**Spirited So Far Away**

**Summary**

Why would a sane human being take a 3-hour drive into the wilderness to attend a fucking rave party in an abandoned theme park miles and miles away from civilization anyway?

**Notes**

Welcome to Spirited So Far Away. The story is based on the Studio Ghibli movie Spirited Away but can definitely be read without having watched the movie even though it would be helpful in order to fully enjoy the references and cameos. I guess the tags mostly speak for themselves: it's the adult version of Spirited Away, in which I explored the topic of the bathhouse as a brothel that was already indicated by Hayao Miyazaki himself.
For individual character teasers (I've turned some of the BTS members into semi-OCs) please take a look at my Instagram @iamspringday_fiction or follow me on Twitter @iamspringday <3

There will be a new chapter every three weeks with a length of about 18,000 - 20,000 words.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Turn that shit down a little, for fuck’s sake”, Yoongi grunted. Of course the two dimwits didn’t hear him over the music. He let himself sink back in his seat, rolled his eyes and leaned his head against the window. It was a bumpy right. Yoongi could swear they had been driving up that mountain for the last 2 hours and they still were not even half waythere. He had never been into the mountain area surrounding Seoul this deeply before. Why would a sane human being take a 3-hour drive into the wilderness to attend a fucking rave party in an abandoned theme park miles and miles away from civilization anyway? They had clubs in Seoul. Quite a few of them, actually. Might as well go to one of their usual destinations and drink the same fucking liquor there. Take a taxi home for less than 5 bucks. Actually make it home. At this point, Yoongi was pretty sure that the engine would exhale its last pathetic puff of air before they even made it up the slope of this hill, let alone reach the plateau where that highly advertised party was supposed to be held. Alright, Namjoon knew the promoter. But he pretty much knew every South Korean citizen remotely involved with music. He knew the owners of all their favorite clubs. As I said, they might have also spent the night there. Or stayed home. Yeah, he should have stayed home.

Yoongi wasn’t quite sure what was worse. Namjoon being the driver or Hoseok being in the passenger seat trying to make sense of Google maps. Okay, so Namjoon was a slow ass driver with a strange affection for chuckholes but Jung Hoseok would have gotten lost in their shared apartment had Yoongi not marked his studio door with a “No trespassing” sign and the kitchen with some of the stickers that came with the fruit loops breakfast cereal shit that Hoseok and Namjoon shoved in their faces every goddamn morning. Entrusting him with the task of navigating them through the
desolation of these woods was like asking a blind man to sort marbles by color. They could have asked Yoongi to do the job but that would have meant turning the radio down to a conversational level. And apparently that was out of question.

“What did you say, Yoongz?” Hoseok called from the passenger seat. He didn’t turn the music down but at least he had the courtesy to tilt his head slightly to the side and at least pretend that he cared about his reply. But Yoongi only rolled his eyes again and chuckled noiselessly. He had always hated it when Hoseok called him that name. But he kept saying it still. The worst part was that Yoongi knew very well he didn’t do it to offend him. He was just careless. That had always been the biggest problem with Jung Hoseok. His carelessness.

“Could you say that again, Yoongi Hyung?” he ventured another try and when he finally reached for the volume control, Yoongi raised his eyebrows with astonishment.

“Nothing. I just asked you to turn the music down a little. It gives me headaches. To be honest, I can’t even tell what’s worse. Namjoon bulls-eyeing every chuckhole or that ridiculous bass drum sample.”

“Aw come on, Yoongz… we’re on our way to a rave. Want me to play some Bach or Mozart? I need to get us in the mood!”

“Mozart always gets me in the mood”, Yoongi snorted, staring out of the window, avoiding Hoseok’s glance who meanwhile had turned in his seat to face him.

“You okay, Yoongz? You look pale.”

“I’m getting car sick, that’s all. It feels like we’re driving up a fucking snail shell. Are you sure you’re reading the map right?”

He pretended to watch the trees flying by but he still noticed the tired look that Hoseok gave him.

“Is there anything you deem me capable of?”

“Misreading a map would be one thing”, Yoongi retorted, crossing his arms, nuzzling deeper into his black Thrasher hoodie. He should have stayed home. He had been more or less willing to go when Namjoon had asked him whether he had plans for Friday night and ranted about how this rave was promising to become the party of the century. But he should have jumped off the moment he had learned that Jung Hoseok was going to join them.

“I’m not an expert on navigating either but I do know how to read a fuel gauge… and we’re fucking running out of it. If we keep making unnecessary detours, we might make it there but we surely won’t make it back to civilization.”

Namjoon’s comment made Hoseok turn the music all the way down. He threw a glance over the steering wheel and clasped his big mouth with surprise.

“We are almost on E!”, he exclaimed, highly alarmed.

Yoongi found himself surprisingly amused by the situation. He just voiced his signature dry chuckle and blinked tiredly.

“Do you think we will make it there before we run out of gas?”, Hoseok asked.

Namjoon shifted gears and threw a glance in the rearview mirror to check his best friend’s face as if it would determine his answer. Yoongi just flicked an eyebrow at him.
“What does Google maps say, Hoseok-ah? How long till we get there?”

“It says 36 minutes. But it has been 36 minutes for quite a while now. Seems… yeah… it actually seems like I have lost connection.”

“Great so… did we bring a tent?”, Yoongi snorted cynically and checked his black-painted fingernails before he started biting his thumbnail. He always did that when he was nervous.

“I suggest we make a stop. Maybe if we stay in a spot for some time your phone will re-connect. It might be unsteady in the woods and driving up serpentine surely doesn’t help.”

“Yeah… I also need to pee… and I’m hungry as hell… I thought on the way there we’d at least be able to grab something at a drive in… But looks like I have to shoot myself a deer tonight. I’d also like to stretch and walk a little. My legs feel numb.”

How could one person have so many physical needs? Hoseok always needed this and wanted that. He could never sit still and just be. It was one of the main problems. In addition to his carelessness.

Yoongi was the entire opposite. And in case you wondered, opposites don’t attract. As the professional dancer that he was, Hoseok was smooth. Smooth in his moves as well as his smiles. Everything came natural for him. He was that smooth ray of sunshine that effortlessly makes it through a solid roof of autumn leaves and that feels like a hot shower on the skin when you step into it and close your eyes. Yoongi preferred cold showers. Even though he despised the cold as such, he didn’t see the point of spending more time than the few seconds it took to actually get clean on the activity of letting warm water run over your body. Time that he might as well use on composing a new song. Jung Hoseok, on the other hand, was all about the feels. He was the type to take a shower just for the nice sensation of hot water relaxing your muscles. His reactions were always over the top. He rolled on the floor laughing when normal people smirked. He burst into tears when a shrug would have done. Let’s not even mention his ridiculously loud and unnecessary voice imitations and inhuman sounds that he uttered when normal people gave a straightforward, sane reply. At the point where Yoongi was still blowing the steam off his morning coffee, too tired to open both of his eyes at the same time, Hoseok had usually already gone through the entire spectrum of human emotions at least twice. Laughed until he cried while sitting on the toilet and scrolling through 9Gag on his phone, screamed in panic when he noticed he was running late for work for that very reason, raged over some headline on the newspaper that Namjoon had subscribed to because he was a granddad and preferred physical paper… Jung Hoseok was mood-fluid, as Yoongi liked to call it. His emotions covered every possible nuance of the rainbow while Yoongi was that black and white test sheet your printer spits out to let you know you didn’t insert the ink cartridge correctly. All the shades of grey with some white spots lacking color altogether. Hoseok was always on the go. Paper cup in one hand, phone pressed to his ear, passionately discussing random things with random people. Yoongi didn’t understand the concept of coffee to go. Coffee was his excuse to sit down and gloomily stare into space while occasionally scribbling some messy lyrics – messy both in words and handwriting – into his notebook. Even in his sleep, Hoseok stirred, rolled around, danced ?, laughed, talked, bubbled, sighed, made weird grimaces, reached out to hug people, snuggle up and sometimes even sat up to lead a serious discussion in the middle of a vivid dream. For Yoongi, sleep was the daily chance to become the rock that he so desperately desired to be reborn as in his next life. He always woke up in the exact position he had fallen asleep in. Well… unless he was forced to sleep next to Jung Hoseok that is.

Opposites surely don’t attract. In Yoongi’s and Hoseok’s case, they had already drifted apart for good.

“Ohhh! Look at this! Now Google says that we’re only about 8 minutes away by car!”, Hoseok
exclaimed with unnecessary excitement. Namjoon threw a brief glance at the display Hoseok was shoving in his face and nodded to himself.

“I suggest the following: I’ll park the car at the next opportunity and then we give the phone to Yoongi for, unlike the rest of us, he’s actually capable of reading a map and does not just rely on the obscure voice commands that shitty app gives. As for the food, I’m afraid we won’t be able to grab something until we actually get there. But I’m quite confident they sell some snacks. It’s a festival after all.”

“Might as well take care of that problem and the bad mood right now”, Hoseok shrugged lightheartedly and Yoongi’s body stiffened immediately when he saw him bend over to grab his wallet from the backpack between his legs.

“I’m out!”, he clarified as soon as Hoseok held out the LSD strip to him.

“Ah, come on, Yoongz! One or two tabs at least… you can’t possibly be planning on staying sober tonight.”

“I’m not planning on staying sober. I’ll have a Gin Tonic once we get there. Maybe two or three. Depends on how annoying you plan to get when you’re tripping.”

“If that increases by the microgram, then I plan to get pretty annoying”, Hoseok laughed recklessly and Yoongi watched three tiny pieces of blotting paper at once wander under his tongue.

“Did you test it?”, he asked coldly.

“Who do you think I am?”, Hoseok raised his eyebrow after a few seconds of silence. His speech a little affected by the tabs that would remain under his tongue for the next 10 minutes at least.

“Three’s still too much even if you tested it and it’s safe.”

“I’m planning to take two more”, Hoseok smiled with a shrug, extending the rest of the strip to Yoongi once again. The design of the paper was uncommonly simple. They were white with only one single red heart printed onto each tab. They reminded of play cards.

“I said no”, Yoongi hissed.

“My God, Yoongz… It’s just acid. Statistically it only bears 1/10 of the health risks alcohol bears. It doesn’t even cause addiction.”

“Statistically it’s the drug most likely to cause horror trips when you have mental health issues.”

Hoseok was pretty much already frozen in the movement of handing Yoongi the trips but the moment his words reached his brain, also his facial expression went on hold. As I said, the moments his face didn’t go haywire were rare. And Yoongi couldn’t deny that he looked somewhat pretty in that natural and timid astonishment, a strand of his blood red hair framing his coffee colored eyes. Black, with a hint of brown when light hit them. There was a ray of evening sunlight brushing past his face, illuminating the dust particles that were circulating in the car.

“Is it still this bad?”, he whispered, his voice barely loud enough to be heard over the engine noises. Chances were Namjoon hadn’t even heard him at all.

“It varies by day. Today is a bad day. Mainly cause I’m going out with you”, Yoongi smiled a smile that resembled a knife’s blade.
“You looked pretty happy the last couple of weeks”, Hoseok pretended not to have heard the snappy comment. Maybe he really hadn’t heard it. Maybe he had that filter in his brain that automatically censored unpleasant things. How else could someone be that energetic and happy all the fucking time? Wasn’t happiness a matter of ignorance after all?

“I’m getting by”, Yoongi returned languidly, shaking a strand of his midnight black hair into his face so it would cover his right eye.

“No… I mean happy as in actually way better. That’s how I came to think that… well, it was for the better. The decision we made… I mean… you know what I mean.”

“You bet it was. I’m doing okay. Cross that. I’m doing great. Social anxiety, however, isn’t something that conveniently just disappears when you get rid of one of the many problems in your life. I’m on top of things. I’m here taking along, aren’t I? But I definitely don’t need to make it worse than it already is. Having my spatial perception and stuff ruined by that shitty drug doesn’t exactly help make me feel comfortable. I can’t use hallucinations trying to hook up with someone tonight. Don’t need tracers on a dick, no no.”

“You’re planning to get laid tonight?”, Hoseok asked. His voice still unusually quiet, way less raspy than it got when he was loud.

“What else do you think I’m here for?”, Yoongi retorted, way more uncomfortable than he would let show. He pulled the sleeves of his Thrasher hoodie over his hands and studied the way his fingertips with the black painted nails poked through the hole.

“To have a good time with Namjoon and… me?”, Hoseok asked and Yoongi’s stomach clenched upon the sincerity in his question.

“Well, one thing does not rule out the other, does it?”, Yoongi replied vaguely. If possible, he would have also drawn in his head and disappeared in his hoodie completely like a tortoise. At this point, he tried so hard to avoid Hoseok’s face that his glance unintentionally got caught on the LSD that looked like a strip of tiny postmarks.

“Gimme half a tab… I guess I’ll need it to endure you”, he suddenly changed his mind.

“If you’re looking for that boost of confidence I’d at least go for 100 microgram. Take a whole one. Don’t worry… hallucinations won’t even start until 200 microgram. But if you take less than 100, you risk getting really nostalgic… and I figure you can’t use that either when… looking to get laid.”

Their eyes met briefly when Yoongi’s fingers came out of the sleeve hole to accept the tiny piece of paper that Hoseok tore off the strip for him. Yoongi hated the feeling of something under his tongue so he just put the tab on top of it, shut his mouth, leaned back with closed eyes and waited for the substance diffused onto the paper to be absorbed by his mucosa. Maybe the uncomfortable feeling of paper under the tongue wasn’t even the main reason. The tab on his tongue gave him a reason to end the conversation. It made him shut up. It made Jung Hoseok shut up.

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Yoongi drew the car door shut behind him, stretched as though he wanted to reach for the tree tops and then readjusted the strap of his backpack that was loosely dangling down from one shoulder. He would have to change outfits once they got there, most likely in some narrow ass toilet booth but he simply couldn’t have been bothered to sit through that tiring ride in skintight faux leather pants and a silk blouse. He took the phone from Hoseok without an unnecessary look at his face but still noticed that Namjoon’s first act – now that he was off driver’s duty for today – was to stuff his mouth with
just as many Tabs as Hoseok had taken. Maybe even more.

“According to Google maps, we should technically be only a few minutes away by foot”, Yoongi declared, swallowing the remains of the little piece of paper that had almost completely dissolved by now. He would have about another twenty minutes before the effects kicked in. And at this, point he couldn’t deny that he was looking forward to the flash of euphoria that came with the intensification of colors and sensations. That would make the pretty boys look even prettier. And help him forget about a certain someone.

He looked up from the phone only to find himself face to face with a solid wall of leafage, blocking the way that they were supposed to go according to the mobile.

“That doesn’t exactly look like a road”, he stated and backed away when Hoseok’s face appeared next to his as he was trying to get a glimpse of the screen from over his shoulder.

“I wonder why there are no other cars. I mean if this is the closest we can get then there should be at least some people here even if there is another official parking lot that we don’t know about. I heard that most people will really be camping out here in the woods. I wonder where they are”, Namjoon said.

“There’s something strange about this place”, Hoseok declared ponderously and kicked a stone with one of those ridiculously ugly yellow and purple 90s sneakers that Yoongi hated so passionately on him.

“What do you mean strange?”, Namjoon asked casually while letting his zippo snap open to light the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He had the habit of immediately swallowing the acid and not waiting for it to dissolve under his tongue. Someone had told him that the really dangerous fakes that were sold as LSD could only harm you if dissolved orally, while LSD could also be absorbed by the body when already in the digestive system. Yoongi, on the other hand, relied on the fact that, according to what circulated as profound pharmaceutical awareness education, you could tell the bad stuff apart by the taste. Rumor had it that the potentially lethal substances that were sold for LSD tasted like battery acid. But then again… also LSD itself was something that Yoongi would not necessarily sprinkle over a dessert. And the conversation with Hoseok had indeed left an aftertaste of battery acid in his mouth. But it would be fine, wouldn’t it? Hoseok had tested the shit, hadn’t he? They had that testing kit at home somewhere… somewhere…

“I don’t know… it gives me a strange vibe… Anyway… I think you should call the promoter, Joon. Describe our whereabouts to him and ask whether it makes sense to walk from here. Excuse me gentlemen while I take a pee behind those inviting bushes.”

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Yoongi looked around the landscape, holding out for anything interesting. They were approaching the end of August but it was still considerably hot and humid. The leaves were of a weak green, a fading green that was on the verge of turning yellow. Those were the days when summer was at its heaviest. When the air could be sliced like cake and when even the happiest people were moved by some sluggish melancholia. Yoongi was looking forward to the cool autumn wind and to the heavy rainfalls that would finally ring in winter, his most favorite season of all.

“The call doesn’t get through even though my phone claims that the connection is pretty okay”, Namjoon shook his head and lowered the cellphone to check the display again.

“Maybe you friend’s in a not spot”, Yoongi suggested and helped himself to one of Namjoon’s cigarettes that lay on the weathered remains of a narrow stone wall next to the latter’s bag. Hoseok
was already gone for a couple of minutes and Yoongi was starting to suspect he had lost his way again. Something deep inside of him wished for him to never return.

“Maybe… Do you hear music playing? If that festival was somewhere around here we should at least be able to hear some beats, don’t you think?”

“It’s only 5:30… Probably they didn’t even start yet.”

“There should be some warming-up acts at this point. I think Jaejoong said something about DJ sets starting at 4 in the afternoon. There will also be some bands later tonight. Mainly some house and techno acts.”

They both fell silent and stared at the ground to focus on the music they hoped to hear. And now that he listened this closely, Yoongi could swear that there was something… but it did not exactly sound like house music.

“Sounds like a children’s merry-go-round or something… or am I making this up? Do you hear it too, Hyung?”, Namjoon mumbled, tilting his head to locate the direction it was coming from.

“I guess so… Sounds like a carnival or something…”

“GUYS!!!”

The moment Hoseok jumped out of the bushes, the faint trace of music was gone. Like a shy animal that went back into hiding, scared his noisy appearance.

“Whaddup? You gonna give us details about how good that dump was?”, Yoongi asked judgingly and extended his hand to indicate that he wanted the lighter from Namjoon. When the cigarette was lit he blew the smoke in Hoseok’s direction who was still trying to catch his breath, one hand pressed to his chest.

“You gotta come check that out!”, he coughed.

“Check what out? The shit you took?”

“I didn’t take a shit! I was looking for a place that wasn’t that visible from the road and I accidentally discovered something like… a gate… an entrance, if you will. Like… it’s a building… Right behind the bushes there’s a wall fencing something in… and there’s… a creepy little guy in front of that entrance.”

“A creepy little guy? You sure appear to be tripping already. Told you to take less. You’ll need a tripsitter for the night and it so won’t be me.”

“My God, Yoongi Hyung. It’s a statue… A strange… I don’t know… creature? Monster? Alright, come on you gotta see that for yourselves!”

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It was a very creepy little guy indeed. It sat right there in front of the black hole, that was the gateway in a particularly weathered red-painted wall, as if to block the road. With its empty eyes and grin frozen in time it gave off the impression of an evil, obese monkey.

“Cute”, Yoongi remarked drily and took a puff from the cigarette while raising his phone to casually snap a pic of the monstrosity. “Looks a little like you, Hoseok-ah…”
Namjoon snorted and nodded his approval.

“Same mischievous grin indeed.”

