

## 1.

It was inevitable that their eyes would meet, the space between them suddenly so small, Sasha with his foot half out the door and Kieran stepping over the threshold, but it still leaves him reeling. His head spins, but his dizzy thoughts grind to a halt the same way the rest of the world seems to, stalled on its axis.

They stare at each other, just as much strangers in this moment as they have been since he moved in, and Sasha realizes, suddenly, that Kieran has known this whole time.

He half expects the other man to leave, the anxiety that washes over his face giving away that he definitely considers it. To Sasha's surprise though, he doesn't flee, his jaw tightening in the next heartbeat before he mumbles, "Uhm, I'll call you later," into his phone and pockets it.

The years have been kind to Kieran, reshaping him from the gangly, thin nineteen-year-old Sasha remembers into a man who's tall and broad enough that he'd easily hidden his identity with nothing but sunglasses and a facemask. He at least has the tact to look embarrassed, the pale panic on his face blooming into a blush as he hesitantly steps the rest of the way into the elevator.

"Hey," he mumbles.

Sasha continues to stare. "Hi."

The years have been kind to Kieran, but in contrast, Sasha can't help but think of what Kieran must see in him. His glasses cast rings under his eyes from their near constant wear, and he'd barely bothered to run a comb through his hair this morning, assuming he had no one to impress but himself. There's ink on his fingers from the night prior, stains from a broken pen that had leaked while he'd been jotting down last minute thoughts in the notebook beside his bed, and he hasn't shaved in at least two days. He wonders what Kieran sees, beneath all of that, that makes him worth acknowledging at all, especially considering . . .

*"I'm not in love with you anymore."*

It's been a long time since he's dredged that memory up, but it hangs in the air between them now, heavy in all the worst ways. The words sit in the tentative smile Kieran offers, the manner with which he swallows audibly,

and they claw at Sasha's insides like the wound is fresh, hitching his breath and staying his tongue.

"I can go," Kieran says quietly, soft, understanding, *Kieran*, and Sasha shakes his head before he can stop himself.

He moves his foot out of the way of the elevator doors, letting them slide closed. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding them open. "N-no. It's alright."

The air that sits between them is stale, thick and discomforting as it settles around Sasha's shoulders. He can't come up with anything to say, wracking his brain and coming up short. His tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, eyes darting away from Kieran to focus on the screen above the door displaying the numbers of floors they've already passed. Six. Seven. Eight.

"So, uh . . . How's . . ." Kieran falters. "How's . . . The weather?" he tries, and for some reason that's all it takes for Sasha to burst out laughing.

Ten years is a long time, dozens upon dozens of months to grieve, thousands of days to think about what went wrong, millions of minutes to become different people. Sasha snorts and does a poor job of hiding it in the palm of a hand, his shoulders shaking while Kieran's eyes widen and his mouth drops open before he's laughing, too.

## 2.

They sit outside on the porch together, the warmth of the house at their backs and the snowfall ahead, waiting for them to make the short trek home in the dark. Sasha rubs his palms together and blows, watching all the love in his lungs turn to clouds and drift off and away.

"You okay?" Kieran asks, hushed, his fingers resting on Sasha's thigh.

His eyes are wet when Sasha looks at him, the sleeve of his coat he lifts to dry them not quite quick enough to hide it. "Are you?"

Kieran nods, shivering on an inhale, the palm resting on Sasha's leg squeezing. "Yeah. I will be. Did you, um . . . Did you look at the picture the social worker emailed us yesterday?"

"No."

It felt too much like hoping to do so, and his heart is still too frayed for that, full but stitched together offbeat. If he looks at the picture, and the match isn't the right fit for their family, he'll only be attaching himself to another thing he can't have before it's in his arms.

"I didn't either," Kieran admits softly. "I . . . I wanted to see her in person, first."

"How old?"

"Ten months."

Sasha's heart twists, turns, clenches tight and then releases. His breath ghosts out of him in a rush, swirling amidst the snow before it vanishes into the night. "Ten months," he echoes. "That means she'll be sitting up. Crawling."

"I think so, yeah."

