-Woon yells, swinging his fist back until it makes contact with a pillar, a loud crack echoing in the alley as pieces of stone crumble to the ground. "*Shut up before I make you.*"

Sae-Hee lets out a plaintive whimper and burrows into Haneul's side, wiping the tears from her face with trembling hands. "I—I want to go home."

Humming comforting words under his breath, Haneul gives her a reassuring pat on the arm. Slowly, her shoulders begin to loosen, and she relaxes against him, her shaking gradually subsiding in the comfort of his presence. "We'll get you home. I promise."

"What's that?" Chang-Ho levels a challenging glare on Shi-Woon, ignoring the startled, "Huh?" at his back.

“Come at me, if you want.” Shi-Woon’s eyes are flint-hard, his face a mask of cold fury as he shakes his fist, flicking pieces of stone off of his knuckles. “And I’ll break you all.”

Haneul half-expects them to scatter—their kind can’t help but turn tail and run away when faced with resistance—but Chang-Ho does the opposite, grabbing a rusted pipe from the floor of the warehouse and pointing it threateningly at Shi-Woon, beady, mud-brown eyes glowering from beneath thick brows. “That was pretty flashy, huh?” He flashes a nasty smirk, causing unease to spiral through Haneul. Whatever he’s planning can’t be good for them. “Then hit me, you little bastard. Try to break me—prove that you’re not a lying sack of piss.”

Shi-Woon’s expression falters, just for a moment but it’s enough to gain Chang-Ho’s derisive amusement. “What? Can’t hit me? That’s what I thought.” Then he lets the pipe fly, catching Shi-Woon in the cheek and sending him sprawling amidst the vicious chuckles and jeers of his friends.

Haneul swears softly under his breath, gently disengaging Sae-Hee’s fingers from his sleeve, preparing to step in before Chang-Ho causes irreparable damage.

“Looks like you were all talk, after all—”

A metal tonfa suddenly slams into Chang-Ho’s face, bloodying his nose. With a shriek, he doubles over, clutching at his nose as he glares through watery eyes at the newcomers watching from the doorway.

“Herbivores,” the tallest of the three addresses them stoically, raising his second tonfa in preparation for the fight to come. “For disturbing the peace of Seoul and for making a general nuisance of yourselves, I will bite you to death.”

Haneul gapes, his expression revealing nothing but shock. “H, Hibari-san?”

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: some violence, typical of both fandoms.

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CHARACTER CAST

Park Haneul is Sawada Tsunayoshi

Byakuran is Byakuran (Parallel worlds and all. xD)

Hyuk Dae-Hyun is Hibari Kyoya

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

XIII.

“Wao, little animal,” Hibari Kyoya acknowledges with a raised eyebrow, cool, gray eyes studying him intently. It’s comforting to know that some things never change. “Where are your fangs?”

Haneul gives a halfhearted shrug in response. “I don’t know where my gloves are—and I guess Nattsu stayed behind?” Nattsu, who was his faithful companion for years after his acquisition during their time-traveling escapades. Nattsu, who trembled and whined and snuffled when forced to confront danger but somehow miraculously always found the will to persevere, just as his master had to. Nattsu, who he missed terribly. Who he has even begun to see in the presence of an orange tabby cat that likes to lurk around the apartment complex, timid and anxious until it scents him, and then it’s all about being petted and held and fed. He doesn’t mind, though, as the cat reminds him of Nattsu and, well, he supposes he could always sneak it into the building...What the landlord doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

Getting to his feet, Haneul gently pulls Sae-Hee into a standing position and all but guides her over to Shi-Woon’s side, whose cheek is already beginning to bruise and swell, a *gift* from Chang-Ho. “Are you okay?” He asks in a whisper almost too quiet to hear.

“I—I’m fine,” Shi-Woon rushes to assure them, offering Sae-Hee a weak smile when she winces at the state of his face.

“Do you know this boy, Dae-Hyun?” Asks a teenager who looks uncannily like Kyoya, with sleek, jet-black strands that sit perfectly trim atop his head and serious, hazel eyes. His expression gives nothing away as he instinctually dodges the tonfa aimed at his head, the third boy sidestepping them both when the skylark suddenly lunges at his lookalike, Kyoya’s brows drawn together in a scowl. His sigh a mixture of exasperation and resignation, the shorter male blocks the next two blows as though used to having to periodically fend off heavy, powerful strikes on a daily basis.

(Knowing Kyoya, he probably is.)

“Learn to address me properly, Hyuk So-Chun, and maybe I’ll be inclined to give you an answer,” Kyoya retorts, easily slipping into what must have been a familiar routine of trading blows, ducking and parrying with the ease of a seasoned warrior. And in his eagerness to defeat a worthy opponent, he seemingly forgets about the bullies crowding around Shi-Woon, Sae-Hee, and Haneul, their bleating and blustering nothing more than background noise for all the attention he pays them.

Until Chang-Ho decides he’s had enough of being ignored and hurls a piece of broken wood in their direction, panting heavily, rage contorting his face into something almost demonic as he stalks toward them. “You bastards...What the hell do you think you’re doing?” His tone is somewhat nasal—but also terse with an edge that nearly borders on hysterical. “Hah. You’re underestimating me,” he sneers, prodding So-Chun’s chest with the same pipe he used to knock Shi-Woon down. “Think I’m some kind of pushover, huh?” He raises the pipe high above his head, ready to bring it down. “Let’s see how you handle a face full of fucking steel —”

Chang-Ho never sees the fist coming—one moment, he’s readying for a fight and in the next, knuckles slam into his stomach, a powerful surge of energy rocketing through him upon contact. He lets out an involuntary gasp as he finds himself flung far across the room, his body landing in a pile of discarded cardboard boxes and old newspapers and other trash until he’s all but buried in it.

Twin cries of “Chang-Ho!” fill the uncomfortable silence that follows.

That...That was ki. Haneul can’t help but stare, unaccustomed to seeing such blatant use of ki-powered attacks. In fact, he’s so used to hiding who he is and what he’s capable of that he doesn’t quite know how to react to someone who so obviously hails from the dangerous underbelly of the world. So he stands there in silent wariness, his brown gaze shifting from So-Chun to Kyoya, whose unimpressed glare is doing its level best to burn holes in the back of So-Chun’s head. (Cousin, maybe? If he has to guess—otherwise Kyoya wouldn’t be nearly as keen to challenge him. He’s always been slightly more peculiar where family is concerned, after all.)

“Would anyone else like a go?” So-Chun beckons the other two bullies forward with a tilt of his head, an air of cool confidence about him. “And no, Dae-Hyun,” he adds as an

afterthought, ignoring the sour look Kyoya throws his way. “We’ll settle our fight another time.”

Seeing what was done to Chang-Ho—seriously, is he even still *alive*?—Haneul isn’t surprised when Chang-Ho’s friends abandon him without a second thought, prompted by a sense of self-preservation too great to ignore...and neither is Shi-Woon, judging from the faint trace of disgust showing on his face.

“A little dramatic there, ne?” The only boy who hasn’t yet been introduced makes a face, running a hand through the short, blonde-tipped brown spikes of his hair.

“Be quiet, Junho,” says So-Chun, before shifting his attention to Haneul, Shi-Woon, and Sae-Hee. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes?” Shi-Woon gives Sae-Hee’s hand a gentle squeeze when she grips his sleeve tightly between slightly trembling fingers—as if afraid he’s going to disappear. All that calm Haneul managed to instill in her during their brief interaction has fizzled away, replaced by unease.

“Do you know Goomoonryong?”