“I went in there. It leads to a train station. The station hall at least. I didn’t go further. It’s creepy…”

“Say what?”, Yoongi asked, a little taken aback. “Why in hell would there be a train station in this God forsaken place? A train wouldn’t even make it up that slope.”

“I think it’s part of that theme park already! It doesn’t even look like a real station hall… well… it’s a hall… and it has benches and… a ticket window but… I could immediately tell it isn’t real, you know? It just doesn’t feel real.”

“So you mean it looks like some backdrop in a theme park?”

“Yeah, maybe that’s what I mean… I don’t even know… it looks somewhat Western. And creepy.”

“So maybe that’s the answer. We approached the park from a different side. Probably the rave is on the entire opposite side of the premises. That’s why there are no cars around this area and why Google maps is so indecisive about the distance to our final destination. Let’s go in I say… and walk the rest.”

“You sure? I mean… I don’t know… The whole situation gives me a weird feeling. Are you sure that we shouldn’t get back to the car and drive a little further? Maybe use someone else’s phone this time to locate the actual position that festival takes place? Maybe it will take hours to walk there.”

“Oh come on, Hobi”, Namjoon put him off. “How big could a theme park possibly be?”

“Yeah, come on Hobi”, Yoongi imitated Namjoon. “I’m sure it’s just the acid that makes you oversensitive for what you believe to be a strange atmosphere.”

Together with the still remaining taste of battery acid on his tongue, Yoongi swallowed the confession that he himself as well had a particularly bad feeling about the black hole gaping in front of them.

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It was a station hall straight out of a movie. With its high ceiling and the detached Roman or Greek columns it almost looked like the inside of a cathedral. Adding up to this sacred vibe were the colored glass windows that constituted the only passage for light to get in. They had walked through a dark hallway for a few meters and at this point the arch of the entrance was so far behind them that it appeared small and surreal and gave Yoongi the weird feeling of never being able to reach it again as he threw a brief glance over his shoulder.

The golden light of the evening sun entered the hall in colorful solid rays. Dark blue and red, green and yellow. Yoongi had never been to a church but at this point he knew what made people fear God in there. It was a serene, almost pious atmosphere. If this was a train station then it was the final terminal. People only arrived here. There was no air of leaving in these halls. Dust and fallen leaves covered the worn out stone floor. They crinkled and cracked under the soles of their shoes, even though muffled, every step softly echoed from the high walls. Yoongi was still carrying the cigarette but something kept him from taking a drag, kept him from throwing it on the ground even though it obviously hadn’t seen a broom in what seemed to be decades. He cleared his throat because at this point the silence weighed too heavy on his lungs.

“It looks more like a church”, he commented, his words were thin as if he was expecting that nobody
was willing to hear them.

“Totally. I mean look at these wooden benches, they are clearly church pews. You won’t find these in the waiting room of a train station. I went to a couple of churches when I visited Switzerland with my parents last year. And from that experience I can tell that this place also feels like a church. There is a certain kind of silence you find only in churches”, Namjoon explained like the university professor that he was. To financially support the recording studio he and Yoongi had founded about a year ago, he gave lectures about music in the digital age at a music academy. He knew one or two things about how silence sounded.

“Maybe that’s just cause this place was abandoned long time ago”, Hoseok said more to himself than to the others. The way he moved around the hall wasn’t natural for him. As a dancer, he usually filled rooms the second he entered them. His presence danced its way into every corner of the place even if he remained in one spot. Right now, he moved like a person testing the ice, body stiff, keeping his head down as though he was afraid something could crumble off the ceiling. Automatically, Yoongi’s glance travelled up only to find that the ceiling of the hall was painted light blue and covered in yellowish golden stars. The paint had long started to fade and yet it still conveyed the calamity of a cloudless night sky.

“That’s also something typical for churches!”, Namjoon exclaimed, tracing Yoongi’s eyes. “But it’s clearly supposed to be a station, isn’t it?”, Hoseok asked, almost as if ready to admit that his first guess about what that place was might be wrong after all.

“I think so”, Yoongi confirmed before he could stop himself. “I mean… look over there… it does have a ticket window. And there’s a schedule for… arrivals?”

An old-fashioned analog schedule above the ticket counter that had lost half of its numbers to time and was also covered in heavy dust really only had a slot for arrivals. If there had been actual trains here once then none of them had departed… at least not with passengers on it.

“It’s fake after all”, Yoongi shook his head, trying to get his thoughts back into order. “It’s a theme park… Probably some Alice in Wonderland thing with magic and optical illusions and whatnot. Why are we even wasting our time in here? The only question is: Does it lead somewhere? To a rave party preferably. Can you spot a door or something?”

“Right there”, Namjoon pointed at the opposite wall. Yoongi flinched at the sight of the big wooden door, decorated with intricate floral iron mountings. He could swear it hadn’t been there before. Namjoon lead the way and the next thing Yoongi knew was Hoseok tripping and his hand instinctively closing around his upper arm, preventing him from falling face-forward in the dirt. Hoseok let out a surprised gasp and his fingers clawed into the fabric of Yoongi’s hoodie.

“Shit”, he hissed and threw a judging glance at the hole in the floor that he had overlooked. “I’m starting to get tracers”, he added apologetically and let go of Yoongi with an awkward grimace on his face.

“It’s alright”, Yoongi mumbled and finally dropped the cigarette butt, discretely shoving it into the hole in the ground with the tip of his patent leather boot. He could still feel the impact of Hoseok’s sudden grip on his stomach and left arm. It burned a little where his fingernails had very likely left marks.

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The moment they stepped into the sunlight, Yoongi himself felt the effect of the LSD kick in. The
colors were popping. The bright green meadow spreading out in front of them seemed to radiate and
looked so fresh and juicy that his desires reached from wanting to lie in the grass to chewing on it
like a happy cow. What appeared to be scattered rocks at first sight, turned out to be more of the
obese ape statues that Yoongi found himself fancying at this point. Some of them were overgrown
with moss but all of them were sporting the same mischievous grin and appeared to be following
them with their empty eyes. Maybe monkeys weren’t the very group of animals they were supposed
to depict. Maybe they were turtles… taking a closer look they could also be very old women…
witches? Ghosts?

“What the actual fuck?”, Namjoon let out in that voice that always told them he had found the big
logical error that everyone else deemed perfectly reasonable.

“What’s the matter, Joon?”, Yoongi turned to face his best friend.

“What’s with those great plains? Shouldn’t we be somewhere very close to a mountaintop?
Shouldn’t there be like a slope at least somewhere? And where are the woods? This freaking
grassland leads up to the horizon and beyond! How’s that even possible?”

“Now that you mention it…”, Yoongi nodded to himself. He wanted to give a critical evaluating
answer. But the drug wouldn’t let him. His eyes got caught on the super bright red poppies that
covered the meadow like someone had tapped out a brush with red paint over a green canvas. What
had used to feel very strange only seconds ago, suddenly felt very right. It felt like they were on their
way. The rave had to be somewhere. Close. He could already hear it. And oh! There was the merry-
go-round.

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It stood to their right on a little hill. An old-fashioned merry-go-round with wooden horses,
illuminated with fairy lights despite the broad daylight and playing a kind of music that only existed
in Disney movies.

“How is it still on?”, Namjoon asked. Did he need glasses, he would have put them on now to
examine the object in question in true professor style. “How come there’s electricity? The train
station looks like the park has been abandoned for at least 30 years.”

“Well but obviously they will need electricity for the rave as well. Most likely the promoters brought
their own generators. Guess they fixed the merry-go-round for people like us who enter the park
from the wrong side and look for a sign of life. Let’s get up on that hill and see if we have a better
view from there!”, Yoongi suggested in what had to be the most carefree tone in weeks. He glanced
at Hoseok looking for an ally. “You in for a ride, Hobi?”

He had him at the nickname. Hoseok’s eyes lit up and the next moment they were running towards
the merry-go-round, trying to pull each other back to get the first choice with the horses. They ended
up on two entire different sides of the carousel, both not willing to give up on the big white horse
they had conquered in favor of sitting close to each other. Yoongi swung his leg over the golden
saddle and held onto the wooden mane with one hand to turn around and look for Namjoon who
reluctantly came walking up the little hill, fumbling for another cigarette in his bag. Yoongi jumped
when all of a sudden he felt a movement right next to his ear. Almost as if something had brushed
along his ear piercings. He whirled around on his horse, halfway expecting Hoseok to have crept up
from behind but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Hoseok-ah?”, Yoongi called, not able to suppress his irritation.

“Yeah?”, came from the other side of the merry-go-round, he was still on the other white horse
“Never mind”, Yoongi turned back to Namjoon but he had just passed him and – who was that? Yoongi could swear he had seen someone dart past the merry-go-round. Someone moving so fast that his eyes had only registered a sudden movement. Had it really been a person? Or maybe just a big bird? Yoongi’s blood froze when he heard a soft laugh right behind him. Right next to his ear where he had felt the draught of air only seconds ago. He jerked his head to the side but once again – he was all alone on this side of the carrousel. There was Namjoon again, fighting with the wheel of his zippo that was stuck most of the time. And there, once again, a moving silhouette.

“Fucking acid”, Yoongi muttered to himself and used his whole face to blink a couple of times and get rid of the unpleasant hallucinations. He had taken about 100ug, for God’s sake. At this point he should only feel a little elevated and have fun with some pretty colors and intense smells and sounds. He wasn’t supposed to see ghosts, alright?

“Let’s get off this thing!”, he called and slid down from his horse, staggered his way to the edge of the carrousel and was ready to jump off when he felt a whiff of air brush along the side of his neck, almost like fingertips ever so slightly touching him. His hand immediately felt for the spot and his fingers touched what definitely felt like skin. Soft smooth skin, a hand. Suddenly, it felt like his blood was carbonated. It prickled through his veins like mineral water poured into a glass with a considerable amount of force. He turned his head millimeter by millimeter only to find his fingers curled up in the hood of his own shirt. The wind must have blown it against his neck. But since when did the wind laugh with the voice of a young man?

Next thing he knew, Namjoon’s hand was closing around his wrist to help him get off the carrousel.

“You gotta fucking look at that, Hyung!”

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Hoseok was already standing there, facing down the other side of the hill. When Yoongi stepped next to him, he couldn’t help but voice his surprise.

“What the actual fuck?!”

Right in front of them, leading down that hill into a valley, lay what looked like an ancient Chinese village. The moment Yoongi realized how bright the red lanterns taut between the houses shone, he also realized that it was starting to get dark. Hadn’t they been standing in bright yellow afternoon sunshine just seconds ago? Now the sky was painted in all imaginable shades of blue. There was no sunset, just a magical dusk settling over the small, cozy looking houses. The golden light coming from their windows made it look as though they were hollow and somewhere inside there was a candle burning. Yoongi took the cigarette package from Namjoon, originally meaning to light one but Hoseok took an unexpected step to the side and when they accidentally bumped into each other he forgot his original intention and just let the package slide into his back pocket. Maybe he also didn’t light one because he knew Hoseok hated the smell.

“It actually looks like there’s a chance of encountering some fellow members of the human species down there”, Namjoon mumbled and flicked the rest of his own cigarette onto the top most stair to step on it with the heal of his boot.

“I don’t particularly like that species but I wouldn’t mind some of them now, I guess”, Yoongi snorted.

“Wow do you guys smell that, too?”, Hoseok asked, his glance altering between them. “There’s
someone having a barbecue!”

It really did smell amazing. Spices, grilled meat, boiling chili oil, glowing embers.

“Let’s go and grab something to eat first! I’m still starving!”, Hoseok continued like a child trying to convince its parents to take a break at a truck stop.

“Yeah, let’s do this. There gotta be people. If they serve the food for the festival here, even the stage can’t be that far away. We can just ask somebody for the way”, Namjoon gave his okay.

“If they have them, I want baozi!”, Hoseok shouted and was already halfway down the first flight of stairs leading into the maze of houses painted in all imaginable colors.

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They had everything. All different kinds of baozi and dumplings in steaming pots made of bamboo. Meat roasting on charcoal grills. Pots of soups simmering to perfection for what already must be hours according to the rich smell. There was only one thing missing. People.

“Where is everybody? Like… There is not a single waiter around. No one watching over the barbecue. How come the meat’s not burned yet?”, Namjoon mused aloud.

“Maybe it’s one single person taking care of all of it together and they are currently on the toilet or… getting new supplies from somewhere. Why don’t we just sit down and start eating? They’ll be back any minute, I guess.”

Yoongi felt his stomach growl in reply to Hoseok’s suggestion. Yet, the feeling that something about the whole scenery was the slightest bit off didn’t leave him. It weighed heavier than the craving for food.

“Let’s not eat until they are back. We haven’t paid for the food yet. We don’t even know how much they charge for the stuff.”

“Ahhh Yoongz, come on, seriously! How much can a baozi possibly be? Multiply that by 4, since we’re at a festival in the middle of nowhere and you can still get three of them for what you usually spend on your favorite Starbucks Latte. And talking of that… Last week when we… talked… at that coffee shop in Sinchon… Well, I didn’t pay you back yet. So don’t worry… Eat as much as you want, it’s my treat.”

Yoongi’s eyes turned into narrow slits.

“You don’t owe me nothing.”

He had paid for Hoseok’s Vanilla Latte and his blueberry muffin at that café. And he had done so for a reason. It had meant something. But obviously the offer to pay him back meant something as well.

“Let’s not waste more time than necessary on eating”, Namjoon padded Yoongi’s back. “We still have to find the stage and meet everyone. I heard that Tae, Jimin and his new boyfriend will be here, too. I haven’t seen them in months so we should give them a call once we’re done here.”

“I haven’t even met his new boyfriend in person yet and they’re already dating like half a year.”

“Neither of us has seen him yet”, Namjoon confirmed Hoseok’s remark.

“What’s his name again?”, Yoongi asked, pretending to care. He was starting to get heavy tracers.
The red lanterns that shone down on them appeared to be floating. Like countless red fullmoons. He started to regret taking the whole tab. Almost as much as he regretted taking along in the first place.

“Jayden, he’s American… like he’s half”, Namjoon informed them.

“Ugh, Jimin always has to go for the exotic birds, huh?”, Yoongi snorted. He had dated Park Jimin a long long time ago. Maybe dated was the wrong word. They had checked each other out and decided that – no thank you, a normal friendship will do. Mainly because Jimin’s ideal nights consisted of smoky clubs, a potpourri of pills and expensive drinks and sex so kinky that it simply wouldn’t have been compatible with Yoongi’s low effort attitude when it came to sports and moving in general. He liked good sex. But he didn’t need to go to the hardware store first to get the necessary equipment. His nights consisted of his 3 screens, his headphones and a watered down glass of whisky so he could still focus on the song he was composing. No human interaction needed, again thank you very much. Maybe that had been the problem. Maybe that was always the problem.

“He quite literally went for the exotic bird this time. Jayden’s a professional tattoo artist… pretty famous one even… he’s the founder of that cancer Charity project Blue Velvet that is all over the news at the moment cause it won that prize… and his artist name is Blue Bird.”

“Oh he’s that guy!”

Against his will, Yoongi showed genuine surprise. He had seen that man on TV the other night talking about how body-modification was a way of self-expression and could even be used in the process of curing a trauma. How tattoos and piercings needed to become more accepted in South Korea for the sake of bringing forth individuality and diversity. That not everyone was destined to become a business man and that even those should be allowed to express themselves through body-art. He had said some pretty philosophical things about how scars, visible and invisible were the medals that were given to us for surviving. Yoongi had raised his half-empty glass of whisky at the TV in approval and admiration. Of course Jimin went after a dangerously attractive celebrity like him. Blue Bird looked like one who could handle Jimin’s kinks. Maybe even outbid them. There sure was a lot of romantic hardware store shopping on their weekends.

“I heard he’s quite an intellectual. Is currently even working on an autobiography that is supposed to help people on their way into self-acceptance. He must have been through some tough shit according to what Jimin told me. But he always gets back up again. Sounds like a pretty inspirational guy. I’m actually looking forward to meeting him. Do you think I can ask him for an autograph?”, Namjoon asked soberly.

“If you want for Jimin to get even more cocky and stuck up then sure… go ahead”, Yoongi rolled his eyes.

“God, they’re delicious!”, Hoseok called out and Namjoon and Yoongi whirled around only to find him seated at one of the tables, hunched over a selection of dumplings and other snacks. When had he found the time to collect all these?

“Jung Hoseok!”, Yoongi called reproachfully. “Could you stop being such a pig? Who told you to go ahead and start eating? Can you not fucking contain yourself for like half a minute until we’ve figured out what to make of the situation?”

“What do you make of an empty stomach and unattended Chinese food? Loosen up, Yoongz! Don’t be such a scaredy cat… or tight ass for that matter. See? Here’s my purse. I have that next to me on the table and as soon as the staff comes back I’ll throw my money at them.”

It was always the problem that Yoongi was too cautious. That he didn’t take risks. That he stayed
home alone and worked when others went out to enjoy themselves. It was the problem that he always had to think twice. When people expected an answer, a decision. Or maybe it was Hoseok. His carelessness, mainly. I said that before. I will say that again.

When he reached for one of the baozi that Hoseok had grabbed for all three of them (because unlike Yoongi he cared about others), he couldn’t deny that it did smell delicious. Delicious on a whole new level. He couldn’t remember that ever before something had smelled and tasted and felt so freaking good. Maybe it was the acid. Maybe his sensory organs were just oversensitive at this point. Maybe he should try and have sex tonight. With some stranger. And wasn’t Hoseok a stranger as well? A stranger, still? Yoongi knew everything about him because he had been wearing his heart on his sleeve ever since they had met about a year ago. But did he know Yoongi? Did Namjoon know Yoongi? Did anyone know Yoongi at all?

He flushed down the meat he had just gnawed of a rib with some of the ice tea that had magically found the way into his hand (seriously, who had passed the glass to him?) and threw a weary glance up the hill where the merry-go-round stood illuminated against the pitch black night sky. When had it gotten so dark? And where did all the people on the carousel horses suddenly come from?

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At first, only his right eye would open. The left one felt like it was glued shut. And the second he raised his arm to his face in order to rub it, a rush of nausea shot through his veins like venom. He barely managed to roll over and the second he had heaved his body up on all fours, he felt a contraction in his stomach and threw up between his hands digging into the dirt of an unpaved road. It was only clear liquid sprinkling the dust beneath of him. As though he had not eaten at all. And it didn’t even smell bad. In fact, there was a rather pleasant smell to it. A sweet and flowery one. Oh right, maybe the ice tea. Wait. Yoongi spat a couple of times before he lifted his head to look around. He could clearly remember putting a glass of iced and sweetened hibiscus tea to his lips, gulping half of it down to still his thirst and flush down the salty meat. And that was that. The rest was missing. He pressed his eyes shut for a second to repress the panic creeping up inside his body like yet another urge to vomit. He felt the gravel pierce into his palms and he tried to focus on the feeling to stay grounded. Being on the verge of a panic attack always felt the same for him. It was exactly like the moment you step to the edge of a tall building, your fingers grab the handrail and you feel a cold hand clench around your lungs. The moment you know everything could be over if you just took one step further. That you’ll be free falling the second you lose hold of your raging thoughts. Yoongi was terribly afraid of heights. But even more so he was afraid of himself. Of his desire to just give in to what was trying to get a hold of him. He had to stay in control. Always.