The snow has started to stall, motes collecting on the ground in dainty puffs of white. Flakes dust down his fingertips and melt between his knuckles, whisked away when Kieran shifts closer, an arm wrapped around one of his, head dropping to Sasha's shoulder as they press together side by side. The seasons have spun past them, bringing everything around right back to where they'd started, with all their best laid plans scattered in their wake. Faintly, Sasha wonders what their lives will look like another two years on, the mating bite on his neck twinging as the thought drapes itself around his shoulders. He lowers a hand to where Kieran's is still gripping his thigh, heat seeping into the heart of him as their fingers tangle together.

Here, he decides. Come what may, he wants to be here, surrounded by the people he loves most, leaning on the other half of his soul as they spend a quiet hour suspended in time, just like this.

### **3.**

The car bumps off the smooth roll of paved road and onto the first winding beats of a dirt path. Outside the window the trees have begun to thin out as they leave the shadow of Samut Songkhram, and Intouch sits up to get a better view. They're almost two hours from where they started, the juncture between the motorway and half wild foliage the last landmark to cross. In his mouth, Intouch's every breath tastes bitter.

The further they go, the more it sinks in how desperately Korn does not want to be found.

Because see, here's the thing; it's not like Intouch never looked.

Of course he searched for him. *Of course he did.* How could he not? But after the months had turned into years, he'd stopped turning his head at every shadow, stopped stalling when he saw a semi-familiar form in profile. At some point he had to accept that he wasn't simply missing him because he'd lost half his sight.

When children are small, their hands as slippery in their eagerness as they are consistently sticky, their parents tell them how to survive if they ever get lost. Don't get swallowed by the maze of the woods or the city. Don't try and find your own way, or you'll end up right back where you started. Don't cry. Stay put and someone will come and save you.

Intouch had stayed put.

At first he'd kept the condo as it was, only adding to the layout rather than updating it. Hell, he'd barely even cleaned the place, terrified and irrational that changing something, anything, up to and including the gathering dust would chase out the last traces of Korn that remained in those four walls.

It took him two years to properly patch up the bullet hole in the ceiling, or the shattered window overlooking the street.

The first time he'd torn the place apart had been when he was twenty-three, meaningless hope finally giving way to raw and stricken anguish.

After that, he'd started replacing pieces of furniture whenever he got bored of looking at them. The sofa seemed like the wrong color of green one morning, so he walked ten blocks to pick out another. When the fridge began making a barely audible whir as the icemaker started he had a new one delivered by the end of the evening. Sometimes the bed looks too empty, and he comes home after work with two more pillows. Every wall in the condo has been painted a different shade at least a dozen times in thirty years, at one point even boasting four separate hues at once when he'd gotten into a bit too much of a mood for a couple of months. Dean had liked that one though, three years old and enamored with the clash of red and green where they met in the corner.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years?" his therapist had asked him once, and Intouch had not hesitated for a second to reply, "Here," with his best smile pre-pinned in place.

A few times, he'd even tried to leave. At twenty-five, angry rather than aching. At thirty, desperate and thinking anything was better than nothing. At thirty-three, tears in his eyes and a stricken sob wrought on each inhale. And at forty, resignation once again heavy like a storm in his soul. He'd always ended those attempts with an apology, genuine shame in every breath as he explained that he couldn't keep lying. By now, it's been almost ten years since Intouch has let himself be held, since he's dared to give in to the selfish urge to pin another man down beneath him in a distant hotel room just to find some sense of humanity left in his own skin.

The last few overhanging branches beyond the window give way to a sight of the shore, and Intouch sits up in his seat, a hand pressed to the glass.

*God*, it looks exactly like he imagined it would.

Right there, on the last stretch of solid ground before the earth fades out to sand sits a house, nothing big and not too small. The front has a fenced in section of grass that leads into a sheltered sunroom, and with the glinting afternoon light Intouch catches a glimpse of a glass float hanging by the westmost corner to soak up the dusk. Dean brings the car around to a carved-out space meant for that exact purpose, parking just where the walls dart round towards a porch facing the water, a perfect view of the waves, and suddenly Intouch panics.

He shouldn't be here.

"Let's go back," he whispers, bile rising in him the longer he looks at the house. "Please. Let's just go back."

#### **4.**

"You need to leave," Korn says, fiercer now despite how he's shaking. "This is exactly why I- *you shouldn't be here!*"

It's the way he says it that hurts the worst, so sure he's right, even now. As if the most awful thing he ever did was the best choice he could have made.

"Finish what you were saying," Intouch demands as he pushes himself to his feet. "Do it. I dare you. Say it to my face. Tell me that this is *exactly* why you left me."