Haneul stiffens, feeling the blood rush to his heart with a thud. If he wasn’t sure before, he certainly is now—Hyuk So-Chun, and by extension Kyoya (or is it Dae-Hyun now?), so very obviously belong to the Murim. Are they also part of the task force assembled to locate the whereabouts of his father and...what? Neutralize him?

This...This is getting dangerous.

“Goo...Goomoonryong?” Shi-Woon stammers, making a rather dubious effort to appear confused. “Uh, no? I—I mean, I don’t know anyone like that.”

Kyoya rolls his eyes and stalks over to where his first tonfa landed after he threw it, reclaiming it with a grunt of annoyance. He then shoots Chang-Ho’s unconscious form a disapproving frown—probably from how quickly that one punch felled him, but what can you expect from a bully?

“Leaving?” So-Chun murmurs, not taking his eyes off of Shi-Woon, who is actively avoiding his gaze.

“Hn.” Kyoya spares Haneul a brief, inscrutable look, then pivots on his heels like a drill sergeant and walks away, the tails of his coat flapping in the nonexistent breeze.

Still has that flair for the dramatic, Haneul thinks fondly and offers Shi-Woon an apologetic smile for leaving him to tackle the problem of So-Chun alone. But since he’s managed to locate at least one of his wayward guardians, he can’t possibly let this chance go. “Hibari-san, wait up!” He pursues the former cloud out of the warehouse and into the enveloping darkness of the alley, pausing only when he finds the other boy waiting for him, tonfas nowhere to be seen. Haneul knows better than to crowd him, easily remembering the beatings that would often occur when students and adults alike loitered in the school’s hallways and in the middle of the sidewalks and streets. “I never thought I’d see you again...*Here*, of all

places. Byakuran kind of alluded to the possibility, but you know how he is. He can't ever be straightforward—and likes to play up the whole mystical *I-Know-Your-Future-And-It's-Complicated* bit—and now I find that you're a Murim-in. I guess it makes sense, though..."

"Sawada Tsunayoshi," Kyoya interrupts in a stern tone. "You're rambling."

"O—Oh! I suppose I am." His expression turns slightly sheepish and he clears his throat. "But, uh, it's Haneul now...Park Haneul."

"Hn." The barest hint of a frown rolls over Kyoya's face, there one second and gone the next, but Haneul decides to treat it as his way of agreeing without actually uttering the words.

"It...It's really good to see you again, Hibari-san." He means every word of it, the void where his guardian bonds used to exist, bright and full and crackling with excess energy, gradually filling until his heart starts to flutter in anticipation of reuniting with the others.

One down, six more to go.

Kyoya grunts in reply, arms crossed and gaze solemn as it roves over Haneul's face, lingering on his forehead where the flame-infused bullet plowed through flesh and bone, leaving a gaping hole as a reminder of how short a don's life span typically ranged.

Haneul still has nightmares about that night, memories of watching guardian after guardian fall in their desperation to reach him. Even Mukuro Rokudo, who loathed the mafia with every fiber of his being and wished to destroy the world responsible for the taint of corruption and depravity interspersed all throughout the underworld. Even Chrome Dokuro, who only joined their famiglia at the behest of Mukuro. Even Kyoya, who rarely spent more than five minutes in their company, preferring to nap on the branch of a tree several feet above the ground than attend an official meeting he was already briefed on. Gokudera Hayato and Yamamoto Takeshi too, who spent more time bickering with each other than in actual compliance but who worked so well together that enemies often fell to their attacks before they even knew what hit them. And don't even get him started on Lambo, who ran around challenging Reborn at random intervals and then sniveled and complained when it didn't go his way.

At the end of the day, they came together as a family...and they died as one.

"It won't be like before," Haneul vows.

But it's his intuition rather than Kyoya that chooses to respond, an insistent clamoring in his ears, restless and on high alarm, warning him of impending trouble. Biting back a groan—because honestly, he leaves Shi-Woon alone for twenty minutes, and trouble happens?—he lets his instincts lead him back into the warehouse, Kyoya a silent shadow at his back.

When he reaches the group, however, shock nearly causes him to stumble. Shi-Woon is lying sprawled across the floor, unmoving with one arm tucked against his chest, his disheveled, sweat-slicked hair framing a face that is practically covered in blood. Sae-Hee is at his side, tears spilling down her cheeks as her eyes remain riveted to his inert form. "What happened," the words come out more as a demand than a question, sharp and to the point.

Clenching his hands so tight that his fingernails bite into his palms, Haneul looks from Junho to So-Chun, both of whom are staring at Shi-Woon as though they've never seen him before. "Well?"

"That's what I want to know," a low, masculine voice just shy of threatening suddenly interrupts.

Haneul's head snaps up, his mouth falling open slightly when he catches sight of Chun-Woo balancing on the ledge of a steel beam, a fierce grin grazing his lips. One arm is wrapped in a cast while the other is braced against the beam, fingers curled around the edge as he looks down at them from his precarious perch. (The fact that his intuition failed to perceive his father as a threat and as such didn't warn him of his presence isn't as surprising as the fact that Kyoya didn't immediately recognize the arrival of another strong player on the board—if one takes into account the way Kyoya's brows furrow suspiciously at the man's sudden appearance, every muscle in his body tautening like a compressed coil.)

"Hey, hey. Shouldn't you kids be in bed by now?"

Really, dad? The whole of Murim is out looking for you, and you decide to show up now?

"Typical."

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XIV.

The lazy chuckle, when it comes, is as unwelcome as it is unexpected. Slowly straightening from his crouch, Chun-Woo drops like a well-aimed missile off the ledge, the impact his feet make as they hit the floor leaving a crater the size of a small boulder. Reflexively, So-Chun jumps back to avoid him while Kyoya makes to jump forward, Haneul hastily grabbing the back of his coat to keep him from instigating a fight he probably—most definitely—can't win.

"Damn, kid. You're going to run out of blood at this rate." Chun-Woo clicks his tongue and, leaning over Shi-Woon, casually brushes the hair out of his eyes to get a better look at his face. A face that seems to have taken the kind of beating usually reserved for professional street fighters.

Haneul suppresses a grimace at the state of it—streaks of dirt and grime mingle with the blood from the numerous cuts and grazes peppering Shi-Woon's face, creating a somewhat clumpy residue on his skin that makes identifying him harder for those who aren't familiar with him.

Rising to his feet, Chun-Woo exhales a long breath and slowly turns to face So-Chun and Junho, pinning them in place with the intensity of his stare. "Was this your doing?"

So-Chun watches him closely, lines of tension mapping the wariness across his face. After a long, deliberate silence, he finally nods.

“Hm. Is that right,” the older male muses aloud and reaches into his back pocket for a pack of cigarettes, popping one into his mouth and lighting it. “If I’m not mistaken, you’re Hyuk So-Chun. A brat rumored to be the kind of genius who might appear once in a few hundred years...”

Haneul pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger and sighs. Leave it to his father to sound both impressed and condescending at the same time. And leave it to Kyoya to want to plant a tonfa between the eyes of someone capable of wiping the floor with him. Resigned, he tugs on Kyoya’s coat when the other boy slowly begins to inch forward, his gray eyes alight with anticipation as he brings out his tonfas. But, upon finding himself caught in a loose but persistent grasp, Kyoya harrumphs and puts his tonfas away, strangely cooperative in the face of Haneul’s insistence.

“So tell me, brat—if you’re that kind of genius, what made you think it’d be a good idea to attack someone who’s only been practicing martial arts for a month?”