His eyes popped open once again and scanned his surroundings for anything familiar. There were houses, illuminated by the mysterious red shine of a million paper lanterns. What was this place? His glance got caught on the legs of a table. He reached for it to drag himself to his feet. How had he even ended up on the floor? Swaying a little on his feet, he tried to focus on his body and besides that raging fit of nausea, everything seemed to be more or less okay. There was a burning sensation in his temple. He must have fallen down from the bench and hit his head. He gently groped for his forehead only to find the right sleeve of his hoodie covered in dust and some particles of dried blood on his fingertips when he lowered his hand again. He definitely had been unconscious for quite a while. It hadn’t been the fall that had woken him up, this much was sure. He instinctively reached for his back pocket only to find his phone and purse gone and the package of Namjoon’s cigarettes the only thing he had still on him until he suddenly remembered that he had carried his belongings around in his backpack. He whirled around himself on the spot but it was nowhere to be found.

There was a table covered in the leftovers of food and, for some reason, the sight of it sent a shiver down Yoongi’s spine. It was a feeling of being at the loss for a certain word, a word that was already on the tip of his tongue but just wouldn’t come out. He knew that he should be alarmed but he didn’t
know why. Maybe because the food was such an unpleasant sight to see. Half of it was obviously rotten already. It looked at least a week old and a foul smell made Yoongi breathe as shallow as possible. For a moment, a half eaten baozi caught his attention. He covered his nose and mouth with his hand and leaned over the table to see whether his shortsightedness was playing a trick on him but there was indeed a maggot curling inside of the rotten meat filling. Yoongi backed away with disgust. Another rush of helpless confusion washed over him. He looked around like a hectic bird not really sure what exactly he was searching for, only knowing that it was super important. Dizzy, he caught himself against the edge of the table before his legs could give in again and tried to steady his breath while counting up to ten in silence. He always did that. By ten all the worries would be gone and he could start over. It was a ritual, a practice he had adopted in his earliest childhood.

By ten you will have to stop crying and help Mommy calm Daddy down. By ten you will have to make him stop hitting her.

6… 7… He raised his head and that was when he noticed them. Two young men, lying on the ground on the other side of the table. Next to each other, limbs entangled as though one would have tried to hold the other at some point and had failed. The realization of how lifeless they looked pierced into Yoongi’s body like blades shoving under fingernails. His heart was pounding in his mouth when he made around the table and fell to his knees next to the couple. He knew these men. There was no name to the pale, greenish looking faces but a feeling. A sensation burning up his throat, setting his windpipe on fire. His heart recognized them, his brain didn’t. Was that how an Alzheimer patient felt upon looking at his relatives? Like a sudden strike of lighting, an image cut through his memory. The picture of the red-haired boy who was lying there lifeless in the dirt. In the memory, he was awake. Alive. Sitting in the passenger seat of a car, turning around to him with a smile as bright as sunshine reflecting from snow-covered mountain tops. Extending a strip of LSD trips to Yoongi.

“Hoseok!”, he cried out, the name tearing through his brain like a whip through flesh. It must have been the acid. There must have been something wrong with it.

“Hoseok-ah!”

His hands were all over his body before he managed to grab a hold of his wrist and it took another couple of minutes – at least so it felt – to check for his pulse. Yoongi was too nervous, he felt his own heart beating in his fingertips, his hands were shaking as though he was experiencing a sudden spasm. He went for Hoseok’s neck instead, pressed his whole palm against his skin, shoving the collar of his sports jacket aside. There was a pulse. Hoseok’s heart was racing, while his limbs appeared like someone had emptied out the bones and just left the skin and flesh behind. Yoongi turned to the other boy whose name he still couldn’t bring himself to remember. But he knew damn well that it was his best friend lying there unconscious, a thin trace of vomit running from the corner of his mouth, pooling under his face. Yoongi’s palm hovered over his parted lips and the weakest whiff of air told him he wasn’t dead. At least not yet. After having detangled their limbs and turned both of them to the side, Yoongi was back on his feet before his brain had communicated the order to get up to the entirety of his body. He blacked out for a second, stumbled and blinked away the dizziness, holding onto the bench for dear life. They needed help. It was on him to call an ambulance. Where the fuck was his backpack? Once again he dropped to his knees and started searching through the pockets of Hoseok’s and Namjoon’s jackets and pants, looking for their phones, only to find every single one he reached into empty. He growled in panic and crawled forward on all fours, something inside of him hoping to find their bags under the table. But there was nothing except for bones from chicken wings and ribs and the rotting peels of fruits. They had been robbed. Well maybe not even that. They had been lying around here unconscious long enough for every passer by to grab what they fancied. Yoongi didn’t give a shit about the 500.000 Won cash that had been in his wallet at this point. He just needed a goddamn phone. Where even was he? What
was this place that looked like an ancient Chinese city straight out of a historical drama? Some fucking backdrop, dummies instead of real houses… like in some fucking… Hold on! Right! The amusement park! Yoongi gasped for air and ran a few steps before he spun around again looking up at the windows of the buildings that rose on both sides of the narrow street like ornate prison walls. The red lanterns reflected in the empty eye-like windows and he couldn’t tell if there were people watching him from behind the curtains.

“Hello?!”, he called helplessly, his voice echoing from all around him, sounding hollow and dark.

“Anybody here?”

There was nothing. Nothing except for a distant jingle, the sound of bells maybe. It was Yoongi’s instinct taking over when he ran towards where the noise was coming from. His own footsteps, the heavy sound of his Doc Martens causing him to scuff his feet rather than lift them off the ground, were dancing around him like a group of invisible children romping about.

“I need help!”, he cried out, spinning around himself again as he made up a flight of narrow stairs that was squeezed in between two buildings. His eyes got caught on the bodies of Hoseok and Namjoon that were almost out of sight now. He would have to remember the way to lead someone back to them. Most likely they would get in trouble for the acid. But that didn’t matter now. The only thing that counted was for them to survive. They would most likely need intravenous infusions, maybe tranquilizers, dextrose… they needed water, goddamnit. He didn’t even have some water at hand to help rehydrate them.

The rave. Like the main character in a video game, collecting items in a jump and run mode, Yoongi’s memories reentered his body. There had to be paramedics around here. He would only have to find the stage. And suddenly there was music again. It weren’t bells. Those were electronic beats. He was getting closer. A wave of relief washed over him the second he reached the top of the stairs. There was light coming from behind the row of houses in front of him, an astrodome of light painting the sky red and gold. It had to be the main stage.

He whirled around when he noticed a movement in the corner of his eye.

“Hey!”, he shouted, immediately sure that it had been a person passing by further down the street.

“Wait for me please! I need help!”

But whoever had crossed the street apparently didn’t hear him. Or didn’t want to. Yoongi squinted to focus his pretty bad vision on the shadows in which the silhouette had disappeared. Had it really been a human being? Maybe his desperation had made him mistake a cat for something bigger. Were there eyes peering at him from the dark corner behind a trashcan? Yoongi let out a sharp breath, ready to kick himself in the balls for leaving his glasses in his backpack, being too vain to wear them in public essentially. He stormed forward to where he saw the little shimmering dots only to find a big fat jet black crow enthroned on a trashcan peering at him like a spy of Satan himself. In his frustration, Yoongi kicked the trashcan with his boot and the rattle made the crow fly up, soar above the roofs and out of sight.

“Yeah, alright, go fuck yourself”, Yoongi forced out and stepped back into the middle of the street, cupping his mouth with his hands to use them as a megaphone.

“Hello?”, he called, his voice breaking with desperation. “Can anybody hear me? I need a doctor! Two of my friends need urgent medical care! Please!”

Once again, he looked up as if hoping to catch somebody leaning in an open window. But all he saw were red lanterns. And in the darkness he couldn’t make out the strings they were attached to anymore. They were hovering above him. There were neither stars nor a moon in the charcoal black sky. At least they weren’t visible from down here. Yoongi grunted angrily when he realized that –
apparently – he was still tripping a little. It couldn’t be his shortsightedness only that caused the lanterns to blur like this. Some trick that the LSD played on his mind made them appear to be floating, not steady in their spot, altering in height. The longer he looked at them, the more they quite literally seemed to be bouncing up and down like big rubber balls. Yoongi clenched his teeth and lowered his glance cursing himself for accepting the blotters once more. For not keeping Namjoon and Hoseok from overdosing on purpose. He had just watched them take it. Said something when it had already been too late. Even though his heart had been bleeding the moment Hoseok had brought the little pieces of paper to his mouth.

Yoongi looked up again. And at this point he was too stunned to scream with shock. He didn’t even flinch at the sight that presented itself in front of him. There had been a solid row of houses in front of him only seconds ago. And now… they were gone. He was standing on a little hill and in front of him lay… the ocean. He glanced over his shoulder only to find the familiar sight of the red, blue, yellow and green houses right behind him. Maybe he had kept walking in some sort of trance? There was a small alleyway between two of the buildings that obviously had brought him here. There was something severely wrong with the acid. With just 100 microgram you weren’t supposed to get blackouts like these. But maybe the panic enhanced the effects of the drug. There was no time to sort that out right now.

Yoongi was standing at the shore. And he had no fucking clue how that was possible either. In a way, he was glad Namjoon didn’t see this. He would have lost his mind about the sight. They were somewhere in the mountains, weren’t they? High up North towards the heart of the country not towards the Yellow Sea. Maybe this was a lake? But soft waves moved the surface of the water that stretched on to the horizon and beyond. And the light he had seen hadn’t come from a stage. But the sunset. Unlike in the alleyway behind him where it had been a pitch-black night, here at the shore, the sun was still setting in shades of red and amber. It also painted the water and made it look like liquid gold. Liquid fire. It was a boisterous midsummer sunset. And it was peaceful. There was no soul to be seen at the coastline. A chilly wind suddenly rose from the plains like a busy ghost woken by the young man’s heavy footsteps, unnerved by his hectic presence. At this point, Yoongi was on the verge of tears. Tears of anger and desperation. Never before in his life had he felt this lost and helpless. Every second counted. The health of his best friend and… well… someone he knew… depended on him. Maybe even their lives. And here he was, out of his mind due to some pharmaceutical product, not able to rely on his senses, the scenery around him kept changing. He had put the little piece of paper on his tongue and then fallen down the rabbit hole.

“What the hell!”, he burst out when he turned to the left to check the beach for any sign of life. There was a giant building soaring into the evening sky not far from him. It had at least 7 stories and it looked like a temple, like it should be located somewhere in the Forbidden City in Beijing and not right here in an abandoned amusement park, built on stilts, a good 200 meters into the ocean. A narrow bridge of red painted wood connected it with the plateau Yoongi was standing on and at this point he had given up on wondering why he had not noticed it before. Unlike the houses of the ancient Chinese city that had lost a good deal of their paint to harsh winters already, the temple-like building looked freshly renovated. The intense red, royal green and even more so the subtle glowing gold stood out gracefully against the sky. Yoongi had no idea what kind of building it was supposed to be. There were only two facts that mattered. The windows were illuminated and there was smoke coming from a monstrous concrete chimney towering next to the temple. There had to be someone in there.

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Having crossed already about one third of the red wooden bridge, Yoongi suddenly felt a stinging sensation in his side. He slowed down and eventually had to stop because it hurt so bad. He tried to catch his breath, bending down to rest his hands on his knees and give his upper body a break. There was sweat running down his temples and the burning sensation reminded him of the wound he had
completely forgotten about right after he had noticed it. He clenched his teeth and used the sleeve of his Thrasher Hoodie to gently dab off the droplets. Now that he had gotten closer to the building, he was finally able to read the Chinese characters above the entrance door. It was a character also used in Hanja. It said hot water. Apparently it was a bathhouse or at least modeled after an ancient spa. Maybe it was the headquarters of the amusement park built to match the theme of the ancient city. It remotely resembled the Jogyesa Buddhist temple in Seoul since – like all Korean temples- it was also influenced by traditional Chinese architecture. From a distance, the building had appeared pretty tall already but the closer he got the more it seemed to grow. Looking up the pagoda-like tower from where he stood now felt like glancing up one of the highrise buildings in the city center of Seoul. He got dizzy just from imagining how it must feel to look down from the roof. The pseudo bathhouse was surrounded by a garden that could also pass as a little forest. The bushes and small Japanese maple trees were neatly trimmed and even though Yoongi couldn’t see them clearly, he noticed countless little dots in all different colors that had to be blossoms. Some of the building’s floors were equipped with wooden balconies and even standing on one of these would have given Yoongi the creeps. For a simple office building, it was actually way too pompous. With its generous window fronts on every other story and the golden mythical creatures protecting each gilded corner and the steeple of the hexagonal roof against ghosts it could really make for a sacred facility. Either way, since they organized raves on the premises, they had to be able to deal with people overdosing on drugs.

„Do you need help?“

Yoongi froze on the spot. It was the voice of a young man. And it was accompanied by a movement behind his back. There was someone right behind him. Someone who hadn’t been there seconds ago. He turned around extra slowly to prepare his face, relax his eyes a little that were ripped open in silent shock.

It was a boy his age. A little younger maybe. 19, if he were to guess. Taller than him. Of a much stronger build than Yoongi. Handsome. Cute. So cute in fact that Yoongi swallowed thickly and lowered his eyes discreetly. The boy’s body was well-toned, no… make it buff. His skin was of a pretty olive tone and his lips had a characteristic arch, he had a rather deep philtrum that caused the curved M of his upper lip to appear slightly pushed up at the highest points. It gave him a sweet, cheeky smile that made Yoongi all kinds of nervous. It spread onto his dark eyes that sparkled with amused curiosity. His facial features were so remarkable that they had distracted Yoongi from the detail that most people would have focused on right away: There was a face-paint spreading over the bridge of his nose, the apples of his cheeks and leading up to his small well-shaped ears. It almost looked like an ornate necklace, consisting of little dots, triangles and there were diamond-shaped forms on his forehead, one over each eyebrow. Apparently it had been drawn on with some kind of eye pencil… or was it an actual tattoo? His charming eyes were enhanced with a smudge of black sparkly eye shadow that added to their infinite depth. Most obviously Yoongi wasn’t that good at hiding his surprise, let alone his perplexity.

“You look a little lost”, the boy smiled. His face was a boy’s face, his body was that of a man. Looking at him felt like vanilla ice cream with chunks of chili peppers. His voice sounded soft but the slightest bit mocking. It was a very young voice, still not fully matured. But it sounded like he could sing. Yoongi had been so distracted by his extraordinary face, it wasn’t until now that he realized how peculiar the boy’s outfit actually was. He was wearing a plain black tight fit longsleeve shirt with a rather wide cut collar that exposed his prominent collarbones and accentuated his abs. While the shirt was spectacular in its own way, it wasn’t anything unusual but his black harem pants sure were. The crutch was particularly low, almost at the height of his knees and they were embodied with golden ornaments that gave it an oriental touch. The harem pants were rolled up to free his ankles. Yoongi’s eyes got caught on a big broad golden anklet that closed around his right leg like a shackle. The anklet as well was ornate, decorated with little bells and cut outs that made it looks as
though it was crafted of flower tendrils. The boy wore pointy black leather slippers, the backs of
which he stepped on with his naked feet. There was a small black leather bag attached to a belt he
wore around his hips. It reminded of the type of pouches hairdressers use to always have their
scissors, clips and brush at hand. The boy wore feathers in his hair, they were of a silky black and
either belonged to a crow or a raven. Who can tell the difference anyway? Ravens were bigger,
weren’t they?

Long bangs that were slightly crimped fell over the boy’s left eye, while the right side was braided
back in 3 tight cornrows that were decorated with golden pins and said crow feathers. With all the
golden jewelry and his imperious glance he had the presence of a Prince from a foreign country.
Yoongi didn’t question his fashion style, though. People who attended these kinds of rave parties in
the middle of nowhere sure had some avant-gardist aspirations concerning their looks as well.

“I see… you don’t talk to strangers, huh?”, the boy mumbled and there was a certain melody to his
words. An enchanting singsong that sounded like an instrument more than a human voice. In fact, it
made his voice an instrument. Yoongi glanced up to meet his eyes with an apologizing look, not
exactly sure what he was sorry for.

“You’re wounded”, the boy suddenly remarked. It wasn’t accompanied by the urgent surprise of a
sudden realization. He said it calmly, sounding informative rather than worried. Obviously he had
noticed the wounds before and taken time to contemplate it before he had pointed it out. Yoongi
shook his head and waved his hand in front of his chest to indicate that it wasn’t that bad.

“I know, never mind. It’s only a scratch. But I actually really do need help. I’m supposed to be at the
festival, you know. In fact, I am looking for the main stage. You see… My two friends are in trouble,
they… they need a doctor. Do you happen to know where I can get medical assistance? The tent of
the paramedics or something?”

The boy looked him over with an expression that Yoongi couldn’t quite fit into a drawer. The
emotion it resembled the most was amusement. But there was also a good deal of calculation.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. But tell me more about your friends. The two young men
who passed out in the village in front of the dumpling booth?”

“Yes!”, Yoongi exclaimed, nervous excitement welling up inside of his chest. “Exactly! How
come… how come you know about them? Have you seen them?”

“Everyone has seen them by now”, the boy shrugged as though he was stating the obvious.

“What do you mean everyone? I didn’t meet a single soul on my way here!”, Yoongi forced out.

“Good for you. It’s dangerous to walk around here alone when the dusk settles in.”

“What do you mean dangerous? Like… I suppose we were robbed already… I mean… you know…
we were on our way to the rave but apparently we’ve entered the amusement park from the wrong
side. My friends were hungry and we decided to stop for some food before we continue looking for
the stage. But then we apparently passed out and… when I regained consciousness I… you know…
ah fuck it… we took a good amount of acid before we entered the park. That’s why. I think they
overdosed. I took significantly less and still I couldn’t remember my own name for the first couple of
minutes after I woke up. There must have been something wrong with the LSD, maybe it wasn’t
clean or something. My friend said he tested it but… I’m sure you understand my situation…”, he
tried to sound particularly friendly. He tried to talk to the boy from one occasional drug-user to
another. But apparently that was a tone they both didn’t really identify with.

“There is no such things as a festival taking place around here…”, the boy commented
lightheartedly. “At least not to my knowledge… but I’m pretty sure your friends have been already taken care of by now.”

“Say what?”, Yoongi shook his head in confusion. The boy with the raven feathers in his hair just smiled a lightweight smile.

“They came to take them away a while ago already…”

“Hold on! Who came? Where did they take them??”

Yoongi’s voice cracked.

“My people. They took them to the bathhouse, I figure. Where else would they take them?”

“The bathhouse? You mean that building right there?”

He used his thumb to point over his shoulder. Maybe he should turn around and make sure whether it was still the same building or whether they had replaced it with a Ferris wheel in the meantime or a replica of the Namsan Tower.

“Yeah, the one right behind you…”

There was definitely a mocking expression in the boy’s coal-colored eyes. Apparently he perceived Yoongi’s reactions as rather funny. What even was wrong with him? He was on drugs too, right? And apparently it was some really heavy shit. But wait? Hadn’t he just said that he didn’t know about a festival in this area? So he was no lost raver rolling hard on molly or whatever the fuck inspired people to paint little black triangles across their cheeks?