"I didn't *leave* you," Korn hisses between his teeth, "*I let you go.*"

The laugh that rips its way out of Intouch's lungs is embroiled in decades of bitterness. "Of course! How stupid of me!" He spits, taking a step forward until they're almost nose to nose. "You let me go! Thinking you knew what was best for *me* without bothering to actually *ask!*"

"I didn't have to! I got front row seats to how *selfish* I was just by being with you!"

"You're allowed to be selfish!" Intouch screams.

Finally. *Finally.*

"I want you to be selfish!" He heaves out. "Because at least then you're *honest!*"

Korn stiffens, "That honesty almost got you killed. It *blinded* you, In-"

"And that was a risk I was willing to take!" Intouch spits before he can finish. "I don't regret it at all! Even if it had fully blinded me instead of just partially, I would still-"

"Don't say that!"

*"YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU TRIED TO DO!?"*

The exclamation, every raw and injured note of it, echoes in the room. Korn's eyes widen.

"You think I don't know," Intouch croaks, "what you were thinking when you reached for that gun?" Korn opens his mouth, but Intouch cuts him off before he can get a word in. "You think you're so smart," he says bitterly, "you're so stupidly certain that the only thing standing between me and happiness is *you*. And yeah, it is. Right now. But not in the way you think. Do you know what that would have done to me?" Intouch asks lowly. "If I hadn't stopped you? Do you think I would have moved on? The same way you thought I would have when you left? Or," his voice is acid now, thick with grief, "do you think I would have just followed you."

He can tell the second he says it that Korn didn't, in fact, consider that at all. It's there in the sharp, shallow inhale he drags in, the tremble that ripples through him. Because like Intouch, Korn is made up of ideals. The only difference is he focuses his on what life would look like without him, rather than the intertwined way Intouch had always clung to their futures.

"I don't regret it," Intouch hisses out. "Stopping you, getting hurt. Even now, with you still being such an *asshole* about it, I don't. Because it means you're *alive*."

Somehow, the hoarse little, "You need to leave," Korn manages is a thousand times worse than it was the first time.

Intouch releases him, not even registering that he'd grabbed Korn by the shirt collar at some point until he does so. "You're still-" he tries, faltering on his own agony as it sinks in. "You still won't- fine!" He whirls towards the door, uncaring of the force with which he throws it open to the view of the sea, the crack it makes as it bangs on the frame. "*Fine!* I'll leave! I'll leave you the same fucking way you left me!"

He doesn't consider his steps as he takes them, merely crossing the sand in heavy strides, each one as unsteady as his breaths. *Fine. Fine. Fine.* Somewhere deep down, he knew this would be the breaking point, anyways.

Korn doesn't call out to him till his feet hit the first brushes of the tide, and Intouch doesn't pay him any mind. He's knee deep by the time Korn's caught up, splashing after him with the sort of urgency Intouch had once longed for, but now can only watch with his heart heavy in his chest. "Don't you dare," he warns, hating how obviously, wetly, the words hitch, "come for me now. *Don't you dare.* You had *thirty years*, Korn. And you're still not-

"You were supposed to move on," Korn gasps between breaths.

**"FUCK YOU! YOU DON'T GET TO DECIDE THAT FOR ME!"**

He takes a step back, another, another, the water rolling up around his thighs. "You think I didn't *try!*? I did! But it wasn't- no one was *you*, okay? I knew the moment I saw you that it couldn't be anyone else. We're-" he chokes on the confession, the ever-wrought brand in that incorporeal center of him that he's always known, even if there will never be any proof. "We're *soulmates*, Korn. And you *left me*."

Another step back, ignoring Korn's quiet, desperate plea of his name. Another, and the grief finally gets to be too much. The sob that overwhelms him is visceral, almost a howl as it wrings itself from not just his lungs, but every fiber of his entire being.

*He left. **He left.***

And time will never be enough to erase how much that hurt.

"Don't touch me," Intouch weeps when Korn tries. He's up to his waist in the waves now, still moving backwards. Eventually, the sea will swallow him, his feet will find the drop off the shelf beneath the water, he knows. "You want me to leave, so I will. I'll leave you first, this time. Because that's what's best, isn't it?"