“A...A month?” So-Chun’s tone is disbelieving. “It’s only been a month? But he—” Breaking off as soon as he senses the rising tension in the air, strong pulses of energy running between them, So-Chun immediately raises his arms to guard against Chun-Woo’s palm strike. It’s a quick, violent movement that he has no hopes of countering, but he tries. Except he isn’t given enough time to retaliate and therefore can only endure the pain of blocking a hit meant to fell him, the sheer force of the attack pushing him back a few paces.

(It must hurt, given the way So-Chun’s arms tremble, his mouth twisting in a pained grimace, and yet—

—It doesn’t take a genius to realize the man held back. In terms of Goomoonryong’s legendary strength, it’s barely a tap.)

“I ask the questions, brat.”

“H—Hey,” Junho yells, pointing his finger for emphasis. “Do you have any idea who you’re messing with? This guy knows Kang-Sung-Sunbaenim personally!”

Haneul stifles a snort, stepping away from Kyoya now that he’s been convinced not to charge in prematurely and toward Shi-Woon, who is still passed out and breathing shallowly, his face and clothes a bloodied mess. (The day his father cares about what Kang-Sung thinks is the day he decides to leave the Murim for good and become a street vendor peddling mudfish soup and live octopus.) “Sae-Hee,” he murmurs, trying to distract her from the intensity of the situation—and the clash between monsters she never should have been privy to. “Shi-Woon will be fine. He’s strong and stubborn and will be back on his feet in no time. You’ll see,” he assures, gentling his tone as one might to soothe a startled animal. “But you...You need to forget whatever you think you saw.”

“How?” She whispers, her lower lip trembling. “You can’t expect me to ignore how hurt Shi-Woon is. That...that boy is even more dangerous than Chang-Ho. And that man...Isn’t he the

new substitute teacher? What's he doing here?"

Haneul doesn't know how to answer that, but fortunately, he doesn't have to.

"You're Goomoonryong," So-Chun announces, his stoic features giving no suggestion to what thoughts are currently flickering through his mind or what emotion has been roused by Goomoonryong's presence, not even the wariness his body exudes.

"Even if he *is* Goomoonryong, that doesn't—wait, what?" Junho's head whips around so fast it's a wonder he doesn't get whiplash. "You mean, we actually found him? *The* Goomoonryong?"

Haneul glances askance at Kyoya, feeling a flood of relief at the sight of his aloof expression. Which typically means he's no longer interested in territory disputes and strength determination battles. A positive if ever there is one.

"Oh ho." Chun-Woo crushes the lit cigarette between his fingers, his nostrils flaring as the cold grey of his eyes blaze like an inferno in the middle of a drought. "So even though you knew about me, you still did that to my apprentice? Cocky little shit." His presence is so massive, so terrifyingly powerful, that if one squints hard enough, they can glimpse a large silhouette of a dragon wrapped around the man's body, fangs bared in warning as it waits for a sign, coiled and ready.

So-Chun stands frozen, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead at suddenly being confronted by the unrivaled strength of Goomoonryong. Not that Haneul can blame him. He remembers how terrifying Reborn used to be when he failed to follow the simplest of instructions, how he tried so hard to sink into the hardwood floor to escape notice and how Reborn had little hideaways scattered across Namimori, using them to spy on unsuspecting people who thought nothing of the strangeness of a baby going around town unsupervised, drinking coffee and casually flirting with every attractive adult he happened upon. Even Kyoya isn't unaffected by the sheer amount of ki emanating from Chun-Woo, considering how attentively he's observing the man, reluctantly impressed by the strength of his will.

Before the situation can deteriorate even further, Haneul preparing to get involved if it proves necessary—even if he must out himself in the process—the loud, disruptive sounds of several motors drawing near slice through the tension like a double-edged sword, both a convenience and a hindrance to the perpetuation of a peaceful solution.

"The guards are approaching," warns So-Chun, licking his suddenly dry lips. "They must have tracked our movements through our cell phones. Dae-Hyun, Junho." *Time to go*, goes left unsaid.

"What?" Chun-Woo growls. "You think I'll just let you walk away after what you did?"

"No." So-Chun's reply is immediate. "You are obviously strong, and your power...It is in no way inferior to the combined might of mine and the guards'. But what about him?" He gestures with a wave of his hand toward Shi-Woon. "If we allow this situation to escalate, it's quite possible that your disciple won't survive the outcome. I'm prepared to fight you, of course, but are you willing to risk his life in the process?"

The silence is deafening, an uncomfortable sensation that makes the tiny hairs on Haneul's arms stand on end, and when a flash of the deepest, darkest kind of fury flickers through Chun-Woo's gaze, So-Chun involuntarily takes a step back. "Are you threatening me, puppy?"

"No threat is intended. I'm merely stating facts," the boy hastens to reassure him, Junho nodding along without preamble.

Well...They certainly changed their tune quickly, Haneul muses to himself—he would have been almost amused if not for the terrifying and oppressive aura bearing down upon them, Haneul's knees locking up on the spot as a heavy weight settles on his chest, uncomfortable and constrictive. But just when he expects the man to ignore whatever kind of olive branch they're trying to tempt him with, Chun-Woo chooses instead to embrace unpredictability with a vengeance. "Fine," he accedes to So-Chun's argument with little fanfare, dispersing the aura with nothing more than a blink of his eyes. "Get the hell out. Before I change my mind."

Huh. With a calm that belies the gravity of a situation capable of turning vicious at a moment's notice, Haneul tugs a teary-eyed, trembling Sae-Hee to her feet once again, able to breathe easier without all that rage whipping the atmosphere into a frenzy. (Some time, during the confrontation, Sae-Hee found her way back over to Shi-Woon's side and spent most of that time with her fingers clenched around his arm, wearing her fear like a veil.) "Come on, let me walk you home."

"But what about..." Her voice trails off, her breath catching in her throat as she seemingly recalls how Shi-Woon came to be in that awful state.

"Don't worry. He's safe now." As if his father, selfish, prideful man that he can be, would allow any harm to befall Shi-Woon while he's in the vicinity—Murim-Ins take threats to their disciples very seriously, even ones who can't help but rebel against the Alliance for daring to order them around. Briefly, he locks eyes with Kyoya, promising to meet at another time, and receives a nod in return before the other boy quietly exits the warehouse, leaving So-Chun and Junho to follow on the heels of Goomoonryong's surprising agreement.

"You too," says his father as he leans down to scoop Shi-Woon into his arms, mindful not only of his cast but of the boy's injuries as well, barely straining under the added weight, no matter how awkward it may look. "Be good kids and get your asses straight home before you stumble into even more trouble."

Haneul doesn't even think to argue with him—he merely reaches for Sae-Hee's arm, who's too busy gaping at the fact that an alleged substitute teacher swore in front of his students to notice when the brunet begins to usher her toward the exit, casting one final glance over his shoulder at Chun-Woo and Shi-Woon before leaving the warehouse far, *far* behind them. Far, *far* away from the threat of discovery.

(Byakuran is going to be *so* unbearable when he hears about this.)

XV.

Later that night finds Haneul at Incheon Bridge, leaning against the railing and gazing out across the murky water at the city backdrop. In the tranquil silence that ensues, the gentle lapping of the waves against the concrete pilings lulls him into a sense of calm—one that is soon broken by the nearly inaudible sound of approaching footsteps, confidence brimming with every step.

(Here is a man with very little to fear.)

“She has a hand-drawn picture of you taped to a dartboard, you know,” are the first words out of Haneul’s mouth, waiting until Chun-Woo is mere feet away to levy him with a long-suffering look. “She’s managed to hit every vital part of your face—eyes, nose, ears...mouth; she especially likes targeting the mouth—but she denies knowing how to play darts. Claims her aim isn’t worth...Well, you get the idea.”