“So what is this building? Is it some headquarter some… main office of the park administration?”

“It’s a bathhouse”, the boy frowned. “A spa.”

“You mean it’s an actual facility where people take hot baths and get massages?”, Yoongi asked, leaning in a little as though it would help understand the raven boy any better.

“You got it. That’s what people go there for.”

“But… I mean… why… right here in the middle of nowhere?”

“What do you mean? It’s very close to the village and the train station.”

Yoongi’s glance travelled over the boy’s eye area once again. His pupils did not appear diluted. But he had to be high. High enough to forget the very fact that he was actually supposed to be on a dance floor right now, shaking his feather-spiked head to some solid techno beats.

“I can assure you that your friends are taken care of. No need to worry anymore.”

“Do they have medical supplies to treat them? They might need an infusion or some glucose injections.”

“I’m sure my people know what they need right now”, the boy nodded gracefully.

“Your people? Does that mean you work there?”

“Where else would I work?”
“Can you take me to them? Do you know where they treat them?”

“Tell me your name”, the boy avoided answering his question. Or maybe that was the answer.

The condition before he would take him to where they had brought Hoseok and Namjoon.

“My name’s Yoongi. Min Yoongi”, he replied a little reluctantly. Even if the others were apparently taken care of at this point, he still had no time to waste. He needed to see for himself whether they were alright. Make sure they were back on their feet and then get the hell out of this park and back to the car. Give Hoseok hell for the LSD and then leave. There was no way he would still attend that rave tonight.

“What’s your name?”, he heard himself ask when the silence was getting too awkward. Was it not common sense to give a name in return for a name? Maybe the boy had waited for him to ask. Maybe it was the second condition for him to be lead to the two dorks that called himself his friends.

“They call me Crow.”

_You don’t say._

“Oh…okay. I see… What’s your real name, if I may ask?”

“What makes a name a real name?”, Crow asked with a secretive smirk.

“Oh come on, I just gave you my real name…”

The slightly mocking expression on the boy’s face gave way to a nasty grin.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have…”

Yoongi indicated an awkward laugh. It ended in an even more awkward moment of silence. Crow worried his bottom lip, one corner of his mouth still twitching with silent laughter. He was lethally pretty in his reckless attitude.

“So… do you think you can take me to my friends? I really want to make sure they are okay.”

“To be honest… I fear that won’t be possible. I guess we can’t disturb them right now. Their condition was pretty bad when they were found. You should let them rest some before they start working tomorrow.”

Yoongi coughed for he had almost swallowed his own tongue.

“Hold on! What? Where would they start working tomorrow?”

“Well… that’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? They will have to make up for the money and effort my people invested into saving their lives. Their state was more than critical. They would have died shortly after you left them. So we decided to act on our behalf.”

“Okay… that makes sense”, Yoongi stated even though he wasn’t sure whether it did. “But listen… I don’t think it will be necessary that they make up for your help with work, you know? In fact, I don’t think it will be possible. Depending on how much you charge for the treatment, we won’t even have the time to stay here this long so… Just name me the sum and I will pay you back right away. If you don’t accept credit cards then that’s also fine… I’ve got some cash on me. I’m sure it will do.”

“Didn’t you just say you were robbed?”, the boy named Crow raised his eyebrows. Yoongi felt his insides drop a little.
“I’m not exactly sure whether we actually really were robbed or… don’t you think it’s possible that some of… your people… took our belongings like… or maybe they are still lying around at that booth? I didn’t have time to really search for them, you know… I was in a hurry looking for help.”

“Did you just suggest that my people stole your stuff?”, Crow tilted his head to the side, frowning at him. He still seemed to be rather entertained by what Yoongi said. If he was judging him for his remark, he didn’t let it show.

“I didn’t mean to accuse them of anything!”, Yoongi tried to weasel out. “I just meant… you know… maybe they went ahead and took it to keep it safe for us.”

“I don’t think so. But you also can be sure that, if someone robbed you, it wasn’t them. My people have no idea what money is and thus don’t care for it.”

“How… would they not know?”, Yoongi stammered.

What kind of place was this bathhouse? Was it run by some kind of autarkic sect that had established a society of its own here somewhere deep in the mountains? A communist group that wasn’t paid in money but in goods for their work and that had no idea what chemical drugs and techno music were? Yoongi was starting to get very suspicious of the situation. Crow didn’t seem unworldly in the least. The way he expressed himself was perfectly normal. He spoke with no specific dialect and even though he seemed to avoid colloquialisms and Yoongi hadn’t heard him cuss so far, he didn’t appear to be indoctrinated by some kind of cult. On the contrary… he seemed to be particularly sharp-minded. Yoongi wasn’t able to see through people pretty quickly and usually always was a good deal ahead of them, anticipating their intentions before they themselves even realized them. It went so far that he could literally predict the exact phrasing that the people he knew better were about to use in certain situations. Usually, he passed on finishing the sentence for somebody else but it always gave him a fair amount of satisfaction when people ended up saying what he was anticipating. And the smug grin on his lips in those situations had always driven the emotional high-voltage line that was Jung Hoseok up the wall. Anyway… This Crow boy was a book with seven seals. He had turned from a fellow raver with an eccentric fashion-taste to someone Yoongi could not predict for the life of his.

“They are frogs.”

“Say what?!”, Yoongi shook his head in utter confusion, not getting what the young man was even talking about.

“You asked why my people don’t care for money. And I gave you the answer. They are frogs”, he ran his fingertips along the hair braided to the side of his head and tilted it again. It seemed to be some kind of habit. Moving his head like an actual bird that was reconnoitering something from afar. Maybe it had earned him his nickname. Maybe he was a scout.

“Oh I… I see”, Yoongi lied. He was too embarrassed to ask what Crow meant by frogs in this context. Apparently it was a code word for something that he expected him to know. Maybe this was a hint at the fact that he was a member of some kind of sect after all. A sect that had a thing for animal names. Probably they classified their members in different categories. There were the birds, of which Crow was a member. They wore feathers in their hair. And then there were the frogs … whatever that meant.

“Anyway… I’d really appreciate if you could tell me where they brought my friends. Is there anyone I can talk to about how to pay you back for your effort? Like… the boss of the… frogs.”

“I am the boss of the frogs”, Crow shrugged. “I’m the personal assistant of the lady who runs the
“bathhouse.”

“Oh… that… makes me a lucky guy for randomly running into you, I guess? So… would you mind introducing me to that lady?”

“Well… you will need an appointment for that.”

Alright, he was attractive. And had they met on the dancefloor in front of the stage, drink in hand and eyes on each other, he most definitely would not have turned away if he had tried to kiss him. But this conversation felt like playing a game that he didn’t know the rules of. Wherever the finish line was, Crow was already there, awaiting him, had already won and now watched him to see how he performed. Yoongi took pride in being the mysterious guy people couldn’t predict. But having that done to him made him high key insecure. An insecurity turned into anger rather quickly for him.

“Oh-huh. And where can I get an appointment with her highness?”, he snapped and snuffled arrogantly. He was only seconds away from turning his back on that boy and marching into that bathhouse on his own. He would find himself somebody to insult hard enough to get an immediate appointment with the highest authority of that goddamn bathtub rental.

“I could see what I can do for you.”

“Can’t you just take me to her right now?”, Yoongi asked again, did his best to exhale the anger and allowed the urgency of his plea to show in eyes. His heart was still racing with worry for Namjoon and Hoseok. Who said that those frogs had undergone a first aid training?

“Well, I would… but I don’t have the time right now. You see… we’re about to open up for the night. And the first customers are already arriving.”

He pointed westward further down the coast. Yoongi turned his head and gasped. Three ships had anchored off shore and there were boats approaching the mainland. Just like the village, the ships were illuminated by red paper lanterns. They were hung across the decks in hundreds. It were three old fashioned-cruisers that looked like they had been in use ever since the beginning of the 20th century. They didn’t even build ships of wood anymore nowadays, did they? Yoongi’s vision was too bad to make out people from where they were standing but he recognized shadowy silhouettes on the little boats that came closer in a remarkable speed for that amount of headwind.

“They are all on their way here?”, he asked, astounded.

“Eventually they will all come here, yes. Some of them will have dinner in the village first… The food you and your friends ate… it was prepared for our guests. I’m afraid you’ll have to bear the expanse as well… Well, either way. It’s my job to welcome them at the entrance door and manage their requests for the night. So I will be busy for the next couple of hours. They come in waves, though. We expect 2 more ships tonight. I could take you to Madame Yu, when the evening guests are all served and the late-night guests are not yet to be expected. There’s another thing, though… Min Yoongi. There’s no way the guests may see you.”

“Wait… what? Why?”

“It would take too long to explain this now. See? They are already here.”

Crow had not turned around and yet he knew that a stream of people came walking up towards where the red wooden bridge connected with the mainland that very minute. When did the boats have time to land at the shore? A new wave of panic rushed down Yoongi’s spine. Blurry as his eyes received them, the approaching guests appeared uncanny, threatening even. All he could make out
were suits, long coats on some but there were no faces. Hoods covering heads and he could swear that some of them were wearing masks. Or why else would there be bright colors where their facial skin was supposed to be? His eyes travelled back to Crow’s face to ask him what the hell he was supposed to do now and he was surprised to catch the young man swallow thickly after he had thrown a brief glance over his shoulder.

“They’re particularly early tonight”, he whispered, his brows arched in a troubled expression.

“So what do I do now?”, Yoongi asked, shuddering at the fresh gust of wind. Apparently the dark-clad guests had shaken it up this time.

“Listen… the thing with this bridge is… people can’t see you… until you talk.”

“They what?!”

“You got me the first time I said it… you aren’t dumb. And you witnessed it yourself. I was standing on this bridge all the while, holding out for you as you came closer. But it was only when I started talking to you that you noticed me.”

Yoongi was at a loss for words. He just stared at Crow’s face in utter disbelief. The boy responded with a smile.

“Don’t worry… it’s just a means of protection. The red paint is responsible for it but I’ll tell you later how it works. They’re too close. Mind my words. As soon as the first guest sets foot on the bridge you must remain silent. We will walk with them towards the entrance gates.”

“I…”

“Alright. I will then reveal myself and greet them. You will stay close to me and not say a word before all of them have entered. Can you manage that?”

“I…”

Yoongi was incapable of talking anyway at this point. His brain was running hot but it still didn’t manage to process the simple truth the boy had just casually thrown at his feet. The explanation for his sudden appearance out of nowhere. He had been there all along, observing Yoongi coming closer only to reveal himself when he had deemed it most fitting. How would red paint conceal a person until they started talking? Yoongi had never heard of an optical illusion capable of this. But how else would it work? He would just have to wait for the explanation, wouldn’t he? There was something giving him the urgent feeling that he should just follow the boy’s instructions now. Even before Hoseok had discovered the creepy little monkey statue in front of the train hall, he had been haunted by the feeling that something was awfully wrong with this place. Maybe it had already started back in the car, driving up the never-ending serpentine towards the top of the mountain. Now he was standing at the seashore. And if that boy told him to shut up, he might as well follow that order.

Crow put his index finger to his way too pretty lips and turned to face the approaching group of people. Yoongi wasn’t exactly good at estimating crowds, but it must be at least around 50 of them. The bridge started creaking as soon as the first man stepped on it. But it weren’t only male guests, as far as Yoongi could tell. He squinted but even though they kept approaching quite quickly, their silhouettes wouldn’t swim into focus the closer they got. Since almost all of them were wearing black, he could only guess variations in patterns. Here and there was the hem of a long skirt or a dress between the suit pants, moved by the now steady evening breeze. But Yoongi figured that the wearers must also not necessarily be female. Truth be told, he wasn’t able to determine any of the guests’ gender. They were indeed all masked or at least it seemed so – their faces were still only
schemes in the darkness that had settled over the bridge as if someone had thrown a black silk veil over it. All of a sudden, Yoongi felt Crow’s fingers close around his upper arm. He dragged him to the side of the bridge and made him face in the direction of the bathhouse instead as though he wasn’t willing to wait until the guests came close enough for Yoogi’s seeing-impaired eyes to fully recognize them. His grip was tight and his hand was warm. And despite the weirdness of the situation, Yoongi found himself enjoying the tingle his touch sent through his body. As if reading his mind, Crow let his hand travel down his arm and let his fingers slip between Yoogi’s. The moment Yoongi’s hand closed around his, he felt something brush his other arm and had to bite his tongue in order not to make a surprised sound when the wind blew the hem of one of the guests’ coat against his leg. He took a deep breath to steady his heartbeat and focused on the pleasant warm feeling of Crow’s fingers that held on tightly to his ice-cold hand. The warmth they emitted crawled through his arm, up to his shoulder and into his chest. It would have been visible on a thermal camera. A dark red flooding his blue body. Crow turned his head to the side, caught his glance and gave him a firm nod to indicate that they would start walking. The swarm of guests took them with it like a wave washing a floating piece of wood ashore. Crow helped Yoongi to adjust to their pace and their footsteps mingled with those of the boots, loafers and high heels surrounding them. The bells on his anklet jingled rhythmically. Yoongi kept his glance lowered, not daring to look up at the face of the person walking next to him. Even while avoiding a direct look, he still noticed white and purple colors in that man’s – he supposed it was a man – facial area. At this point, he was too scared to find that he wasn’t wearing a mask but that the white and the purple (there was also some black, wasn’t there?) was his actual skin color. None of them said a word. Just like Yoongi and Crow they were wrapped in silence. Yoongi had a thousand questions on his mind and yet they were all way too diffuse to ask them even if he had been allowed to talk. With a sudden rush of panic he remembered Namjoon and Hoseok and started asking himself how in the world he had managed to not waste a thought on them for the past five minutes. Most obviously the LSD was still causing him some temporary memory loss and he decided that he should be very alarmed, still. He needed to get to them as fast as possible. Maybe he shouldn’t wait for Crow to finish his duty… Maybe he should just storm into the bathhouse the second the gates opened, look for them and make them run for their lives. Yes… running for his life seemed like a good idea somehow.

They had arrived in front of the gates. The guests suddenly stopped as if an invisible wall was soaring up in front of them. And maybe it was. Who knows. Maybe that red paint could not only hide people but also concrete walls. Still nobody talked. They didn’t even whisper. Nobody cleared his or her throat, nobody coughed. They just waited. Crow slightly pulled Yoongi by the hand and lead him out of the crowd. They made around them still holding on to each other before he eventually let go and directed Yoongi to stay where the bridge met the building that seemed to sit on the surface of the water like an island. Yoongi understood it as an order not to leave the bridge before he was done with his business. He watched Crow step in front of the waiting crowd. When he was facing them he cleared his throat and with a cold shiver ghosting down his back Yoongi watched the approximately 50 heads turn to face Crow. There were two possibilities. Either they had paid him no attention until now. Or it was indeed his voice that had revealed him to their eyes.

“Good evening”, he said in a very formal tone and then bowed deeply, his head almost touching his knees, half of his hair falling into his face. A strange murmur rose between the guests. As though his ears would suddenly be just as challenged as his eyes, Yoongi couldn’t exactly tell whether they were actually talking. It sounded like leaves rustling in the wind. And he just now started to wonder how it had been possible that he had seen the guests all along even though they hadn’t talked. And how come Crow had seen him all along? Had he seen him all along? The urge to ask him about all this was welling up in his throat like water rising in a rain barrel. He pressed his tongue against his palate and crossed his arms as if to restrict himself from doing anything impetuous.

The communication between Crow and the guests was silent as well. It consisted of brief hand gestures and sometimes not even that. Out of nowhere he had produced a little note book and a pen.
Maybe he had kept it in the leather pouch on his belt. He jotted down some quick notes while the gates of the bathhouse started to open behind him. And that was when Yoongi screamed. They were actual frogs. Big frogs. Almost the size of a toddler. Four of them. Dressed in what looked like a light blue kimono, customized for their tiny and yet not so tiny shape. And they walked upright. Moved quickly and with utter precision. Pushed open the doors with the same power a human being would have invested into this task. He had no time to pay them more attention. He felt something ice cold pierce into his chest and when he looked up, he recognized it to be a glance. A glance that physically hurt. At this very second, all eyes were on him. But in return he only had eyes for one single person. The shadow who had been walking next to him for most of the time. It wasn’t man or woman. But ghost. It wore a simple white mask with slits for eyes and mouth and decorated only with purple shapes on the forehead and the cheeks. It resembled a Japanese Kabuki mask but the expression wasn’t funny nor angry, neither sad nor cocky. It looked dead. The rapid eye movement behind the narrow slits gave off the impression of a living soul trapped inside a dead body. The person wearing the mask was veiled in a black robe and despite the fact that Yoongi could not actually see their eyes, they kept pulling him in.

The second the scream of shock had left his lips, Crow’s eyes had shot up and he, too, was still staring at him with a force as if to stun him. The next second, he dropped his notepad, raised his arms, clapped his hands above his head and then turned his palms at the crowd. Yoongi felt an invisible fist punch into his stomach but before he could crouch down and catch his breath, Crow darted forward and grabbed Yoongi by the wrist. He dragged him towards the white little wooden fence that surrounded the garden. Yoongi pressed his eyes shut as he felt leaves and little branches slap across his cheeks. They disappeared deeper and deeper into the bushes until Crow pushed him to the ground and they both came to sit on their knees in the cloak of a bush with giant fragrant light pink blossoms.

“What the fuck?”, Yoongi whimpered, gasping for air.

“I told you to stay quiet!”, Crow hissed and rolled his eyes. Yoongi couldn’t tell whether he was mad at him or mad at the situation.

“What’s going on?!”, he burst out. “What did you do to them? Who are these people? Why mustn’t they see me? What’s with those fucking frog creatures? What the fuck is going on? What is this place?”

“Hold up!”, Crow interrupted him and the look he gave Yoongi was admonishing and yet composed and rather soothing. “I stunned them. But it won’t last very long. So I need to make this short. They mustn’t see you because… it would make for a bad impression. Yeah… that’s why. They are not used to seeing random strangers around here. Everything has to be in order. We like to keep the exclusiveness of this place guaranteed at any time. It’s also about discretion and privacy… They expect me to welcome them and only me… You already owe this place quite a lot… so you don’t want to cause any further trouble, do you? Anyway-”

“Did these frog things take my friends here?!”

“These frog things are very well trained amphibians that make some of our most reliable staff members. They carry out all the basic tasks that don’t require a lot of brain cells. You know… we haven’t succeeded at teaching them how to talk yet. But they understand simple commandos and reply with sounds or gestures. And yes… if they hadn’t had the courtesy of carrying your two friends over to the bathhouse they would have died from a severe blood poisoning that has been diagnosed and treated at this point. Wherever that came from…”

At this point, Yoongi didn’t know much anymore. But he knew for sure that LSD did not cause
blood poisonings. So it must have been some fake shit then. And maybe this exactly was the reason why his memory and his visual reception was still this challenged. He should be grateful he was still alive. Grateful the other two still were. And not question anything else.

“Listen, Min Yoongi. You won’t be able to enter the bathhouse through the main gate after that incident for the time being. If you want to get to your friends do the following: Walk around the building. Stay hidden in the bushes until you arrive at the backside. There is a staircase leading down to the boiler room. The door is always open. You’ll meet a guy called Blue Bird there. Tell him Crow sent you and that I want him to assign someone to take you to Madame Yu’s office. I’ll meet you there. And now go.”