Part of him, sick and aching and forever broken, wonders if that's more true than he can admit. What has he done by being here, anyways? All Korn has been since he arrived is *miserable*. That's his fault. Korn didn't want to be found.

Neither of them is any better than the other, too busy thinking they know better than to ask. *Awful*, Intouch thinks, choking on his tears now, barely able to breathe around his own shuddering sobs. They're both *awful* people.

So, in the end, will it really be so bad if he leaves? If he just disappears beneath the sea? Maybe Korn was right, after all.

Hands catch in the sides of his shirt, haul him forward, and Intouch will never know if that next step back would have found more sand, or an endless drop. "No no no no *no*, In," Korn gasps. "*No.*"

Intouch struggles in his grip, but Korn only shifts it from his sides to his back, firmly trapping him. "Why not?! It's what you did to me!"

He can't. *He can't*. He's too weak, weighed down by too many years of heartache to fight it when Korn holds on to him.

"I know," Korn says, hushed and just as broken, just as hurt. "And I'm *sorry.*"

Intouch slumps as soon as he says it, every muscle turning to jelly from the shock.



"I'm sorry," Korn repeats, pulling him closer until the next iteration is breathed out right against Intouch's ear. "I'm so fucking sorry, In." They're both cold, windswept and half drowned from the waves that swirl at their waists, but even shivering as they are, Intouch sinks into the warmth of the embrace without a second thought. "I thought that if I was . . . *Gone*," he doesn't clarify in what sense, but Intouch knows. The beach house is a compromise for the scars on his wrists. "That you would be better off. I never deserved you in the first place, so thinking that was so . . . It was easy. It made me feel better about . . . About what happened. If my misery meant your happiness, I was fine with it. I always thought you were so much stronger than me, so-

"I'm not," Intouch mumbles weakly into his shoulder.

"You *are*," Korn corrects before he's barely even finished speaking, his tone fierce above the surf. "So I knew you'd survive it, even if I didn't," he admits. "And I won't . . . If you *leave*," he chokes out, the meaning of the word shifting to that much more final, awful definition. "I don't think I'll . . ."

It's slow. Intouch brings his hands up to Korn's back in half measures, his limbs leaded down with every apology. He curls his fingers into the damp fabric over the other man's shoulder blades one at a time, almost terrified that if he moves too fast the moment will be swept away from him and rushed back out to sea. "I want to stay," he whispers. "But I . . ." He tightens his hold, anchors them together as he hitches over his own, worst confession. "But I can't forgive you."

He thinks, as Korn merely holds him tighter, closer, that they both already knew that.

"You hurt me," he says thickly. "And I can never . . . That's going to hurt *forever*, Phi. You can't make up for that. But knowing you're sorry . . ." He hiccups, unsure now if his vision is blurred more by his own tears, or the spray of the sea. "Phi, *that's all I wanted*. I don't have to forgive you, right? Just knowing you're sorry, that's-

It's enough.

Because a Korn that's sorry is one that won't hurt him like that again.

"You don't have to forgive me," Korn confirms, hoarse and wavering, his face buried in Intouch's neck now as he clings to him. "I don't want you to."

Intouch nods into his shoulder. "I-" he sobs, "I-I really *hated* you. But I don't want to. I *don't*, P'Korn." He hopes he's not hurting him, his grip on Korn so tight where they cling to each other in the surf, but he can't let go. "I want to love you. I want to fall in love with you again, Phi. I want that so *much*. But I can't unless you *let me*."

He can't bear it otherwise, can't survive a Korn who pushes him away, and says things that he means to hurt. They have to talk to each other, trust each other. Korn has to *let him*.

". . . I never stopped, you know," Korn whispers.

Again, Intouch's laugh rings a little too bitter, a touch uneasy. "Yeah. I figured. You wrote a whole book about it."

Korn nods. "I don't need you to . . . To love me again," he murmurs. "But I . . . I want to make you happy," he confesses, every bit of that admission raw. "I want to . . . To make up for *everything*. I want to give you back all the time we've lost, as much of it as I can. And-"

"Phi," Intouch interrupts. He tightens his fingers in the fabric of Korn's shirt and tugs, draws him closer. "Be *selfish*. Tell me what you want for you, not for me."

He's quiet, the roar of the sea surging around them overwhelming before Korn chokes out, "I want you to love me."

"Me too."

"I . . . I want to be *happy*."

"*Me too, Phi*."

"I want you to stay."