Chun-Woo’s chuckle is soft and wry as he settles in beside him, bringing his arms up to rest them against the railing. “That mad, huh? Woman always did have a temper.”

“Hey, that *woman* is my mother,” Haneul defends, narrowing his eyes in warning. “And I can’t fault her for being angry. Absentee fathers have that kind of effect on her.”

“Right.” Chun-Woo heaves a deep sigh, looking up at the sky as if it holds all of the answers to the universe. To some, it does. “I’m a horrible father. Believe me, I know. But you know why I can’t be involved. It’s...”

“Dangerous?” A faint, wistful smile lightens the brunet’s somber features. “I’m not stupid, abeoji. I know why you left all those years ago...and why you never return her calls. Speaking of, if I were you, I’d avoid further antagonizing her. In fact, just avoid her altogether and you should be fine.” It’s true. Jina can hold a grudge like no other; the second she sets her sights on someone she perceives to be the enemy, she’ll run them to ground until she either catches them or they drive her to submission. She’s stubborn like that. And making an enemy of someone who managed to conquer all nine seats of power—each seat representing a different specialized technique that is difficult to master by itself, let alone nine separate times with nine separate techniques—is just unreasonable and irrational and something only his mother would do. Trying to repress her vengeful nature is like trying to convince a dog it doesn’t need fresh air and exercise. Utterly pointless.

Which is why he welcomes the change in subject when it comes.

“Have you mastered the **Full Body Barrier** yet?”

“Not yet?” Even Haneul can hear the question mark tacked on to the end of his answer.

“Right now, I’m only able to shield my head and part of my neck, but it feels...close? Like I’m on the verge of a breakthrough.”

“It’s all in the distribution,” Chun-Woo says. He wraps his good arm around Haneul’s shoulders and slowly reaches up to ruffle his wild curls. “Keep practicing. You’ll eventually get there.”

Haneul's smile deepens, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he briefly allows himself to bask in the glow of his father’s approval. “So? How is Shi-Woon’s training coming along?”

“Bah! That kid.” Chun-Woo shakes his head in fond exasperation. “He doesn’t know or accept his own limitations. Do you know how long he pestered me until I agreed to teach him anything? Too damn long. And to think it all began here.”

“Here?”

His father cracks a smile of his own, dropping his gaze to the water. “I had to test his resolve, didn’t I? The Murim is a dangerous place to traverse as you well know. Hell, I figured he’d give up after a few days. But then I made one bullshit comment about staking his life and soul on learning martial arts, and the boy actually jumped from this very spot...What else could I do but agree?”

Indeed, once a challenge is met with determination, the only way forward is to accept the outcome and move on, especially when that someone is as hard-headed and as single-minded as Shi-Woon.

“You’ll look out for him when I no longer can, right?” Chun-Woo looks sideways at him, his tone and expression suggesting solemnity. But it’s always hard to tell with him.

“We’re friends,” Haneul responds honestly. “And friends look after their own.” A *genuine* friend does, at any rate. A genuine friend would gladly take a bullet for them—as he once did for his own famiglia.

"You're a good kid, Haneul." Chun-Woo gently knocks his shoulder against his. There’s a certain pensive air about him that pokes and prods at the ex-sky’s concern with a metaphorical stick. It’s almost as though the man doesn’t expect to survive the *manhunt*, which is simply ludicrous. He’s Goomoonryong, after all—and that means something in the Murim, his reputation going down in history as something unfathomable and terrifying. “Too good for this world, honestly. Don’t know how I managed to luck out in the kid department, but I ain’t complaining.”

“You only say that because you don’t have to live with me twenty-four seven.”

Chun-Woo snorts. “Don’t rain on my dad parade, kid. Let me be a proud parental figure for once.”

“Fine,” Haneul huffs. “But you only get one pass.”

Abeoji. Term for father.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: just Byakuran being Byakuran and Hibari being Hibari. xD. And Chun-Woo too. Can't forget him. But honestly? the T rating is still in effect.

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CHARACTER CAST

Park Haneul is Sawada Tsunayoshi

Byakuran is Byakuran (Parallel worlds and all. xD)

Hyuk Dae-Hyun is Hibari Kyoya

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

XVI.

Byakuran is bored.

(And a bored Byakuran is a dangerous one.

At least that's what the elders tend to say after a long night of drinking and political maneuvering.

But maybe he's feeling a little vindictive too...but only a little: all one has to do to arrive at that conclusion is glimpse the childish glee in his eyes as he stalks a prominent figure in the Murim from the safety of an unlocked window, unashamedly proud to be the driving force behind an old man's eventual attempt to drown himself at the bottom of a keg of soju.)

So while Haneul is otherwise busy reuniting with daddy dearest—and ignoring Byakuran's witty, emoji-based text messages, the jerk—the self-proclaimed menace of the Sun-Woo Clan is currently dangling from the window (yes, *that* window) of a high-rise, patiently awaiting the arrival of Alliance Chief Shin-Il, a man he only knows through the glib warnings of an aloof clan elder, warned only because of his close ties to the future leader of their clan, his sweet, precious sister; something about how greedy old men should know better than to try to steal another man's pie.

This one apparently doesn't know how to take no for an answer.

(Which, okay. Yeah. Not cool.

Consent is valid.

Consent is best.

Consent is—)

The loud, creaky sound of a door opening and closing brings his attention to the short, gray-haired man making his way into the living room, frustration in his voice as he asks—read, *demands*—“Have you found him yet?” Whatever answer he receives on the other end must not have been the one he wanted, because he gives a tiny grunt of dissatisfaction as he lowers himself onto the black leather armchair facing the window. (And miraculously doesn't notice a stranger hanging around outside his penthouse suite until Byakuran deliberately and exaggeratedly clicks his tongue, casually brushing a few wisps of white-blond hair out of his eyes with one hand while using the other to pull himself up onto the surprisingly sturdy windowsill so that he can straddle the sill without having to worry about losing a shoe to the picturesque pond below.)

“I'll call you back,” says the man before abruptly ending the call and pocketing his phone, a hint of suspicion touching his eyes. Good. A suspicious man is often the last to kick the bucket.

“You're playing a dangerous game, Chief,” Byakuran sing-songs, his purple eyes holding a glint of humor as he watches the various expressions flicker across that adorably expressive, wrinkled face, from bewilderment to wariness to alarm to...none of the above.

(Oh. A poker face. How cute.)

Shin-Il slowly gets to his feet, never once taking his eyes off of Byakuran. *Smart*. “Who the hell are you?” A ripple of cold energy circles the room, sharp and threatening, before forming a tangible barrier between them. *Huh. Impressive*.

“Someone,” says Byakuran, giving a Cheshire cat grin at the absolute irritation he can see lurking in the chief's expression. So no more poker face, hm? Color him disappointed. “Or maybe no one at all—depends on who you ask...But Chief, you're not asking the right question.”

Shin-Il grinds his teeth, the kindly guise he shows the world melting away under the heat of his indignation. He obviously doesn't feel the need to humor a man decades younger than him. More's the pity. “And just what is the right question, boy?”

Straight and to the point. *Boring*.

“You should be asking yourself, ‘where's Hyuk So-Chun?’” The pointed question shoots out like a bullet, and his grin widens until he's all but bearing his teeth at a man foolishly determined to make an enemy out of the Sun-Woo Clan. Byakuran may not get along with

every member—may often think about punting a few of the less agreeable ones into the sun—but this clown is responsible for sending flunkies after his beloved sister. And that just isn't acceptable.