Yoongi didn’t move.

“What’s going on here? Why were we invisible on that bridge until you raised your voice? How come I could see the guests all along even though none of them spoke a single word?”

“That invisibility spell only works with humans, Yoongi.”
Chapter Notes

Due to its length, I had to split the second chapter into 2 parts. Part 2 is written but not yet edited and translated. It's scheduled for November 11 or even earlier. Please don't worry, part 1 will feel like an individual chapter but obviously, there's going to be some sort of cliffhanger ;)

In this chapter, you'll meet PUMPKIN, my interpretation of Jimin for this story and a rather sassy soul xD. It also introduces my OC BLUE BIRD who, look-wise, is based on Mic Drop Yoongi. He originated from my Angst story "Butterflies in Autumn" as a tattoo artist with a message about life and survival but also known for his passion for kinky sex. If you want to experience that passion firsthand, I recommend my pwpt (porn with plot twist^^) OS "Twice as Blue" in which he also makes quite the appearance :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2: Names Part 1

Yoongi was sitting on the stone stairs leading down to the boiler room of the bathhouse. The amber of the last cigarette from Namjoon’s package was glowing between his fingers. He just stared down at the orange heat eating away at the paper, had taken only one or two drags so far. Instead, he had spent the last couple of minutes trying to recall the image of the first ever glance he had taken at the bathhouse. It had been standing on stilts back then. Giant wooden pillars reaching down into the
water, at least ten of them to brave wind and tide. But now – and he was still pondering whether he should go with “now” or “in reality” – it was built on a solid concrete plinth. Apparently, some of its floors even lay under the water surface. Yoongi knew he should hurry on, look for Kim Namjoon and Jung Hoseok and convince them of the urgency to leave this place right away but his feet just wouldn’t carry him anymore. He listened to the sound of small waves splashing against the building, hoping for it to calm his raging thoughts. There were logical explanations for all of this, weren’t there? Apparently, the amusement park hadn’t been abandoned. It had been purchased by someone who had remodeled it into a spa resort that obviously was a popular destination for cruises. The guests of those ships went ashore for some wellness treatment and exotic food while enjoying the magical atmosphere of an ancient Chinese setting. So far, so good. Apparently, the exotic visuals were the key element to the marketing strategy. A boy in make-up and with feathers in his hair. A disgustingly big species of frogs that had been trained to serve the guests – a brilliant gimmick that would sure as hell earn them some extra tips from giggling elderly ladies enjoying how the frogs rubbed their feet with a hot towel soaked in lemon water. The red paint… well… It was still possible that Crow had lied about its effect. Just to play a trick on Yoongi because why not? Maybe the guests had seen them all along but been minding their own business and only turned their attention on him when he had started screaming all of a sudden. The one and only thing to blame for this slightly surreal atmosphere surrounding the building was the LSD still circulating through Yoongi’s system. He was so angry at himself that he kept clenching his teeth and meanwhile had a pretty bad headache. He should have stopped Namjoon and Hoseok from going so over the top with the amount of tabs. Of course, they were full grown adults and responsible for their own actions. But at least when it came to Jung Hoseok, Yoongi knew that he had just taken that much to provoke him. He had wanted to hear a “Don’t do that”… He constantly had to be reassured that he meant something to other people. And that was why Yoongi had always avoided giving him this superfluous reassurance. It was stupid, wasn’t it? And unnecessary. It was why they had broken up after all, right? Because Hoseok had refused to believe that Yoongi loved him. You’re always so cold and distant, Yoongz. He had told him, goddamnit. Told him once, why would he need to tell him again? It wasn’t like you suddenly lost your love for someone, was it? In Yoongi’s world, an I love you lasted for a lifetime. That wouldn’t reinforce it… only make it weaker. And eventually the ears would get used to it and the importance of it being said would fade. But Hoseok had needed an I love you for every morning coffee he had taken into Yoongi’s studio. Needed one every time he left for work and one when he came back in the evening. He also left them everywhere. Under his text messages, scribbled notes that he wrote when Yoongi had fallen asleep in his office chair and missed Hoseok leaving for dance school or some event. They didn’t get along. Even outside of the I Love Yous. Hoseok was late summer evenings and Yoongi was midwinter nights. Hoseok was smiles and Yoongi was frowns. Hoseok was too careless and Yoongi was full of worries. Hoseok thought drugs were fun and the only way to get the most out of life. And Yoongi had been a drinker for too long not to mind the risk of any substance that made you addicted. He had given up on liquor 2 months ago when he and Hoseok had broken up. And ever since then, he was down to a thinned glass of whisky a day and a couple of bummed cigarettes from Namjoon. Yoongi had turned his back on his addiction. And he had turned his back on love.

Without taking another drag, he threw the butt of the unsmoked cigarette into the ocean and shoved the empty package back into the pocket of his jeans. He got up, stretched and let his head roll around a couple of times before he took a deep breath and hurried down the last couple of steps that still separated him from the little iron door.

* 

It was at least fucking 120 degrees down here. Yoongi had to stop and catch his breath for the heat felt like something solid shoving down his throat. He felt his cheeks flush and while he still pondered whether it would be inappropriate to take off his hoodie and run around in just his tank top he spotted
someone who surely wouldn’t mind.

If his hair color had earned him his name then he was Blue Bird. He was a little taller than Yoongi, about the height of Crow, around 5’8 maybe and his hair was dyed bright blue. It was even a little longer than Crow’s, slightly wavy and tied back with a bright red bandana to keep it from falling into his eyes. His arms were well toned, no wonder considering his job. He was standing with his back to Yoongi, shoveling coal into the fire of one of the three giant heating furnaces responsible for the ridiculous temperature. There was a literal mountain of coal stacked on one side of the cellar room. Blue Bird was dressed in nothing but a sweaty wife beater and a pair of denim overalls. One of the straps was dangling down from his shoulder, he hadn’t minded closing the buckle or maybe he did it for the freedom of movement. The heavy black boots he wore looked like they were equipped with steel caps. Could be for safety, could be for the looks as well. Everything he wore was covered in soot. His muscles flexed as he used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat off his forehead and Yoongi was now very ready to take off his shirt. He tried his hardest to suppress the smirk that came with the realization of how needy he apparently was after having been single and not really out hunting for dates lately. It didn’t exactly help that the young man’s arms were covered in tattoos – a fashion choice Yoongi found particularly sexy on others. He had loved the teeny tiny sun and moon tattoos under either of Hoseok’s ears that he had gotten on a vacation trip about two years ago. He had loved them always made sure to ridicule Hoseok for his shortsighted decision to just go with a design that didn’t have a deeper meaning. That the tattoos that would last for the rest of his life were the result of a literal crackpot idea. “Maybe I already knew I was going to meet you back then”, Hoseok had always replied. “We’re destined to be together. I’m the sun and you’re the moon.” And it had always made Yoongi smile and then roll his eyes to play down his emotional reaction. Anyways – he really did dig tattoos on guys.

Imitating Crow’s substantial way of clearing his throat, Yoongi finally tried to get the young man’s attention. When Blue Bird whirled around to see where the noise had been coming from, both he and Yoongi froze.

“Who are you and what are you doing down here?”, Bird forced out, putting the shovel down before his initial shock turned into a curious smile exceptionally quickly. Yoongi didn’t quite know anymore what he was doing down here except for admiring the young man’s unconventional beauty. He didn’t need to get any closer to see that he was a 10/10. Just like his arms, his chest was covered in tattoos and so were his neck and even his face. There was a small delicate rose running along his temple, framing his right eye. Judging by his facial features, his defined jawline, the high nose bridge and the particularly light skin tone, he appeared to be mixed-race. He had that kind of all-encompassing beauty that would make you remember that person’s face forevermore. In fact, Yoongi felt like he had seen the young man before. In a dream, maybe. He indicated a nervous bow.

“I’m really sorry in case I scared you. Sorry to disturb. My name’s Yoongi… I’m… looking for Blue Bird.”

“Well congrats, you found him”, the blue-haired man smirked. “Just call me Bird, though. What brings you here if I may ask?”

He leaned on his shovel, ran his tongue along his upper lip to catch some tiny droplets of sweat and Yoongi had to keep from sighing out loud.

“Crow sent me here”, he went all out and hoped to see a glimmer of recognition in the other’s eyes upon mentioning the name. He did get it. But it was more a glimmer of suspicion than of relief.

“Crow… I see. Well… to be honest… I don’t. Why in hell would Crow send you down here? That makes no sense.”
“Well, you see… According to Crow, two of my friends have been brought here by… by your people… to be treated for their blood poisoning. I don’t know if this has gotten through to you but… that’s what it is. I’m looking for them and it also looks like I will have to talk to the owner of this bathhouse in order to pay her back for the favor of taking care of them. Crow wanted to take me to her but… we were interrupted and then he sent me to you. He said you could appoint someone else of the staff to take me to… what was her name again?”

“Madame Yu”, Bird said gravely. The curiosity in his glance had vanished. His facial expression was rather serious now. “A blood poisoning you say? How did that happen?”

“To be honest… there were drugs involved.”

Bird nodded slowly. Unlike Crow who had pretended not to get what Yoongi was talking about, the word drugs had made Bird prick up his ears. Yet, he apparently preferred to not go into detail. He just nodded to himself and Yoongi watched as the little golden ball of a tongue ring appeared between his teeth as he started playing with it, lost in thought. Yoongi swallowed thickly.

“Well… so could you call someone to take me to this Madame Yu maybe?”

“I can… sure… but…”

“But?”

“It’s just… what else did Crow say? About paying them back for saving your friends?”

“Well, obviously we will have to make up for their expenses… medicine and time and all that. One of the major problems is that apparently my phone was stolen. Do you… do you think I could use yours and give my friends a call now?”

Bird gave him a once-over and then slowly shook his head.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have a phone.”

“Oh, okay… that’s fine. I mean… I can talk to them in person anyway soon.”

Bird took a deep breath.

“Sure… I guess you can.”

He looked at Yoongi for a couple of seconds before he wiped his cheeks with the back of his hands and leaned his shovel against the wall.

“You have some soot on your cheek now”, Yoongi mumbled with a stealthy little smile. He took a step towards Bird and raised his hand to wipe it off but the second he was close enough to see him 100% clearly he stopped mid-movement. There was a huge scar on Bird’s throat, a big slit that must have been stitched innumerable times to grow back together. It ran from next to his Adam’s apple all the way around the side of his neck to where it disappeared behind his dangling ear piercings. The scar was partly covered by a butterfly tattoo, an insect almost the size of Yoongi’s palm, spreading its wings to camouflage the damage that had been done to the young man’s skin. He must have had a tumor or something. What else could possibly leave such a deep cut? It literally looked as if somebody had slit his throat. Yoongi was about to ask when Bird seemed to notice his eyes on the scar and discreetly turned to the side to keep it from facing Yoongi. He wiped his own cheek and spread more soot across his face in the process. Yoongi pulled out a compassionate smile.

“You made it a lot worse”, he mumbled. “Now you even have some on your nose. And your clothes
are covered in soot as well… but I guess that’s unavoidable, hm?”

Bird looked down to inspect the bib of his overall. The amount of black stains made him roll his eyes and exhale between gritted teeth.

“The fuck are you doing? Get off me, will you?”, he snapped and Yoongi’s jaw dropped when all of a sudden the black soot stains seemed to come to life and stirred before they downright seemed to curl up and rolled down Bird’s clothes like little cotton balls only to leave them all shiny and clean. The one on his face had fallen off, too. Rolled down from his shoulder like a little fluffy animal. Now that had been some crazy shit acid, my dude. Had his brain really just come up with little soot animals when, in reality, the young man had just brushed off the black particles from his clothes? Memory loss aside – this was hilarious. And maybe he was a little late to the party but he was finally beginning to enjoy this trip. His eyes got caught on Bird’s facial tattoo again and then travelled over the piercings that he hadn’t noticed from a distance. He wore a septum ring and a philtrum stud that complemented each other perfectly. The jewelry was made of gold and emphasized the natural pout of his upper lip. For a very brief second, Yoongi gave in to the fantasy of having Bird push him up against one of these dirty hot stone walls, their bodies smeared with soot and sweat. Moans mixing with the crackle of the open fire. And Bird must have read his mind for he gave him a dirty wink. 

“Shit”, Yoongi thought.

“You’re wounded”, Bird suddenly whispered very softly. Yoongi bit his teeth shut when Bird’s hand reached for his face this time. He was sure that Bird just wanted to make him tilt his head a little to get a better look at the wound. The bigger was his surprise when he felt the young man’s thumb gently brush over his skin. Why would he touch it with his bare hands? Still pretty dirty hands while we are at it? Yoongi wouldn’t have minded them down his pants… but on a fresh wound? Bird traced the cut a couple of times with an unreasonable amount of pressure. Yoongi involuntarily cringed with pain. Bird bit his lips but he continued touching the wounded skin. A hot sensation started spreading into Yoongi’s temple. He wanted to ask him to stop but something about his touch felt so right. There was a slight tickle to it, like an electric tension. He found himself closing his eyes like a cat enjoying to be caressed behind its ears. Before Bird withdrew his hand, he ran the back of it along Yoongi’s cheek and Yoongi heard him exhale a smile.

“Don’t worry… it won’t take long to heal… it’s not that deep. Plus… soot actually has a disinfecting effect.”

He bashfully looked down at his hand, the only part of his body that was still pretty black.

The very same second, a creaking door disrupted the tension that had been smoldering in their eye contact.

“Who’s this?”, an extraordinarily soft, smooth and rather high voice asked. For a brief second, Yoongi had deemed the owner of the voice female until he turned around to the door that led to the inside of the bathhouse and found himself faced with legitimately the prettiest boy he had ever laid eyes on. How were there only demi-Gods working in this spa?

His hair was dyed a soft pastel pink, the first stripe of color on a lush spring morning’s sunrise and Yoongi was sure that it smelled like cotton candy. The boy’s face looked like it had been sculptured by an experienced artist who had just recently fallen in love for the first time in his life. The shape of his hooded eyes was expressive; the plush swell of his upper lip was shameless exaggeration. It resembled a flower lustfully embracing the first ray of sun after a June’s monsoon rainfalls. Petals still decorated with shimmering droplets but warm and silky where the golden light caressed them. The boy was dressed just like Crow: black harem pants with gold embroidery, a tight-fit black long-sleeved shirt and leather slippers, a big golden anklet, not equipped with bells though but still jingling
against some smaller ankle bracelets as he walked. Instead of feathers however, his hair was decorated with a hairband that had sparkly red devil horns attached to it. The color clashed with that of his hair and he wore the same loud combination of red and pink as eye shadow. His labret was pierced and he was wearing a rather big golden ball as jewelry below his plump lower lip. He was carrying a tray with a bento box, a cup and a bowl of rice.

“His name is Yoongi”, Bird explained. “He’s looking for his two friends. Apparently, they have been brought here with a blood poisoning. Do you know something about it?”

The pink-haired boy stopped and just like when Yoongi had explained the situation to Bird, a frown appeared on his angelic face.

“Yeah”, he finally said and sat the tray on a small collapsible table that stood in a corner and was already cluttered with empty dishes. There were two chairs. “I heard about them. They are well. Currently asleep. But when they wake up they should be… alright.”

“Where did they bring them?”, Bird asked and made over to the table to help the pink-haired boy unload the tray and collect the empty cups and plates.

“10th floor dormitory.”

“10th floor?”, Bird repeated in a questioning voice.

“10th floor”, the pink-haired boy confirmed with a flick of his eyebrow and the next moment, his lips were on Bird’s. For a few seconds, they seemed to forget about Yoongi altogether when they started kissing hungrily. It wasn’t exactly a sexual kiss… more hungry in the sense of not having seen each other for a long time. A little desperate even. As if they had to reassure that it was really the other they were facing. Only when Bird reached into the pink hair to hold the boy’s head in place, Yoongi noticed that he was also wearing one of those big golden rings. But unlike Crow and the pink-haired boy, he wore it as a bracelet around his left wrist.

“It’s not exactly wise to do that in front of other people”, Bird mumbled, panting a little, as he withdrew from the boy and threw an apologetic look at Yoongi.

“I couldn’t care less about it at this point. He’ll be on our side anyway. Crow made a mistake by sending him down here.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too…”

“So… you guys are dating?”, Yoongi asked, having no clue how he was supposed to react to the information conveyed in the last couple of sentences exchanged. In addition to that, he figured that he should try his best to be friendly with them. He expected a favor after all. And he urgently needed some of the explanations that Crow hadn’t been willing to give him.

“Pfff… dating. As if. As if that was possible in this shithole of a place.”

“In the realm of the possible… we are dating”, Bird confirmed. “But Pumpkin is right, that realm is not exactly extensive.”

“Your name’s Pumpkin?”, Yoongi asked, not even surprised anymore.

“Yep”, the boy with the cotton candy hair nodded, not looking at Yoongi. “At your service.”

“What’s with all these names if I may ask? Are fancy nicknames a part of working here? I asked
Crow for his real name but he wouldn’t tell me.”

Pumpkin snorted, arms akimbo.

“As if he would remember his real name. We do remember ours. My name’s Jimin and his name is Jayden. He’s half in case you didn’t notice. But do us a favor and don’t use these names. It would earn us a fair share of trouble. And we don’t want that. You don’t want that. And if your real name’s dear to you, better write it down somewhere. Names get lost quickly in this place.”

Listening to his words, the names the pink-haired boy had just dropped seemed to fade from Yoongi’s mind, evaporate like water sprinkled on a hot cooking plate. What were they called again? Ji---? Wait. The only thing that remained was a familiar feeling, as though he had heard their names before but it wore off way too quickly. He didn’t dare to ask again. There were other questions he needed to get out.

“What do you mean by this? And how would Crow not remember his real name?”

“I remember Crow’s real name”, Bird shrugged. “It’s Jeon Jungkook. But if you call him that, he most likely wouldn’t react. People tend to forget things that they are not frequently reminded of, don’t they?”

Jeon Jungkook, Yoongi repeated to himself, holding on to the name as if his life was depending on it.

“People forget shit all the time”, Pumpkin confirmed and brushed back his hair. It was very thick and fell back in layers.

“Anyway, will you take him upstairs to the old witch, Baby?”, Bird asked his boyfriend with an adorable, soft smile that made Yoongi cringe with jealousy.

“You sure you wanna go see that old dragon?”, Pumpkin asked. He might look like an angel but the little horns on his head surely were there for a reason. Yoongi had rarely ever met someone with an attitude this bitchy. But he could totally pull it off. He was sexy and he knew it.

“Well, technically I just want to check upon my friends and… pay that lady back, I guess.”

“Well, you could also still just make a run for it, you know? Who cares about friendship these days anyways? Take my humble advice to just shit on them and get out of here while you still can, boy. Your friends are screwed either way. But the very fact that you still know your name makes me positive that there’s a last light of hope for you.”

“What are you talking about? What do you mean they are screwed?!”, Yoongi asked, starting to feel angry again. Was it really necessary that everybody in this place spoke in riddles?

“I fear it’s too late for that, Pumpkin”, Bird sighed and then turned to Yoongi. “When you asked Crow for his name, he most likely also asked for yours, didn’t he?”