The energy darkens, hardening into a fine point that presses against Byakuran's throat like a knife, pricking his skin. A single drop of blood seeps from the cut and trickles down his neck, disappearing beneath the collar of his shirt. His pristine, white shirt that refuses to cooperate with stain removing solutions. Damn, there goes another one.

"What have you done?"

"Me? Nothing." Byakuran's expression is the personification of innocence, all wide-eyed and guileless. "But the Nine Arts Dragon? Yeah, he's a different story."

Shin-Il's gaze flares with anger, almost irrational in nature, as though the very mention of the man who single-handedly dominated the *Shinmujengpe* personally offends his poor, old man sensibilities. "How?" He forces through clenched teeth, a growl in his voice. "How are you connected to *that man*?"

"Again, you're not asking the right question." Byakuran's tone is just shy of mocking, a ruthless gleam in his eyes as he casually balances against the windowsill, just one word away from slipping away into the night, carried away by wings made of ki. Hm. Sounds like a ballad worth singing. "And even if you did," he adds before the chief can say anything, unapologetically caustic and spiteful. "I wouldn't tell you."

"You brat," Shin-Il hisses, taking a threatening step toward him.

It's the kind of threat he knows better than to ignore; so naturally, he chooses to reward it with a chuckle instead. Because Old Man Shin-Il surely deserves an A for effort. "And that's my cue." With a wiggle of his fingers and a blasé "ta-ta," he gracefully pushes away from the window, his innate ki surfacing to form wings along his back, massive but translucent against the night backdrop, and slips away like a thief in the night, allowing the darkness to swallow him whole.

(Playing a dangerous game, indeed.)

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XVII.

The following Saturday morning finds Haneul claiming his usual spot on the marble bench facing the front of his apartment complex, a purring tabby cat lying curled up on his lap,

amber eyes closed in bliss as Haneul runs gentle fingers down the cat's back, marveling at how soft his fur is. It's strangely therapeutic, petting a cat while thinking of that earlier mess with Shi-Woon and Sae-Hee and Chang-Ho and Hibari and Hibari's lookalike...not to mention his father, who apparently can't be bothered to lay low when he can simply threaten other Murim-ins into keeping their silence instead.

(He's almost as bad as Reborn and his penchant for chaos.

Now isn't *that* a terrifying thought?)

Tilting his head back to stare up at the sky in pensive silence, a resigned look painted across his face, his fingers hover over Nattsu Jr's head, barely grazing his fur. So naturally, the tabby takes great offense to that and rubs his head against Haneul's hand, demanding head pats and ear scratches as his due.

Haneul's gaze drops to his lapful of lazy, purring cat, complying with a faint smile. "What should I do, Nattsu?" His voice is barely above a whisper, memories of a small lion cub merging with the tabby until they become one in his mind. "I was hoping for a quiet life...well, quieter than usual. But I never expected to see *him* again—any of them, really. And of course, there's Dad, who's gone and made an even bigger splash than that time Mukuro destroyed an entire family...Granted, one that thought to use him, but still...Should I just pretend nothing's happened? But Shi-Woon...Shi-Woon is definitely involved, and Byakuran probably won't let me ignore any of this, anyway. He knows where I live now...Eh, suppose I could always fake...amnesia?" Haneul pauses to think it over, but not even a second later, he scoffs at the idea, only just now realizing how ridiculous it sounds after verbalizing his thoughts.

(Who knew that coming up with some kind of foolproof plan that won't immediately *pop* the second someone tries to poke holes in it would be this hard?

Certainly not him.)

"I'm doomed," he laments, amused by the way Nattsu Jr cocks his head in a curious fashion as if he can understand him and meows, before butting his head against his hand once more, seeking more scratches. "You're a spoiled little thing, aren't you?" He gives a fond chuckle but concedes, anyway—only to tense for the briefest of moments when he senses the approach of that familiar, impetuous energy that sparks along his nerves, the possessive embrace of a cloud orbiting around his sky. It doesn't take long for the contentment to sink in, the tension easing from his frame. Gods, how he missed this. "Hello, Hibari-san," he greets the other boy with his usual warmth and acceptance, a smile in his tone. "What're you doing here?"

Hibari Kyoya—for he will forever remain Kyoya in his mind regardless of what he's called in this life—materializes beside him, as silent as the grave and with the demeanor to match. "Park Haneul," he says, gray eyes alight with something vaguely resembling anticipation. For what, Haneul cannot say. But it rouses his curiosity, a curiosity his own instincts refuse to let him ignore. "Sawada Tsunayoshi," Kyoya corrects after a brief pause, "Prove you still possess a strong will...and fight me."

His demand lingers in the silence between them, heavy with purpose...Then Haneul sighs—because, honestly, he should have expected this; it’s just so...*Hibari*—and carefully deposits Nattsu Jr on the bench beside him, before rising to his feet. “You never change,” he murmurs, almost nostalgically. “But if that’s what you want...then follow me.” And with that, he starts in the direction of the complex, toward a courtyard overgrown with weeds and rarely used.

If it’s a spar Kyoya wants, it’s a spar he will get.

It’s the least he can do for someone who raged and raged and **raged** the moment his sky fell to the bitter, hateful grudge of an old enemy.

XVIII.

Haneul stands in the middle of the deserted courtyard, arms loose and relaxed in a way meant to deceive his opponent—in a way Reborn taught him to be, determined to make something of a boy who knew nothing at all, the very same tactic Chun-Woo’s videos have always emphasized. *Fool your opponent, make them think you’re a non-threat. And then attack.* But Kyoya knows him, knows what he’s capable of...acknowledges the possible threat he can and will become in the watchfulness of his gaze and the tense slope of his shoulders. With a flick of his hands, tonfas appear (some would say like magic, but Haneul recognizes the move for what it is—a skill only Kyoya is able to execute with any true hope of success), and the cloud who isn’t a cloud but still possesses the same traits of one drops into a familiar stance, the glint of light on steel sending a sharp, visceral thrill through him.

Before he can so much as blink, however, Kyoya *charges*, swift and purposeful and as merciless as he was in his past life—even to family, **especially** to family.

A rush of excitement sweeping over him, Haneul ducks, the tonfa barely grazing his hair—so quick he can hear it whistle through the air like a train. But he’s not nearly fast enough to avoid the second tonfa. Grunting, he catches the sideways spiral with his arm, ignoring the sharp, brief pain of contact as he retaliates with a knee to the stomach that Kyoya manages to evade at the last second.

(Curse those innate Hibari reflexes.)

“How are you still so strong?” Coached as a complaint without all the negativity that usually follows, Haneul fights back a giddy smile, his heart beating wildly, attempting a painful escape through his throat. He’s forgotten just how exhilarating sparring with Kyoya can be. “Shall we continue?”

A hint of a smirk plays at the corners of Kyoya’s lips as he points both tonfas at him, inviting him to attack this time.

Haneul can't help but chuckle—a sound that somehow manages to be both soft and tense, bordering on anxious with a side order of eager. But it's his eyes that tell the *real* story, fierce and bright and flecked with amber as he holds Kyoya's challenging gaze.

He raises his fists, tendrils of ki dancing across his knuckles, reminiscent of flames.

In response, Kyoya flares his own ki, allowing it to encase the metal batons in tangible, imposing energy.

(Challenge accepted...and message received.)

Without warning, Haneul lunges forward, aiming to land a right hook to his throat that Kyoya neatly dodges—who then goes on to reciprocate with a leg sweep that Haneul smoothly blocks with the flat of his shoe, a complicated maneuver taught remotely thanks to an estranged father who is at least aware enough of the dangers of physical contact to use an untraceable phone number and IP address.

It's like a choreographed dance. For every punch thrown, a kick is returned twofold. For every thrust of the knee, a tonfa meets flesh, blocked by capable hands. Every so often, a blow lands, hard enough to startle but not nearly hard or powerful enough to end the spar—a silent agreement between a former cloud and his sky who've only just reunited and wish to prolong their encounter for as long as possible. And Haneul, he positively *glows*, laughter flowing freely between bouts as he evades and counters with an ear-to-ear smile that brings a light flush to Kyoya's cheeks.

"You're amazing, Hibari-san," he pants, his pulse flying in a way that reminds him of their last foray as a Family, when they banded together in defense of one another after that planned sneak attack against one of their own. "You're really...something else."

Kyoya's eyes widen, and he falters slightly, taking a punch to the stomach for his trouble. But he's just as quick to regain his balance, eyes narrowed as he surges forward, grabbing the front of Haneul's shirt and pulling him into a brief, hard kiss that startles a gasp out of the brunet and nearly leaves him reeling.

"I...Uh...What..." Haneul stammers, feeling the warmth of a blush crawl up his neck as his fingers hover over his lips, barely touching them. Gods, how embarrassing...to lose his composure like that.

"The Alliance now knows of the link between your dragon and his baby lizard. Their hunting grounds have expanded to include the school," Kyoya says as a way of an explanation, ignoring his own flushed cheeks and racing heartbeat in lieu of Murim business.

Haneul blinks, his brain steadily working to decode Hibari-speak—and hopefully convert it into something easily understandable, which thankfully doesn't take long—before his expression softens into a warm smile. "I missed you too."

Perhaps he could've convinced Kyoya to sit with him for a while, perhaps he would've even succeeded...if not for the sudden clearing of a throat.

Slowly, hoping to be proven wrong but in actuality gearing up for the very real possibility of having the intimacy of their rendezvous exposed to prying eyes, he turns around and almost groans upon catching sight of his mother standing there in all her nosy, *satisfy-my-curiosity-or-perish-in-the-flames-of-war* glory.

(So dramatic.)

“What are you doing?” Jina asks, arms folded across her chest as she looks from Haneul to Kyoya, the former avoiding her eyes while the latter regards her with narrow-eyed suspicion. Kyoya doesn’t shy away from her gaze, even seems to revel in the challenge—which seems to make her laugh, the sound a fifty-fifty mixture of disbelief and amusement. “*Another* one, Haneul? Really?”

He just shrugs.

XIX.

It’s only when he’s getting ready for bed later that night—after suffering through an interrogation from a busybody woman who claims to enjoy living voraciously through her son—that Haneul remembers to check his voicemail.

(Because apparently, that is now a thing he must check regularly.

Who knew?)

His brows come down into a barely perceptible frown when he realizes there are two, one from Byakuran and the other from Chun-Woo. Which is frankly bizarre, seeing as he never gave this number to his father in the first place, but he supposes the man has his ways...and connections. With that thought firmly in mind, he decides to listen to Chun-Woo's voicemail first.

“Hey, kid,” Goomoonryong's lazy drawl comes across loud and clear. “Bad news. I’ve been made. An idiot led the fools right to my backyard. Should have known better than to trust that bastard to be discreet. But what can you do?” There’s a loudly defensive, “Hey!” in the background, leading Haneul to believe the idiot-in-question is still there and mostly unharmed from the sound of things. “And the other idiot wouldn’t let me take care of the leak, so now I’m expected to run away like a fucking dog with its fucking tail between its fucking legs...*Like a damn coward*. And it’s really starting to piss me off...Wish I could’ve seen you one last time before I hit the road, but I ain’t like idiot number one here—can’t chance sending the Alliance dogs to your front door...They’d probably piss all over it and then you’d have to get a new one. And then your mom would probably take it out of my hide. I keep expecting her to jump out of the bushes or something.”

Haneul has to stifle a laugh at his words, not even bothering to deny it. (There's no point. Because he knows his mother. If she actually knew where Chun-Woo was, she'd be actively stalking him, out for a little thing called revenge. And no one, least of all them, really needs that kind of headache right now.)

"Fuck. Gotta go...Take care of your mom, kiddo. Don't forget to brush your teeth after every meal, yada yada yada...Love you," Chun-Woo ends the message on a softer, almost wistful note.

(Maybe...maybe this was what he meant when he asked him to look after Shi-Woon in his stead?)

Damn it, Dad.

Haneul nibbles on his lower lip, conflicted. On the one hand, he's tempted to dial the unknown number and see if, by chance, his father will pick up. But on the other hand, he doesn't want to risk exposing Chun-Woo's location to his enemies.

And then there's Shi-Woon, who's at risk himself simply because of his association with the Nine Arts Dragon. Fact is, according to Kyoya, the Alliance has already begun poking around the school, possibly in pursuit of Shi-Woon—it won't be long before they make the connection needed to send the full might of the Alliance down on Shi-Woon's head, and knowing that boy, he'll take them head-on without any thought to the consequences of losing even one battle or, gods forbid, his life.

He heaves a deep, long-drawn sigh, weariness settling on his brow as he moves onto Byakuran's voicemail. It can't be any worse than Chun-Woo's...right?

Wrong.

"Tsu-kun!" Byakuran begins, his tone hanging somewhere between overly familiar and annoyingly peppy. "I see you've found Kyo-chan again, and without my guidance too. Good for you! Can't say I was expecting you to fall onto his lips like you did, but he certainly didn't seem to mind...Now that I think about it, I never got my kiss. I think my good behavior warrants one the next time I see you, ne?"

With furrowed brows and slightly pinkened cheeks, Haneul props his body against a few of the fluffier pillows he swiped from his mother's room and speculates, long and hard. How can Byakuran possibly know about the kiss? Is he *spying* on him?

"You better keep a closer eye on that adorable disciple of Daddy Dragon. We don't need another martyr throwing himself to the baying hounds now, do we?...No? I didn't think so...But don't worry, my dear friend! I'll see you soon...ish? Maybe tomorrow? Maybe Thursday? Meh...But when I do, I expect a kiss, okay? No take-backs, got it? Jalga!"

Uh... Haneul shakes his head, his eyelids drooping as he reaches across the bed to place his phone on the bedside table. Nothing about Byakuran has ever made much sense, so why would his voicemail?

Whatever. I'll figure it out tomorrow, is the last thought he has before sleep finally claims him.

Chapter End Notes



Hibari:



Also Hibari:

Super duper secret author's note: thanks so much for all the kudos and comments, guys! I promise I read them. In fact, reading them all makes me happy and content and it helps me get over my writer's block faster. So, anyway...Thanks for reading! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. <3

Chapter Notes

She lives! *Barely*, but it's true. And she comes bearing the best gift of all, a new update! Yay! I honestly can't believe it's been over a year since my last one, and I feel downright awful that I can't seem to stick to a regular posting schedule. But I am determined to keep writing and updating because this story will forever hold a special place in my heart. That, and I enjoy trying my hand at writing fight scenes even if I'm not the best at it. xD. Thank you to everyone who's decided to stick around, though, to see this one through! I'm still amazed by the amount of interest this fic has garnered over its lifespan of two years, even if I'm writing in a pretty obscure fandom.

Trigger warnings: some violence, typical of both fandoms. Still rated T, however, so there's that.

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CHARACTER CAST

Park Haneul is Sawada Tsunayoshi

Byakuran is Byakuran (Parallel worlds and all. xD)

Hyuk Dae-Hyun is Hibari Kyoya

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

XX.

Byakuran is a bonafide menace.