“Uhm, yeah?”, Yoongi replied slowly, sensing that there was something very serious to Bird’s words.

“Duh-dum. Game over”, Pumpkin shrugged carelessly.

“Did you really give it to him? First and last name?”

“Yeah…”
“Well…”, Bird mumbled more to himself than to Yoongi. “It wasn’t the smartest thing you could have done.”

“Could you explain that maybe?”, Yoongi asked, a little too teed off to hide it any longer.

“Nothing… you know… if you hadn’t given him your name, nobody could have charged you for the treatment of your friends, you know? That’s just what we are saying.”

He threw a reassuring glance at Pumpkin and Yoongi knew he was lying.

“Anyway… even if you hadn’t told him… I suppose they… would have found out one way… or another… like either way so…”

“I’m perfectly ready to pay your people back”, Yoongi tried to defend himself. Pumpkin leaned against the shoulder of his boyfriend and contemplated him with a thoughtful look that – just like Crow’s smile – Yoongi couldn’t quite interpret.

“They will ask you to start working here”, Pumpkin finally said in a matter-of-fact way.

“Yes, Crow already hinted at something like that but I’m afraid we won’t have the time to make up for your expenses with work. That’s why I want to meet your boss. To ask her whether she accepts payment in cash.”

“How will you pay her in cash when your purse has been stolen from you?”, Bird asked casually. Yoongi’s whole body straightened up with alarm before he had even finished the sentence.

“How would you know that my purse has been stolen?!”, he fired at Bird.

“Just assuming”, Bird returned with an unreadable glance. “You know… you said somebody took your phone…”

Yoongi grew a little smaller with the puff of air he exhaled. Again, there were two possibilities. 1. Bird was pretty good at combining facts. 2. He had taken his belongings or knew the person who had. Initially, Yoongi had deemed him more trustworthy and more straightforward than Crow. But doubts started to creep in.

“It’s up to you but I still recommend going back to where you came from while you still can”, Bird stated, his hand running up and down Pumpkin’s shoulder.

“I won’t go anywhere without my friends”, Yoongi shook his head persistently. It might have been the first time ever in his life that a sentence like this had left his lips. And maybe it would also be the last time. He thought of Hoseok’s horse-like smile and his flashy teeth. And something in his stomach dug its claws into his flesh.

“Well then… follow me”, Pumpkin sighed.

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Pumpkin did smell like cotton candy indeed. Walking behind him on the narrow stairwell, Yoongi was engulfed by a sweet heavy scent that was made up of so many different nuances that – mixed together like that – simply smelled pink. A big deal of it was just vanilla with a little coconut and shea butter maybe… and then there was a hint of wild roses, hibiscus and some type of red berries. There was no way this was just one perfume. It was a multitude of different cosmetic products that he obviously used on a daily basis. Body lotions, hand cremes, facial mists, hair products and fragrant oils. It might be pleasant from afar but having to inhale it while making his way up a flight of
stairs that easily had about 500 steps made Yoongi gulp for air with an open mouth.

“Smoking is bad for your health”, Pumpkin remarked without turning around. “You sound like a steam loco dragging yourself up these stairs. I really hope for your boyfriend that your stamina is a little better in bed.”

Yoongi stopped.

“How do you know I’m a smoker? And what makes you think I have a boyfriend?”

“You stink. You smoked a cigarette only minutes ago. And I thought one of the two guys with the blood poisoning is your boyfriend. The redhead.”

“Why would he be my boyfriend?”, Yoongi forced out, anger and irritation taking the last of his breath away.

“I sense such things”, Pumpkin shrugged. He had climbed a couple of more stairs but now he decided to emphasize his words with a dramatic glance over his shoulder.

“That’s crazy to claim such a thing! How could you possibly sense anything? You haven’t even seen us interact. In fact, he was as good as dead when you saw him, wasn’t he?”

“So he’s your ex… interesting”, Pumpkin shrugged and made on, the golden rings and chains around his ankle jingling in rhythm with the empty dishes on the tray he was carrying.

Yoongi had to start running to keep up with him.

“How the fuck would you know this?”

“I put two and two together. That’s how you get along here. Think ahead of people. How do you think I survived until now? I’ve been here for 3 years already!”

“How… how old are you?”

“23 and you?”

“25.”

“I thought so. You look old.”

“Well, thanks”, Yoongi snapped, pretty sensitive when it came to that topic. But not half as sensitive as when someone pointed out that he had a couple of white hairs already and would not accept his tries to insist that it was just a pigment disorder.

“I’m just stating facts. And I don’t mean your face looks old… well, obviously your skin ain’t that great cause you smoke but… what I actually meant was your character. Your soul looks old. You know that when you’re grumpy and self-centered all the time it ages faster, don’t you?”

Yoongi passed on giving a snappy retort in favor of going into detail about what Pumpkin had said earlier. He needed to collect as much information about this place as possible before meeting its owner.

“So… you say you’ve been here for three years already?”, he started, gulping in some air before taking the next step. His Doc Martens felt like they were filled with lead. He could barely lift them high enough to meet the steps, time and again he stumbled a little. “How did you… end up here? I mean… how did you get the job what… did you do for a living before you started working here?”
“What I did before I started working here? I got things into a complete mess, that’s what I did. I
fucked up. I think that’s what brings you to this place… you fuck up and then you end up here. Like
Alice, you know? She was supposed to read a book… educate herself. Listen to her sister. Learn all
the pretty poems by heart. But she followed the white rabbit instead, fell into the rabbit hole and then
it was too late anyway. How did you end up here, huh? Don’t you think you screwed up in one way
or another?”

I screwed up. I should have kept them from overdosing. I should have stayed sober to watch over
them when they were tripping. I shouldn’t have compromised my principles, should not have taken
the LSD. I should have told him I loved him just one more time at that café when he said that he
misses me… misses us. I bought him his vanilla latte and a muffin. And I thought it would do. But it
didn’t do. I screwed up.

“Well… I guess so…”, Yoongi mumbled and couldn’t suppress a muffled sound of surprise when he
bumped into Pumpkin, lost in thought so deeply that he hadn’t noticed they had finally made it to the
top of the stairs. The dishes clinked together and Pumpkin barely managed to keep his balance with
the loaded tray.

“Why don’t you wear your glasses?”, he asked sharply, making no effort to hide how unnerved the
incident had him.

“What tells you I need glasses? I just wasn’t paying attention.”

“I noticed how you were squinting at me when I entered the room. You’re shortsighted. On both
eyes. You’re pretty blind in fact. I’d say like a -3.5 at least.”

“What are you? A fucking optician?”

“I’m shortsighted, too. But I wear contacts. That’s one of the perks of working here. They want us to
look good. So there’s an endless free supply of everything beauty-related. We’re not allowed to wear
glasses so they provide us with pretty cool color contacts. See… mine are purple.”

He ripped open his eyes for Yoongi to see pretty much nothing in the dim light of the hallway. The
one thing he actually noticed while looking at Pumpkin’s eyes was the fact that the little red heart on
the highest point of his cheek was either a very good fake or indeed a real tattoo. Everybody wore
golden rings… they all had their faces tattooed.

“Why is it so important to look good?”

Actually, Yoongi hated asking questions. Even when something interested him, he mostly just
waited for the person to continue talking and if they didn’t then well… that was also fine. But he
figured that Pumpkin was a honeycomb full of information that he had to suck dry in time. Even
though he was sickeningly straightforward – he had a lot in common with Hoseok actually only that
he was shameless where Hoseok was just curious – he seemed to Yoongi as someone he could get
along with if compelled to do so. He was indiscreet. But as far Yoongi could tell he was honest.
Maybe not to him. But to himself. And Yoongi liked that.

“To please the guests”, Pumpkin shrugged and while he usually said everything with a pinch of sass,
that sentence had come out surprisingly sober.

“You’ll have to excuse me while I take care of this”, he added and lifted the tray a little to indicate
what he was talking about. Their earlier topic was done with. Walking a little slower now, Pumpkin
led Yoongi around a corner and suddenly they were exposed to the soundscape of a busy kitchen.
Yoongi’s eyes got caught on a door standing slightly ajar and a delicious smell of food that was even
strong enough to subdue Pumpkin’s heavy scent entered his nose. He paused and watched the pink-haired boy approach the door and glance over his shoulders a couple of times before he softly knocked in what seemed to be a secret code. There were two short knocks framed by two long ones. Once again he threw a glance down the corridor as if to reassure himself that there was really no one else around. A small pair of female hands reached through the door crack, opened it just wide enough for the tray to fit through it.

“Thank you, Chi”, Yoongi heard Pumpkin mumble before he backed away from the door and – for the third time – looked around himself rather nervously. He then waved at Yoongi to follow him and left his action of returning the tray uncommented. In fact, he didn’t speak at all until they had reached some kind of anteroom that separated the bathhouse from the kitchen and the cellar. Yoongi frowned when he noticed a couple of tray return trolleys waiting right next to the curtain that obviously led into the inside of the bathhouse. Pumpkin could have dropped Bird’s tray off right there, couldn’t he?

“Take off your boots!”, the pink-haired boy instructed him, taking his mind off the matter. He followed his own command and stepped out of his leather slippers and onto the first one of the three wooden steps that separated the dark brown mahogany floorboards of the bathhouse from the dusty stone floor of the basement. Now that his feet were naked, Yoongi noticed the dark polish on his toenails. He guessed the nuance to be a dark purple but he couldn’t exactly tell because, at this point, the only source of light was the shimmer falling through the fabric of the red curtain that veiled what he found himself rather eager to see. Thinking back, he wasn’t even able to tell what had been lighting their way up the cellar stairs. Light bulbs? Candles?

“Did you hear me?”, Pumpkin probed, taking the other two steps, about to push the curtain aside. “Shoes off, I said.”

Yoongi looked down at his Doc Martens. There was a whole row of black slippers aligned in front of the wooden step, waiting for those who had business to do in the cellar. Pumpkin had just kicked his into a corner, maybe he was the only one frequently descending to Bird’s realm. There was no other pair of regular street fashion shoes. No boots no sneakers. Just those black leather slippers with pointy tips in an array of different sizes.

“Do I really have to?”, Yoongi asked, not exactly willing to leave his Docs unattended. Not only because they had been pretty expensive. He didn’t feel like losing more of his belongings in this fucking theme park. Robbing him was one thing, stripping him off the clothes he wore was definitely another.

“This is a bathhouse, for Christ’s sake. How can you even think of entering it with those dirty boots? They are Docs, right? I used to wear them, too… in my former life. I had the dark red ones… but let’s be honest, they are not even comfy… way too heavy. Either way… the guests are allowed to wear shoes. We aren’t. Most of the floors are paved with very expensive wood, some even with Tatami mats, some of the bathrooms with marble tiles. We want them to stay clean. Most guests even comply and wear the slippers we offer them. Some don’t but that’s a fashion choice we have to accept. Now would you be so kind as to take off those boots, my time is limited.”

Reluctantly, Yoongi sat down on the topmost step and started untying his shoelaces. He didn’t want to take off those boots. They made him feel safe. Gave him the feeling of having both feet on the ground. He liked their weight for the comfort it provided. And he didn’t want to lose another part of himself. After taking off his socks he rolled them into a bundle, shoved them into one of the boots and awkwardly moved his toes to get rid of the black fuzz they had left between them.

“Chill. You’ll soon be asked to wash them anyway.”

The dark wood felt smooth and comfortable under the soles of his feet. He walked up to Pumpkin...
who suddenly raised his hand to prevent him from touching the curtain first.

“Listen up now, Yoongi. Getting you up to the topmost floor and into Madame Yu’s office won’t exactly be an easy undertaking. There are some rules you’ll have to follow or you’ll get yourself into serious trouble. Rule number one. Stay close to me at all times. And by close, I mean close. Hold on to my shirt or my belt and never let go. Rule number two… don’t.”

“Speak?”

“How come you know?”

“Crow told me not to speak when we crossed that bridge. I did scream, though. It got me in trouble.”

“Well… I see. Whatever Crow did to get you out of that trouble, be aware that I can’t be bothered to do it for you. Also… it will be a lot harder to protect you in here than it was outside.”

“Protect? What do you mean protect? Crow said I wasn’t supposed to speak because the guests don’t like to see strangers around.”

“So… that’s what he said?”, Pumpkin raised his eyebrows and sighed heavily. “It’s not my job to explain the universe to you. It’s not even my job to take you to Madame Yu but I’m carrying out this unpleasant task cause my boyfriend asked me to. And because I think it’s better if I do it than when anybody else does. Just follow the rules and you’ll be fine.”

With a nod, he indicated that Yoongi was supposed to grab his belt that held a very similar leather pouch to Crow’s. But it was decorated with dangly, jewelry-like straps, gold of course. Yoongi reached for them with even greater reluctance.

“What’s with the red paint? How does it work?”, he asked, forcing Pumpkin to make eye-contact.

“You’ll find out soon enough… and learn to use it to your advantage.”

*

The whole elevator smelled pink. Pumpkin’s numbingly sweet body odor was downright paralyzing Yoongi’s senses. It didn’t help that he wasn’t allowed to move away from him. They stood there, hunched together in a corner of the tiny room, the backside of it, as the other three walls were made of glass. If the train station had been a church, the bathhouse was a monumental cathedral on the inside. The center of the building was designed like a giant atrium, almost like the staircases in shopping malls with all stories lined by a generous balcony facing the rails on which a total of three elevators were operated. Even though Yoongi remembered the roof of the bathhouse to be hexagonal and the image of the little golden creature protecting the very tip of it, maybe serving as a lightning arrester, the first thing he had to accept upon entering the bathhouse was that it had a glass roof through which you could see a tiny black hole that was the night sky. Not that the skylight actually was tiny. It was just so high up there that Yoongi’s latest calculation of 10 floors once again proved erroneous. The elevator said there were 13. But Yoongi could swear that they had gone up more than 25 already. Starting to feel dizzy and uncomfortable, he turned to face Pumpkin instead, the red velvet carpet felt even more pleasant than the wooden floorboards against his feet. In the yellow light of the elevator, he could validate one thing for sure. The heart on the apple of the boy’s cheek was an actual tattoo.

“When did you get this?”, he asked, careful not to breathe in too deeply. When Pumpkin moved his head and a new whiff of coconut and hibiscus engulfed him, he couldn’t help but cough a little.

“What?”, the boy asked. Ever since he had returned that tray to the kitchen, the nervous and
somewhat alarmed attitude hadn’t left him again. Whereas he had moved as though he owned that place down in the boiler room in the presence of his boyfriend, he now seemed hyper-aware of his surroundings. But whatever he was expecting to come at him, couldn’t do so in the four walls of an elevator, could it?

“The face tattoo…”, Yoongi replied casually.

“Oh. That’s what you mean. After I started working here.”

“I see… is it mandatory to get a face tattoo if you work here? I noticed it on all of you guys. Bird has that rose and Crow… he has this…”

“Crow’s face tattoo is fucking ugly”, Pumpkin snorted.

“So is it a real tattoo?”, Yoongi asked, not bothering to hide his surprise.

“It is. His is definitely one of the worst ones. I mean it covers his entire face… not that it’s a pretty face, though…”

“So is it mandatory to have or get one if you start working here?”

“Not mandatory for the work I figure… they give it to you for other reasons.”

“Huh? Could you elaborate?”

“Told you I’m not here to explain the universe to you”, Pumpkin turned him down.

“It… looks cool on you, though”, Yoongi added apologetically. “I like your style… it’s edgy.”

Pumpkin laughed emotionlessly.

“Not that I had chosen it for myself…”

He looked around the elevator and the dark red sequins on his devil horns sparkled in the yellowish tint of the overhead light.

“You didn’t get to choose the design?”, Yoongi asked, bewildered.

“I was able to choose the design. I wasn’t able to choose whether or not I get a tattoo.”

“What about your labret piercing then?”

“Same with that one. I was able to choose where I wanted it. Not whether or not I get a piercing.”

“Is that some kind of dress code?”, Yoongi asked, unable to shut himself up.

Pumpkin met his eyes and sighed heavily. Reluctantly. And were it the purple contacts or was there a hint of pity in his rather distant eyes.

“It’s a punishment”, he eventually said.

“For what?”, Yoongi burst out but Pumpkin just rolled his eyes and then glued them to the floor indicator.

“Are you open for threesomes?”, he suddenly asked.

“Excuse me?”, Yoongi wasn’t even sure whether he had heard him correctly.
"I think you’re kinda hot", Pumpkin shrugged in the most uncommitted way this sentence had ever been said. “And I noticed the way you looked at my boyfriend. Just so you know… you don’t have a chance with him cause he actually really loves me. But I could tell he thinks you’re cute. So in case you are up for some casual sex… let us know. You come off pretty needy… Obviously, you didn’t have sex for quite some time because you’re still not over your red-haired ex.”

Yoongi was speechless. He didn’t know whether he should get really angry or start laughing out loud. He ended up not reacting at all. For, after all, Pumpkin was right with everything he had just said.

“Well… thank you but no thank you. Regardless of whether I would be up to that or not, I’m sure the chance won’t even present itself. My friends and I’ll be gone as soon as I’ve paid my dues.”

Pumpkin snorted once more.

“Well… if you change your mind or… someone else changes it for you… you can always come back to my offer. I can assure you that Bird would know exactly how to help you out.”

“What makes you think I’m a bottom, anyway?”, Yoongi raised both eyebrows and underlined his question with a sharp sigh through his nose.

“You’re way too snappy in everyday life not to be a little obedient slut in bed”, Pumpkin informed him, completely unmoved by the offense he pretended to take.

“You’re way too snappy in everyday life not to be a little obedient slut in bed”, Pumpkin informed him, completely unmoved by the offense he pretended to take.

“And even if I was one… what if I like your boyfriend but you’re absolutely not my type?”

“You’ll have to arrange yourself with me if you want him”, the answer came without a second of hesitation.

“Then I’ll pass on him… thanks. Both of you aren’t exactly my type.”

“Oh. Who is then? Crow, huh?”

“Why would he be my type?”

“When I said his face tattoo was ugly you frowned.”

“I just don’t think it’s particularly ugly. Why are we even discussing this?”

“You’re right it’s none of my business. But if I were you, I wouldn’t get involved with him. Neither on a friendly nor on a sexual level.”

“Well, thanks for your unselfish advice but I’ll stick with my earlier statement… It won’t even come to any of this. I don’t plan on staying here longer than I have to.”

“You gave Crow your full name. That means you’ll have to stay for quite a while. So might as well start thinking about who to trust within the realms of this establishment. Who’s a safe fuck and who’s not.”

“Pumpkin”, Yoongi pulled at the straps on the younger boy’s belt to emphasize the fact that he was done with the bickering at this point. “Explain what you mean by this. What are you hinting at? Please. I need to know what’s going on here. If you want me to trust you… then tell me.”

“Who said I want you to trust me?”

The pink-haired boy bit the inside of his cheek and rolled his purple pupils around a couple of times.
Yoongi could tell that he actually didn’t dislike him half as much as he pretended to. And he could tell that he was on the verge of spilling at least a little bit of that tea. But that was when the elevator came to a halt and the doors opened. In one fluent movement, Pumpkin stepped in front of Yoongi, shoving him further into the corner of the elevator and bowed deeply to greet the guest who stepped in. Yoongi held his breath upon the sight of the red Oni mask covering the face of the stranger. He was wearing a long cloak that reminded Yoongi of the Harry Potter movies.

“Good evening”, Pumpkin mumbled to his own feet, using the same formal language Crow had chosen in front of the guests. He straightened up slowly as if any movement that was just the slightest bit too rushed would have upset the guest. Yoongi retreated into his Thrasher hoodie once again. It felt like the guest had carried in the chilly wind blowing on the bridge outside. And then, as if said wind would rustle through some already dead autumn leaves, the person raised their voice. The sound Yoongi had heard on the bridge was indeed a way of communication. A whisper dry as parchment, sharp like paper cuts.

“I’m deeply sorry”, Pumpkin replied to the words that Yoongi didn’t even get, couldn’t even pin down as a certain language. While the pink-haired boy spoke, he reached behind his back and his fingers closed around Yoongi’s still holding on to the accessories on his belt. Their fingers locked and Pumpkin pressed his palm as if to crush his bones. “I’m already booked for that slot”, he added and Yoongi felt his back press against his chest. The sweet rosy scent was about to suffocate him but that wasn’t the only reason he didn’t dare to breathe. He figured the guest hadn’t seen him yet. For whatever inexplicable reason. But he would stick to Pumpkin’s order and not say a word. His hand was starting to sweat and so was Pumpkin’s. At this point, it wasn’t clear who of them pressed harder. Again, the guest’s whispering voice rose like a midwinter breeze that stroked over a body frozen to death.

“Thank you so much for that compliment, Sir. I feel deeply honored. And I would love to make time for you right now. But… you see… I’m assigned with a different task and oh-”

The wind voice obviously interrupted him, still Yoongi wasn’t able to make out words from the inhuman sounds.

“I absolutely don’t mean to offended you, Sir. Absolutely not. I ask for your understanding that we are currently short of staff capable of fulfilling that special request. We’re still recruiting, you know? If you wouldn’t mind waiting until the 10 PM slot, then I’d be delighted to be at your service.”

A short whiff of air. And Yoongi didn’t need to understand it to know that he had accepted Pumpkin’s offer. The boy’s rather short and stubby fingers dug into Yoongi’s palm when he, once again, bowed so deeply that his butt bumped against Yoongi’s thigh. For a second, the tension that had risen with the guest’s entry seemed to die down but then the wind started blowing once again. With more force. Sharp and cold. How was that a voice? And how did Pumpkin speak that language?

“Oh no Sir, you are definitely mistaken. There is no one around except for the two of us.”

Yoongi’s stomach dropped when the elevator suddenly came to a halt. The doors opened with a chime and Pumpkin stepped on Yoongi’s feet when he tried to maneuver him past the guest and at the same time tried to keep up the impression that he was just holding on to his own hand behind his back.

“Please enjoy yourself until we meet again at 10 PM”, Pumpkin forced out shoving Yoongi backward with his whole body. “Please have a drink or two at the bar.” Yoongi almost gasped with shock as Pumpkin abruptly let go of his hand to reach into the leather pouch on his belt. Lacking an alternative, he grabbed the fabric of his shirt instead, making sure not to obviously crumble it, finding
himself ready to believe in the apparent fact that he was invisible to the customer’s eye. Pumpkin handed a little coupon to the man with the Oni mask. A pale hand poked through the black layers of fabric and accepted it.

“With this card, all drinks are on the house tonight. It’s the least I can do to make up for your inconvenience. I’ll be awaiting you in the private room on the 6th floor at 10 PM.”

The doors of the elevator closed before the guest had the chance to raise his wind-like voice again. Both Pumpkin and Yoongi let out a shaky breath of air but Pumpkin made sure to throw a glance in every direction before turning to Yoongi, extending his hand to him again.

“Take it. It’s safer that way.”

“What the fuck did he want from you? What is that language? Where did you learn it? Why do I have to hold your hand?”

“He asked for an appointment. And it’s a matter of being willing to understand them. They prefer not to talk aloud but whisper. You’ll get used to it.”

“It sounds motherfucking scary.”

“I actually prefer when they whisper. There are some who don’t talk at all. They are the really scary ones.”

“What are these people?”, Yoongi asked, a pressuring urgency in his voice. For Crow had indicated that they weren’t human at all.

“Even if I was willing to tell you… even if I had the words to… you wouldn’t believe me either way. Take my hand now, Min Yoongi. It’s too late already, I can’t save you. But I can spare you one thing or another.”

Yoongi accepted and their fingers locked once again and Pumpkin’s purple eyes held on to Yoongi’s for an intense second. And this time Yoongi was sure it was pity.

“What kind of service did he ask from you?”, Yoongi ventured. “Is this … This isn’t a regular bathhouse is it?”

And the thought gained shape as he spoke.

“Hot water… In most parts of Asia brothels used to be disguised as hot springs and spas, am I right? Some still are. So this is… considering the fact that everybody is masked and… This is a brothel, right?”

“It’s not a brothel”, Pumpkin forced a bitter smile. “This place surely ain’t a brothel.”

“What else would it be then?”

“Hell.”

Chapter End Notes

Please be so kind as to subscribe, leave kudos or even a comment if you liked what you
read and want to fuel a girl's motivation ;) I'm not yet sure whether I'm going to keep translating this story or just continue it in my native language (German) because publishing it in both languages is just awfully time consuming. So if you care for how this story unfolds, please let me know^^
Names Part 2

Chapter Notes

Here's the second part of chapter 2 "Names". You'll meet Taehyung and Madame Yu in this one and encounter Crow for the second time... I hope that slowly but surely the hints dropped start to make sense and help you build theories. If so, please voice them. This story is definitely intended to encourage some guesswork and speculation...^^

Do you trust Pumpkin? Do you trust Crow? Is Yoongi going to escape? What's with the anklets?

Chapter 3: Names Part 2

Up close, the skylight was about the size of a helicopter landing site. As if they were so high up that they had actually gotten significantly closer to the sky, the stars appeared huge. Abnormally huge. They had always been distant little dots, like glitter on a silk shawl. Out of reach. Something that Yoongi had never felt a connection to. How was a night sky romantic? Hoseok had taken him out of Seoul once to watch the stars from a little village where no orange city lights blurred the view. And apparently, it had meant something to him. He had taken him there for their 100 days anniversary. His eyes had been sparkling just like the ocean of stars above them... And this was where Yoongi’s gaze had gotten lost eventually. In his eyes. Not in the distant night sky.

But through the skylight of the bathhouse, they almost looked like little suns, appearing to have way more rays than they were usually depicted with. And they gave Yoongi a weird feeling of nostalgia. Their light that seemed to be radiating, flickering almost, made him miss Jung Hoseok. But maybe it was just his bad eyesight, combined with a tired mind and a fading LSD high. Yoongi kept his eyes glued to the glass ceiling, letting himself be dragged along by Pumpkin who was leading the way, their fingers still entwined. He was too afraid to risk a glance over the balustrade, too afraid of the height. Pumpkin had not been willing to elaborate on what hell meant in this context. But Yoongi also did not really need an in-depth explanation to adjust his plans to the prevalent situation. He would talk to this ominous Madame Yu now and see whether there was a chance of paying her back on the spot and settling things peacefully, then he would retrieve Namjoon and Hoseok and - in a very brief sentence he was currently piecing together in the notebook of his mind - convey the information that – chances were – they had gotten themselves into an establishment involved in human trafficking if not worse. Like a group of angry demonstrators throwing themselves against police shields, his thoughts were raging behind the wall that he had built within seconds to keep his sanity in these crucial minutes. Among them a voice that claimed that maybe the food had been poised and that – should he even find them alive – Namjoon and Hoseok would be missing a kidney or two. He couldn’t let himself slip and give in to a horror scenario like this. Not just yet. From the best to the worst-case scenario, the two depended on him, needed his help. And he couldn’t let them down by allowing a panic attack to get the best of him right now. Maybe he was making the imminent danger up. Maybe they were fast asleep in a comfy dormitory, medicated and happy to greet him when he woke them up.

“We made it”, Pumpkin said and let go of his hand, pulling Yoongi out of his trance.

The wooden door in front of them was intimidating to say the least. Both Pumpkin and Yoongi were
neither tall nor exactly short in height but in front of that gate-like entrance, Yoongi felt like a dwarf. It marked the dead end of a corridor lined by a mahogany wainscoting in an even darker shade than the floorboards that were covered by an endless oriental carpet. It felt like they had descended deeper and deeper into the burrow of some animal. Dusty chandeliers illuminated the corridor. The steps of their naked feet were muffled on the worn fabric. The hallway smelled of time.

“Will you excuse me? I won’t go in with you. I don't want to get myself into unnecessary trouble for taking you here. If someone asks, Crow explained the way to you. I told you to get the hell out of here while you still can. Don’t make me responsible for anything that happens in there… or in the future.”

He finished the sentence with a sassy move of his head, shaking some pastel pink strands out of his eye. Yoongi wanted to ask him to stay but instead, he just went with the brief hint of a smile.

“Thank you… Pumpkin. Sincerely thank you.”

“You’d be pretty stupid to thank me for doing you this kind of disservice. Well then… good luck. We’ll most likely meet again soon… anyway… good luck.”

Having said that, he turned on his heel and Yoongi listened to the sound of his jingling anklets disappearing somewhere down the hallway before he raised his hand to knock on the door that reminded him a little of the one that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere in the station hall. On a sudden impulse, he lowered his hand again and rolled up the sleeve of his hoodie to check his arm for the claw marks Hoseok’s fingernails had left when he had tripped and held on to him for support. He found them right above his elbow. It was for him and Namjoon that he gathered all of his courage and eventually knocked with focused determination.

No one answered from inside but the second his knuckles made contact with the wood, the door swung open a few inches. The creak was subtle, almost inviting.

“Hello?”, Yoongi asked. If there was someone in there then it probably had not even been loud enough for them to hear. Despite his fear of what might await him, his legs almost moved on their own behalf as he slid through the crack, not really daring to push the door open any further and make his entrance an official one.

He found himself in a dimly lit room. The only actual source of light was a Tiffany lamp on an antique wooden desk. The colored glass shards of its shade depicted pink blossoms that looked a little like roses only softer and plusher. They gave the light a reddish tint. The rest of the room was illuminated by candles and it took Yoongi’s eyes a little to get used to the semidarkness. The office was empty. And it wasn’t exactly big. There was the desk on one side, a shelf with surprising few document files next to it… Either the business was fairly new or they didn’t bother archiving their papers. In one corner of the room, there was a little tea table with four wooden chairs grouped around it. The windows were covered by heavy, completely opaque velvet drapes that looked like they were designed to not only keep out the sun but rather the whole world. And speaking of heavy. Despite being an occasional smoker, Yoongi felt a stinging sensation in his lungs when he tried to get some oxygen out of the incense smoke that replaced the air to breathe in this room. His glance darted around only to find little incense burners everywhere. On the desk, the table, the shelf and the ornate wooden drawer right next to the door. As if it hadn’t made it through the smoke until now, all of a sudden Yoongi realized that there was music playing. Music really seemed to be coming and going in this place. Like an ex-lover that still stops by when they have no better plans. And that melody was an ex-lover indeed. Yoongi would recognize it even if two single notes were all that he was given. It was Yiruma’s River Flows in You. Arguably one of the most well-known neo-classic pieces in the world that everyone knew. Even Jung Hoseok. He had made Yoongi play it over again
on the lousy little desk keyboard that he used in his recording studio. Only because he had also
played it on a grand piano in a shopping mall on their very first date when they had come to watch
the Christmas illuminations and shop for warm clothes. The day Yoongi had bought his Thrasher
hoodie.

There was no one playing an actual piano. The music was definitely coming from an old-fashioned
record player. Looking for it, Yoongi’s eyes got caught on another velvet curtain, covering the
passageway that separated the office from the neighboring room. The record player had to be in
there.

“Hello?”, Yoongi called again, his voice pressed by the smoke filling his lungs. Under these
circumstances, a drag from a cigarette would have felt like fresh air. The curtains, the carpet, the
antique dark wood and the incense smoke gave the room the acoustics of a walk-in closet stuffed
with winter coats. It was hot and stuffy as if it hadn’t been aired out for decades. Not really sure what
to do, Yoongi slowly took a few steps towards the desk, rubbing his palms together while peering at
the documents scattered across it. Only then he noticed the absence of any kind of technical device.
There was no computer, no laptop, not even a calculator. But a silver fountain pen and a pretty little
crystal flask filled with black ink.

The moment the hands closed over his eyes from behind, Yoongi jumped so hard that the scream got
stuck somewhere halfway up his throat. He stumbled and felt a body behind him, a voice he didn’t
recognize laughed so close to his ear that he could sense the shaky breath on his neck. Automatically,
his hands reached up and grabbed those pressing down on his face, he struggled to free himself while
the boy – it clearly was the voice of a teenage boy – giggled with amusement. The moment he finally
let go of him, Yoongi whirled around and found himself face to face with a prince. And that
impression was not only based on the tiara decorated with purple gemstones he wore in his silvery
messy curls. The upper body of the young man was naked and yet it wasn’t. He was not wearing a
shirt but there was a multitude of thick golden necklaces covering his chest, the longest of which
almost reached down to his belly button. There was a ridiculous amount of golden bracelets jingling
around his delicate wrists, on the left side they almost reached up to his elbow. On the right side, he
wore a bangle around his upper arm. His harem pants were purple and way more ornate than the
black ones worn by Crow and Pumpkin. They were tied around his waist with an unnecessary lot of
golden bands that had tassels at the ends. He also wasn’t wearing shoes and there were more golden
rings around both of his ankles. He looked like a walking jewelry box. Yoongi’s eyes scanned his
body one more time but he couldn’t spot any tattoos or piercings, not even make-up. The only
irregularity was a rather big and yet fascinatingly pretty mole on the apple of his left cheek that
looked like a beauty mark too well placed to be a mood of nature. The boy himself was too pretty to
be real. He was still laughing playfully not minding at all that Yoongi was panting with shock and
grabbing the left side of his chest to calm down his heart.

“You’re finally here!”, the boy stated, his voice already rather deep for his age. There was no way he
was older than 16 or 17.

“You scared the living daylights out of me, boy”, Yoongi grunted even though he figured that it
might not be exactly wise to scold someone casually hanging out in the office of the renowned
Madame Yu and even more casually sporting a crown.

“I was there all along. You just failed to look close enough. Your eyes aren’t that good, are they?
And your reaction is slow… It’s fun to play hide and seek with you. But let’s play something else
now.”

“Hold on!”, Yoongi burst out. “Was that you on the carrousel behind me?”
“Maybe?”, the boy grinned and Yoongi was somewhere between surprise and shock to see a suggestive grin take over his petite lips. He let his eyes travel up and down Yoongi’s body and they casually took a rest on his crotch every now and then.

“I’m Taehyung”, the boy whispered and his eyes flung open like a feathered hand-held fan emphasizing the highlight move of a burlesque dance performance.

Yoongi just indicated a brief nod. Pumpkin’s and Bird’s reaction had taught him to be careful with giving people his name. And apparently, the boy didn’t expect him to introduce himself. Maybe he already knew. Had picked up his name while following them around the theme park unnoticed. For how long had he been around?

“I’m Madame Yu’s son”, he added.

Jackpot, Yoongi thought.

“Nice to meet you, Taehyung”, he mumbled in the most humble way his raging mind had to offer and watched as his back decided that a little bow would be appropriate. A part of him was still very ready to slap that brat for jumping at him from behind. Another part started questioning whether it was legal that the younger checked him out as though he was picking something from a shop window… in the redlight district.

“Now that you finally made it, let’s go play!”

Next thing Yoongi knew was the boy’s slim and notably long fingers closing around his wrist, dragging him towards the dark purple curtain.

The room behind it seemed to be his bedroom. But it more resembled a setting from Arabian Nights. There was a canopy bed draped with the same heavy velvet curtains but actually, the whole chamber invited to lie down and sleep anywhere. There were sofas and chaises-longues cluttered with cushions and blankets, all of them in an oriental color range that went from a light orange to said dark purple. There was a vanity table, the mirror of which was lined with light bulbs and books lay scattered all over the furniture and floor. The record player was standing on a low sideboard, a pretty huge record collection piled up next to it.

“So… you like classic?”, Yoongi asked and used the time the boy took to contemplate his answer to free his arm from his grip. He was still working on how to tell him that he had no time to play. Would it work to just ask him whether he could call his mother?

“What do you mean…?”

“Oh… I just meant whether classic is your favorite genre of music”, Yoongi replied a little confused as to why he did not get his question.

“Genres? Music is music, isn’t it? That’s what music sounds like. And I like music.”

Yoongi frowned.

“Mind if I take a look at your record collection?”

“Sure. Go ahead. I also like it when people look at my stuff.”

He definitely was neither slow-minded nor uneducated. But there was something otherworldly to this boy. The way he chose to express himself, the way his brain seemed to work. Yoongi kneeled down next to the low sideboard and browsed through the records. There was the empty sleeve of Yiruma’s
Yoongi thought of the rave. His plans to drink the night away on a crowded dance floor seemed like a distant memory, part of another life. Less than an hour ago, he had still been looking for the main stage, confident to find it around the next corner. Sometimes it just happened, didn’t it? You made plans but reality made different plans for you. You step on a train with a certain destination in mind but then life takes over, sets the course and you end up someplace else. Sometimes you plan on “forever” with a person. But then reality’s like: No, that’s not where we’re going.

Taehyung cleared his throat. Apparently, he was starting to get bored looking at Yoongi staring into space while flipping one of his Chopin records around in his hands.

“Who’s your favorite?”, Yoongi asked, looking up at the boy. He figured the way to his heart was the way to his mother and the way back to Namjoon and Hoseok.

“Depends on my mood…”

“What says River Flows in You about your mood?”

Yoongi put on a casually interested smile.

“Oh I put it on when I want to make dirty thoughts go away. My Mom says I’m not supposed to have them.”

Yoongi blinked rapidly.

“How old are you?”

“I’m 17 but I’ll turn 18 next week!”

“Oh uhm… I see but… It’s fairly normal to have dirty thoughts at your age, isn’t it?”

“I always have dirty thoughts”, the boy whispered and ran his fingers along one of his silvery locks that could’ve also been a greyish shade of purple but Yoongi couldn’t really tell for the light bulbs around the mirror and some more candles were the only source of light in here.

Well, good for you, Yoongi thought and went with a discreet smile.

“How about you?”, Taehyung asked nonchalantly. Yoongi’s smile froze.

“Uhm… well… from time to time I guess… you know… sometimes your mind just has its own will, if… if you know what I…”

The boy giggled.

“No… I wanna know how old you are.”

“Oh… I’m… 25”, Yoongi answered sheepishly.

Taehyung used his fingers to count.

“That’s only 7 years older than me…”

There was an open ending to his sentence and Yoongi was afraid that he had understood his intention correctly. He gulped.
“So… what are we playing?” he eventually tried to change the topic.