A menace with a propensity for ambiguity, as proven by the cryptic text message waiting for him the following morning:

U shld srsly think abt takin a detour 2 the caf at 2:18. On the dot, Tsu-kun. Not a min earlier or later, k? I promise youll c somethig interestin.

Haneul squints suspiciously at the text, wondering what game Byakuran is playing and if he wants any part of it. But he supposes it can't hurt to humor the man—at least keep him

occupied enough so he'll forgo looking for a source of entertainment elsewhere. Besides, it's not as if he's required to stick around if it turns out the former Gesso has something entirely too vexing and mischievous up his sleeve.

(Perhaps he should've listened to his inner voice's warning and ignored Byakuran's text, or at the very least found a reason to avoid this section of the school without rousing the marshmallow-obsessed man's suspicions.

Well, it's too late to beg off now. Even if curiosity is slowly starting to get the better of him.)

Which is why half a day later finds Haneul lurking in the hallway like some adolescent creeper, mere inches away from the principal's office as with both a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes, he stares intently at the intimidating group gathered in the room. A few of the men are immaculately dressed in black suits while the one standing in full view of the doorway is wearing traditional clothes, complete with a black hanbok-style shirt, slate-gray pants, and a patterned coat that hangs elegantly to his ankles.

What's the Alliance Chief doing here?

Edging closer to the doorway, Haneul debates sneaking into the office and eavesdropping on what is bound to be a private, clandestine meeting. The Alliance is unmistakably out for blood, pursuing even the slightest rumor of a Nine Arts Dragon disciple—desperate to find a weakness to exploit.

(*Any* weakness, really, including a son the Goomoonryong rarely sees.

Chun-Woo's aggressive strength and overwhelming power have accrued many enemies over the years, enemies that would overjoy at the first hint of a familial connection between such a powerful heavy hitter and a seemingly normal high school student. They won't care who gets caught in the crossfire; their only concern will be the absolute destruction of a man who not only surpassed all other competition for the glorious title of *Goomoonryong* but who refused to bend over backwards for the Alliance, who still refuses to allow them even the smallest hint of authority over him.)

The thought of discovery leaves an uneasy frown on Haneul's face.

Thank god for impromptu lessons on how to read lips from a distance.

Attention riveted on Alliance Chief Shin-Il, tense and guarded and frankly nervous at even the slightest threat of detection, Haneul watches the clever way words form on the elder man's lips, trying to parse through the chief's subterfuge to reach the heart of the matter. The fact that his party doesn't seem particularly concerned about leaks, considering they left the door partway open, is telling. Overconfidence is a dangerous quality to have in the Murim, easily capable of destroying you from within for the sheer audacity of thinking yourself above reproach or ruin.

It will be this man's downfall if he isn't careful.

“I come bearing terrible news, Gyojang sunsaengnim,” Shin-Il is saying, his tone as somber as the air permeating the office. “Your esteemed president’s body was found on US soil. If not for the help of a government official, we may have never learned of his unfortunate...accident.”

From where he’s standing, Haneul can see how wide the principal’s eyes are, his side-profile hunching forward as the elder nods shortly and adds, “We have reason to believe one of your new...hires is connected and with your permission, of course, we were hoping to question him.”

Oh.

Oh no.

Hibari was right. They know.

He slowly backs away from the doorway, heart pounding in his ears. Fear is a chilling presence dogging his every step, cold and primal. (It knows no weaknesses, nor can it be reasoned with. It simply is.) Haneul takes a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. It isn’t fear for himself that has him hastily departing before the Alliance representatives can detect an unwanted presence. It’s fear for his father, a man capable of many vicious, godlike feats but still very much human at the end of the day—and fear for Shi-Woon too, a boy on the verge of a colossal breakthrough the likes of which has only been seen sparingly. A teenager with seemingly more courage than sense and an incredibly dedicated, unwavering sense of justice. His father certainly struck gold with that one.

It isn’t until he’s halfway to his next class, however, that Haneul realizes something big is happening, big enough to warrant a cry for help.

“Quick! Someone, get a teacher! Chang-Ho’s finally lost it!” An agitated voice calls out, accompanied by shocked exclamations and gasps, wide-eyed students circling Chang-Ho and his choice of victim like vultures, too startled to do anything but gawk at the spectacle.

Worry sits heavy in Haneul’s stomach, like a stone at the bottom of a river. Because he *knows* that silhouette. Recognizes that sandy-brown hair, even streaked red with blood, and that compelling aura of untested power.

Shi-Woon.

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XXI.

Two inconspicuous men—one with long, blond-white hair and the other with short jet-black hair, both adorned in black suits—stand amidst the gawking crowd of onlookers, studying the rather violent scene in thoughtful silence.

Yi Shi-Woon hasn't moved from where he fell after taking a bat to the head, a fact that seems to alarm one of the girls who immediately runs to the injured teenager's side as soon as she notices what is happening. "Shi-Woon," she cries as she drops to the floor beside the boy, reaching toward him with a trembling hand, fingertips barely grazing the back of his head, as if afraid of further aggravating his injuries.

The men share a look, introspective and calculating in nature, unmoved to act but suspicious all the same. Until the instigator, this Chang-Ho, points his bat at the girl in a threatening manner, no doubt prepared to use it. A startled gasp catches in the girl's throat, her eyes squeezed shut. But before Chang-Ho's weapon of choice has the chance to connect with its intended target, a surprisingly strong fist plows into the kid's face, blood splattering everywhere as the impact sends him careening into the jeering posse gathered around him.

The men stare, transfixed, at Shi-Woon, astonished by the amount of ki they can feel emanating from him, from the clenched fists at his sides, his boyish features contorted into a livid expression as he glares at Chang-Ho. As practitioners of the North Star School, their senses are more attuned to ki than most, capable of determining the strength of one's ki simply by being in the same vicinity as them—and for someone previously unknown in the Murim, this boy seems to possess a staggering amount, reminiscent of the Nine Arts Dragon when he first rolled onto the scene all those years ago.

"You think that's him?" Asks the one on the right.

"Seems like it," the other replies with a curt nod.

Exchanging yet another loaded look, they step out of the crowd, ignoring how the other students immediately fall back, a curious hum sweeping through the group as their collective attention shifts to the only two adults in a crowd of students. (Strangers who do not belong.

But that's never stopped them before.)

"Hey, you," the long-haired one calls out, a sly smirk twisting his lips, his intense gaze hidden behind dark aviator sunglasses. His lightly accented voice with its mocking undertone seems to startle Shi-Woon out of whatever trance he briefly fell under, and the man watches with vague anticipation as the boy goes rigid, muscle memory evoking an unusually ominous stance that acts as yet another reminder of the dangerous influence that only the Nine Arts Dragon is suited to.

Coincidence? He thinks not.

When it looks as though the boy intends to slip away, to escape before the two Murim-ins can obviously question him—a tenseness to Shi-Woon's face that all but screams wary—the man's hand snaps out, seizing Shi-Woon's wrist in a vice-like grip. "Rumor has it you're involved with *the* Goomoonryong. That true?"

Shi-Woon blanches, which is all the confirmation the men need to act on their suspicions. "Told you," declares the shorter haired one, a hint of a smug smile tugging at his lips as he comes to stand abreast of his companion. "But know this, Kang Woobin-ssi, only the master has the right to interrogate the boy. We must not interfere."

“Seriously, man? You saw how confused the poor kid is,” says Woobin, pursing his lips in a pout. “C'mon, Sung-Ho-sunbae. Live a little,” he adds, unapologetically excited about the prospect of being the one to capture the Goomoonryong's disciple. “We probably don't even need to wait for the chief to interrogate him. This'll be a cinch.”

At that, Shi-Woon seems to lose even more color, as if familiar with their chief's reputation. Warned, no doubt, by the very man they're searching so diligently for.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Shi-Woon is quick to say, a defensive note creeping into his voice.

Woobin stifles a snort, not even sparing the boy a reply as he and a scowling Sung-Ho—the guy has never really appreciated being contradicted, especially in public—move to surround him, hoping to cut his escape off before Shi-Woon can act on what his instincts are clearly telling him to do.

But Sung-Ho doesn't seem to have any such compunction, despite his earlier words. “Who're you trying to fool, Yi Shi-Woon? Your face says differently.”

“Hey, Shi-Woon!” An unfamiliar voice sharply (unexpectedly) cuts in, startling the two men into turning to confront whatever new threat has decided to present itself. “Duck!”

Unhesitant, Shi-Woon drops to his stomach, and the next thing Woobin sees is a pair of black canvas shoes coming for his face. With a muffled curse, Woobin ducks, practically rolling out of the way of what could have been a potentially lethal attack...and yet he still somehow manages to catch a ki-enforced fist to the jaw, the blow strong enough to dislocate it. (Not to mention the big, fat concussion it threatens to leave him with.)

Oh—

"*Fuck*," he grunts, barely able to get the word out, and rubs his chin with a pained wince, already beginning to feel the physical effects of the new kid's punch in the raw tenderness of his jaw and the way his teeth don't quite line up properly.

(Damn brat.)

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XXII.

A collective gasp washes through the stunned crowd, seeming to wake Shi-Woon up from his dazed state. “Haneul-ssi?” He mutters, almost in disbelief as he watches the other boy perform the same intricate, powerful maneuver his own master taught him just last night, before informing him of his imminent departure—something about how hanging around Shi-Woon is getting too dangerous (for Shi-Woon's sake, of course) and that it's time to move on. He tried to argue against it, naturally, but Chun-Woo refused to even entertain the idea of

staying and now the man is long gone, supposedly taking the so-called dangerous Murim business with him.

Or so his master wanted to believe, but apparently, the Murim chose to seek Shi-Woon out instead.

And now?

He can't help but gape at Haneul, who managed to pull off a **Breaking Spirit Strike** with the surprising ease of a seasoned pro. The very same Haneul who seemed so perfectly normal not even two days ago when he decided on a whim to sit with Shi-Woon at lunch, quietly finishing his homework while Shi-Woon lost himself to Chun-Woo's teachings, thinking of a hundred different ways to execute the very move Haneul did so effortlessly. Does that make him a student of Chun-Woo's then? If so, why hide it?

(Maybe for the same reason you do. Idiot, he thinks with an inward shake of his head.)

"No time," the other boy grits out, abruptly grabbing Shi-Woon's hand and yanking him in the direction of the stairs, all while ignoring how dubiously some of the students stare after them, a murmur of confusion and some bemusement rippling through the crowd as the two Murim-ins curse before quickly giving chase.

Together, the two boys slip out one of several side doors and immediately high-tail it for the front gate. Just as they reach it, though, another man—this one so much broader and taller than the other two, with thick, white hair styled to resemble a military-esque cut—steps out of the shadows, blocking their exit with his bulk. "Shit. Kang Oongsan," he hears Haneul mutter under his breath. He then turns to offer Shi-Woon an encouraging grin, strangely unconcerned by this new arrival. "Your turn."

Shi-Woon has to fight back a nervous chuckle at how quickly and cheekily Haneul steps down—as if he's the teacher and wants to see how far his student has improved. It's so eerily similar to Chun-Woo's approach that Shi-Woon obeys without question.

Ki externalizes in tangible waves, circulating in his ankles and synchronizing with his footsteps. Just as his master taught him.

One step. Two steps. Three steps...Four, lightning-quick and simultaneous to the point that when Kang Oongsan blinks once, Shi-Woon has already dodged the man's outstretched arms; he then follows it up with a hard right hook to Kang's midsection, just shy of reaching the *Breaking Spirit* point.

But it's enough to bring the Murim-in to his knees, enough to make him double over with a grunt of pain, which in turn gives them a tiny but doable window of opportunity to escape before the other two can catch up.

"You're a fast learner, huh," Haneul muses aloud as they cut through an alley toward the main street, inspiring confidence in the way he evades pedestrians as he leads them to yet another alley, not bothering to slow his pace as he navigates around dead ends and narrow back streets. Shi-Woon keeps pace easily enough—which is a surprising turn of events given

his former body condition. (But thanks to something called a Divine Pill, he is now strong enough to step into the world of Murim without feeling as though he may very well expire on the spot. Speaking of...)

“I, I didn’t know you were p, part of this world, Haneul-ssi,” Shi-Woon pants, little lines of concentration forming between his brows as he focuses partly on regulating his ki distribution and partly on keeping up with Haneul.

“Never came up,” Haneul replies, as nonchalant as if they’re talking about the weather. “How about we table this discussion for now?” He suggests after a brief, awkward pause filled with the sounds of pounding feet on concrete and deep, steady breaths. “I promise I’ll tell you whatever you want to know...once we’re safe.”

Shi-Woon takes a long moment to think it over, finds the suggestion reasonable. “Yeah, okay. Later then,” he forces through lungs that are starting to burn, still not used to running for longer bouts.

It’s just as well—that kind of multitasking, he regrettably learns, is *so* much harder than it has any right to be.

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XXIII.

It’s no secret that Alliance Chief Shin-Il can be rather *impatient* when certain problems arise that need to be dealt with swiftly and quietly. That is, perhaps, why the man who reluctantly interrupts their meeting to deliver the bad news is sporting a grimace and trying very hard to disappear into the floor.

“I have an urgent message for the danju,” Shin-Il overhears from the now open doorway where the aforementioned man stands panting, nearly bent over his knees to catch his breath and possibly to muster up what little courage he can—as if he’s been running miles around Seoul in search of the Goomoonryong’s disciple himself. The elder perks up, thoughts of finally having Chun-Woo right where he deserves to be (on his knees, begging for his life) weighing heavily, excitedly, on his mind. “The suspect has just penetrated the first encirclement. And he’s not alone,” adds the younger Murim-in, an involuntary shudder running down his spine as the chief stares uncomprehendingly at him, before a scowl darkens his countenance.

What.

Almost beside himself with frustration, Shin-Il snaps out infuriatedly, “Damn you! How could you let the boy make a fool of the Alliance? Were you even paying attention? And what do you mean he’s not alone? Explain yourself!”

The other man barely suppresses a flinch, hands held aloft in the universal sign for ‘I don’t know.’

Kang-Sung’s sigh is heavy when he moves to rise, meeting the chief’s narrow-eyed, inquisitive gaze with determination. “I’ll find the boy, Danju-nim,” he promises.

A promise Shin-Il is more than happy to take to the bank, the elder inclining his head in acceptance.

(Because—if anyone has the skill to pull it off, it’s the Sammoonryong.)

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XXIV.

“Haha, do you really think Tsuna’s here?”

“That’s what the marshmallow-loving imbecile said.”

“Yeah, but can we trust him?”

“Of course not.” There’s a beat of silence, followed by a slow exhale as the two boys gaze up at Nine Dragons High School, taking in all the commotion with little interest save for the possibility that their missing sky may be at the heart of it. “But I refuse to live in a world where Tsuna doesn’t exist, so he must be here.”

A low, unrestrained chuckle pervades the solemn atmosphere. “Well then. Let’s go find him.”

Chapter End Notes

Byakuran is legit having the time of his life.

Hope you liked the new chapter!

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