“Marbles”, Taehyung replied as though it had been decided from the beginning of time. He reached into the deep pocket of his harem pants (it was when Yoongi noticed that he wasn’t wearing a belt with a pouch attached to it) and produced a good hand full of glass marbles from it. He sat down cross-legged next to Yoongi on the floor and let them pour from his hand onto the carpet between them. Yoongi just sat and stared as the little glass balls kept rolling from the boy’s palm. When he finally lowered it and used it to prop himself up, a total of about 50 blue, purple and pinkish marbles lay between them. And Yoongi was about to lose his. Alright, the boy’s hands were fairly large. About the size of his own. But there was no way in hell that all of these glass balls would fit into just one of his fists. What was this? Some kind of magic trick? If it was one, then the boy apparently didn’t expect some sort of reaction as someone who had just performed a trick usually would. He just casually proceeded to spread them out between them, his innumerable armlets clinking like a cutlery drawer being shaken. Yoongi took a deep breath. At this point, he was sure that he would never touch a tab of LSD again in his life.

“What kind of game do you have in mind?”, he asked and shuffled to pull up his black ripped jeans a little that were pretty tight seated like this. He caught the boy looking at the small hint of skin when he sat up on his knees and his hoodie exposed his belly button. Something told him that the center of his attention was the strip of hair below it disappearing under the waistband. Taehyung made absolutely no secret of being interested in Yoongi’s pubic hair. He shamelessly enjoyed the sight while it lasted and only when Yoongi had settled back into a comfortable seating position, he started with his explanation of the game.

“You’re only allowed to use one hand. You have to pick up a marble, throw it and pick up as many as you possibly can before you catch it again. It’s about dexterity. You have really long and pretty fingers… I bet you’re really good at this game… Hyung”, he just breathed the last word and Yoongi pretended he was incapable of reading between lines whatsoever. He just reached for a marble, threw it up in the air and picked up another one before he caught the first one again.

“Like this?”, he asked. There were tracers on the marbles. But they actually helped him determine the curve the one he threw was making. He looked up at Taehyung the two marbles still in his hand. The boy had spaced out staring at Yoongi’s fingers and his teeth dug into his lower lip. It was when Yoongi noticed that River Flows in You had stopped playing and the record was just spinning idly on the turntable. So it had been no joke? The song really did keep his dirty thoughts in check?

“Your skin is so white, Hyung… it shimmers like ivory… Do you know what the surface of the moon looks like? Because I’m sure your skin must be ten times prettier… it sparkles… like sugar crystals.”

He reached out and let his exquisite fingers run along Yoongi’s artery as though his forearm was indeed a piece of the moon itself.

“Uhm… how about we listen to that song again it’s… it’s also one of my favorites. I like Yiruma a lot… “, he suggested awkwardly and leaned over to put the tone arm back on the vinyl, causing Taehyung’s fingers to slip from his wrist, leaving him no time to decide. The boy still stared at him with hazy eyes and softly blushed cheeks. Yoongi started fumbling with the marbles in his hand. They were already greasy with sweat.

“Did you… did you know that the song was actually supposed to be used for one of the Twilight movies?”, he asked just to say anything. “I mean… that scene when Edward plays the piano for Bella. They originally intended to use it on the OST but ended up going with the cheaper option of having a new song composed for the movie… instead of buying the rights to use River Flows in You
“What is Twilight?”, Taehyung asked confused, devoting his whole attention to the actual topic now. Apparently noticing that he should try a little harder to contain himself. But maybe it was also the catchy melody starting anew that tamed him a little.

“It’s a… pretty popular movie. Some teenage romance flick about vampires based on a pretty shitty book… It’s not well-written. You don’t know it?”, Yoongi asked just as confused as Taehyung.

“No. But it’s about vampires?”

“Yeah. You like vampire stories?”

“Not really. They are unrealistic, you know?”

“Totally agree.”

“Vampires don’t have fangs and they don’t bite people.”

“Oh, obviously not”, Yoongi laughed about the seriousness with which Taehyung had stated his sentence.

“So… is River Flows in You a love song?”, Taehyung asked as if he expected Yoongi to know Yiruma in person and having led lengthy discussions about his intention behind the title with the artist himself.

“Well… I guess so… I mean it’s on an album called First Love so… and… don’t you think being in love kinda feels like having a river flow through you?”

“So did Yiruma write it for a person he loved?”

“Well, I guess so”, Yoongi stated. “I guess when you write a poem or a song you always have a certain person or situation in mind, don’t you? And… it’s a really romantic song… the feeling that inspired him must have been really strong. So I’d say chances are he wrote it about a certain someone…”

“I want someone to be so in love with me that every song and poem they ever write is dedicated to me!”, Taehyung called out with sudden excitement. Yoongi had to bite back a chuckle.

“Have you had a song dedicated to you, Hyung? Has someone ever loved you this much?”

“Well I… no. I don’t think so.”

Hoseok had loved him in the “let’s be best friends and annoy each other every day” kind of way… which wasn’t the “I dedicate love songs to you”, kinda way, was it? Maybe Yoongi had loved him that way, though. A lot of unfinished songs on his hard drive were written about Jung Hoseok. And the frustration of simply not being able to meet his expectations. Like Sun and Moon was one of them. It had a piano sample as an intro.

“I really wanna know what that feels like… having a river flow in you”, Taehyung sighed in a dreamy voice while River Flows in You flowed past in the background.

“So… haven’t you been in a relationship yet?”, Yoongi asked. Maybe it actually was the drug that helped him fight his way through the small talk. Even though they had proceeded to a somewhat deep topic, for him it was still small talk. It was small talk until he was comfortable enough to open
up to a person and didn’t feel the need to watch his every word anymore. So basically, the only person in the world that he had left the realm of small talk with was Kim Namjoon. Talking to people was just hard. He usually found himself lost in the maze of what he thought they expected him to say and the impression he wanted to give off. Always scared to say too much or too little. It was the reason why he usually stuck with not speaking at all.

“My Mom doesn’t want me to date the employees… so who else should I date? The people from the village? Obviously, I’m not allowed to date them either.”

“I see”, Yoongi mumbled slowly to buy himself some time to think. Obviously, there was a certain hierarchy. Madame Yu deemed the employees of a status too low to date her son. Yoongi wondered whether he should take this as a proof for his initial thesis of Pumpkin and the others basically being sex workers since that would be a solid reason for a mother not to want her son involved with them.

“But… you’re about to come of age, aren’t you? Technically you could go wherever you want then… and date whoever you want.”

“Where would I want to go?”, Taehyung asked, mildly irritated. “It’s not safe anywhere but here, is it? I’m not even allowed to go stay out on my own after the sun goes down. And I may not play at the shore. So where would I go?”

Yoongi frowned at him. This wasn’t the way a 17-year-old young man would state things. It was a child talking. Yoongi was sure, however, that Taehyung wasn’t mentally retarded in any way. He just seemed… unaware. Unaware of what life was like outside the walls of the bathhouse. Like a bird that believed that the world consisted of a perch, some grit, a mirror and metal bars.

“Why is it dangerous to stay out after dark?”, Yoongi asked, trying to take advantage of the boy’s naivety in order to get access to the information that Pumpkin and Crow both protected with a smooth reticence.

“Because of them…”, Taehyung shrugged and reached for his tiara, rearranging it. Those were definitely real gemstones. Yoongi wondered about how much it might cost.

“They? The guests you mean?”

“Who else?”

“What makes them so dangerous?”, the marbles clicked against each other as he shuffled them in his hand.

“Most of them carry guns.”

“Pardon me?”, Yoongi burst out.

“You have to be very polite with them… and very careful when you start working here”, the boy nodded with a pitiful expression. “Take good care of yourself, Hyung. I like you.”

And the young lean hand closed around Yoongi’s fingers that were still playing with the marbles. Yoongi gasped at the touch. The boy seemed to buzz. As if electricity instead of blood was circulating through his body. Now that he felt the sensation again, he realized that it had already been there when Taehyung had covered his eyes from behind and also as his fingertips had just brushed over the skin of his lower arm. Most likely already been there on the carrousel. His hands were soft, dry and warm. And they felt like live wire. He had been too occupied with them to notice Taehyung slowly moving forward and leaning in.
“I don’t listen to her… you know? When it comes to dating employees”, he whispered and Yoongi could feel his words ghosting over his own lips. He backed away immediately and felt his stomach drop through the floor when, in the very same moment, the curtain separating Taehyung’s room from the office was pushed back.

“What for Heaven’s sake do you think you’re doing here?!”

Yoongi didn’t believe his eyes. The woman who came marching towards them in an old-fashioned blue dress was so short that she would measure up to Yoongi’s chest if at all. And Yoongi was almost sure that she couldn’t be Madame Yu. She was way too old to be Taehyung’s mother. If she was, she had given birth to him in her late 50s, early 60s. Judging by her looks she was old enough to be his great-grandmother. 85. Her wrinkly, particularly dark skin looked like she had been a chain-smoker since birth. She wore her gray hair up in a topknot and the amount of blue eye shadow she had applied to match her dress was downright ridiculous. Maybe she tried making up for the product that was lost in the deep crease above her eyes. Her shape was rather round, maybe due to her huge chest and the speed with which she approached the two young man made her wobble like a penguin trying to catch the bus. The most peculiar feature was her nose. It resembled a beak, was obnoxiously large and the wart on her forehead right between her eyebrows didn’t exactly help to tone it down. Entirely perplexed, Yoongi stared at her and totally forgot to withdraw his hand from Taehyung’s grip.

“How dare you molest my son!”, she croaked and came to an abrupt halt, propping her hands into her hips as if to give herself a wasp waist. 

Son, Yoongi’s brain typed out and marked it bold.

“Mom!”, Taehyung intervened. “I just asked him to play with me!”

“We… we… we just played marbles”, Yoongi stammered, not sure whether he was supposed to get up and bow or stay the fuck where he was, down at her feet.

“Who asked you to speak?”, Madame Yu snapped at him. “And if you possess the audacity to raise your voice at me the next time, make sure to end your sentence with a “Ma’am”. Where are your manners boy?”

“I’m sorry Ma’am”, Yoongi gulped, still trying to get ahead of the situation.

“Who brought you here?”, the old woman inquired. “And will you let go of my son’s hand already?”

Yoongi withdrew his hand as though he had burned himself.

“No… nobody… I… came by myself.” They looked at each other. “Ma’am”, Yoongi added.

“How would you know the way to my office? You can’t tell me you checked every single one of the 14 floors for it. You wouldn’t even have survived the ground floor without help.”

“Your assistant who… introduced himself as… as Crow explained the way to me, Ma’am”, Yoongi lied.

“Is that so?”, the woman’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“I’m really sorry I entered your office in your absence. You see… I met your son and he asked me to join him until you came back. He… was about to explain that marble game to me when you entered. I didn’t think… it would be a problem if I… kept him some company.”
“You obviously didn’t think at all. And neither did Crow. Where even is this useless boy anyway?” she muttered grimly. And then, without a warning, she closed her eyes and raised her hand to snap her fingers three times in a row. Yoongi decided it was best to ignore the unusual behavior and seized the moment to straighten up as well as he could and choose a friendly, relaxed smile from his repertoire.

“You see… Ma’am… I’m looking for my friends. Crow informed me that some of your… people… had the courtesy to take them to the bathhouse and treat their blood poisoning. I’m here to express my deepest gratitude and to make up for your expenses.”

He had chosen the same register Pumpkin had used in front of the guest. The polite tone seemed to appease Madame Yu the slightest bit.

“Well, of course I know very well why you are here. I’m just asking what it is that makes you think you can come marching into my office like this and get your dirty hands on my son.”

Yoongi refrained from informing her that his hands weren’t exactly dirty and that she as well could choose a slightly more friendly tone. That it was in fact her son trying to get his hands on him.

“He was very kind to me”, Taehyung sided with him. “He explained some facts about River Flows in You that I didn’t know yet. Did you know it’s a love song, Mommy?”

Madame Yu’s eyes became narrow slits.

“What makes you think you’re qualified to lecture my son about music?!”, she hissed.

“Oh, I… I just told him some fun facts I thought he’d like to know since… since it seems to be one of his favorite songs. I… you know… I used to work as a piano teacher to earn some extra money in high school. I work as a producer now. I run a studio together with my friend.”

He didn’t mean to brag. He just tried to come up with a justification that actually made him sound qualified.

“You can play the piano?”, Madame Yu asked, suddenly all ears. “Well enough that you used to teach other people?”

“Well I… I guess so… I haven’t played a real piano in a while, you know… I just have a … basic keyboard at home.”

“We have more than one grand piano here”, Madame Yu stated bluntly. “We are lacking skilled musicians at the moment. I’ll test your abilities first of course… but I guess that’s how you could make up for our expenses.”

“You expect me to work here?”, Yoongi asked as though he didn’t know yet. “You see… Ma’am… I was wondering whether it would be possible to pay you back in cash since… we… I mean me and my friends… we don’t actually plan on staying here longer than necessary. We will have to return to Seoul tomorrow morning.”

“Oh I didn’t know that… “, the old lady said without the slightest trace of surprise in her voice. “Moon and Hope didn’t mention that when they signed their working contracts.”

“Pardon me… who didn’t mention that?”

“Moon and Hope. Your two friends.”
“You mean Kim Namjoon and Jung Hoseok?”, Yoongi asked in utter bewilderment.

“I mean Moon and Hope. We changed their names when they signed the contract.”

“I picked the names!”, Taehyung interrupted with an audible sense of pride. “I’m good at naming people. Mom always lets me pick out the new employees’ names. And I really like cute names. Don’t you think they fit perfectly? I shortened the name of the boy with the ash-blonde hair to Moon… because he’s mysterious and bright. And the other boy’s name sounded like Hope. I could also sense that he was hoping for something. His aura is very colorful. He shines. Like the sun.”

Yoongi didn’t know what to say. It took him everything to keep his mouth shut and not drool in his stupor. His lack of reaction seemed to worry Taehyung.

“You don’t like the names, do you?”, he asked with genuine disappointment.

“They are great”, Yoongi’s vocal chords took over.

“They fit so perfectly, my little prince”, Madame Yu cooed and the sudden sweetness in her voice left Yoongi even more befuddled. His mind had turned into a street riot again. They had signed a contract. Evidently still drugged up and most likely out of their right minds Moon and Hope – God rest their poor souls – had signed a labor agreement in an alleged brothel. A brothel catering to guests that whispered like autumn wind and carried guns.

“Awesome…! They are… awesome names!”, Yoongi forced out.

“They also really liked them!”, Tae informed him happily. Yoongi’s whole body was a doubtful expression. He almost curled into a question mark. But before he could get his thoughts in order, the familiar jingle of bells made him whirl around. The moment Crow entered the room, he was practically already on his knees. He put his forehead to the floor in a formal bow right in front of Madame Yu’s feet. After remaining in that position for an appropriate number of seconds, he got up again, only to bow deeply in front of Taehyung.

“Young Master”, he greeted him and then turned to his mother. “You called for me, Madame.”

Hold on. So he had heard her snap her fingers?!

“This was Yoongi. She pointed at him on the floor like she was referring to a broken vase or something. Crow turned his feathered head and Yoongi ventured a shy smile but Crow’s facial expression remained entirely emotionless. He didn’t smile, there was not the slightest trace of recognition in his eyes.

“His name is Min Yoongi. He’s the third member of the group that was found in the village.”

“Obviously”, Madame Yu replied coldly. “I’m asking you how he managed to get to my office and harass Tae Tae.”

“He didn’t harass me!”, Taehyung spoke up but his mother shushed him with a penetrating glare from her saggy eyes.

“There was an incident on the bridge. He got scared by the frogs and screamed in the presence of the evening guests. I stunned them in time and I am positive they didn’t actually notice him. I couldn’t accompany him so I advised him to go straight to your office. He’s looking for work in order to pay back his dues.”
He avoided the piercing look that Yoongi shot at him from the floor. He knew bloody well that Yoongi sought to pay them back cash. Suddenly Yoongi remembered that he had yet to retrieve his backpack, his wallet to be precise. He began seeing his hopes dashed.

“We will make him work. I was tempted to just let the guests have him, given the fact that he entered my office without any authorization. And for molesting my son-”

“He didn’t molest me!”

“Shush, Baby!”, his mother shut him up. “But I just found out that he can play the piano.”

“We are in urgent need of musicians”, Crow confirmed her words. Yoongi didn’t know whether he was speaking in his favor or against it. Was this to prevent him from being left to the guests – whatever that meant – or was it a positive reaction towards his enslavement by contract? His glance travelled up Crow’s body. He had left the impression of being attractive in Yoongi’s mind already. But seeing him for the second time he recognized him to be a little more than just that. He was actually gorgeous. Maybe it was the perspective of looking up at him from the floor. But my God did he turn Yoongi’s head.

“That’s like winning the lottery, isn’t it? We got a dancer, a gambler and a piano man in just one day.”

“A gambler?”, Yoongi asked so forcefully that not even a “Ma’am” at the end would have made it better.

“Your friend Moon is very smart. He’s excellent at Go. And our guests like that game a lot.”

“Are they doing okay?”, Yoongi couldn’t stop himself from asking. And maybe he was just making it up but Crow seemed to stir a little at the genuine concern in his voice that he could no longer hide.

“I told you they have been taken care of”, he said coldly without looking at Yoongi.

“They have been brought to the employees’ dorm. They were already given new clothes and they are resting now”, Taehyung reassured Yoongi but it didn’t really put him at ease. A new plan had taken shape in his mind. He would act along. Sign that contract. Whatever it said. Sign it, let them take him to the same dorm, give him new clothes and assign a bed to him. And the very minute they left him unattended he would wake them up and they would book it out of there.

“You will get the chance to demonstrate your musical talent now, Min Yoongi-ssi”, Madame Yu said with a put-on inviting smile. She signaled him to get up and go back to her office. Yoongi struggled to his feet, using the sideboard for support and when he turned around he caught Crow and Taehyung exchange a glance. The boy was making sheep eyes at the slightly older one. But Crow turned him down with an admonitory glance. Yoongi found himself sandwiched between them when everybody was heading for the passageway and Taehyung passed on the curtain to Yoongi who held it open for Crow. The second Crow’s hand replaced his on the heavy fabric their fingers brushed and their eyes met. Yoongi couldn’t help but gasp a little when Crow’s deep dark glance pierced into his heart like a switchblade. Now that he knew it was a real tattoo spreading over his face, there was no holding back anymore. He was falling for him at the speed of light. His eyes were like a black hole drawing him in. And black was Yoongi’s favorite color.

There had been no piano in this room before. It stood next to the desk with the Tiffany lamp. Where there had been nothing but empty space less than ten minutes ago. The sight of it made Yoongi sick to his stomach. He was almost ready to throw up again. Despite the stuffy heat in this room, he shuddered with cold. Slowly and consciously losing parts of your mind had to be the scariest thing in
the world. His hands trembled when he sat down on the small piano stool and lifted the black lid. There was no brand logo. Maybe it was custom made.

“We are to play River Flows in You”, Taehyung exclaimed, kneeling down next to Yoongi to watch his fingers up close. It was literally the song Yoongi would have went for if they had left the decision to him. The only notes he could remember by heart right now. Everything else in his mind was just one big blur. But that song had been engraved into the deepest layers of his heart. And that was where it poured from when his fingers started stroking the keys as though he had practiced it only minutes ago. He didn’t miss a single key, not a single note came a second too late. The face he checked for a reaction after he finished playing was Crow’s. He appeared comparably unmoved. He just nodded as if to confirm something that he had not expected to come out any differently.

“He’s very good!”, Taehyung voiced his opinion. “I liked it better than the original version by Yiruma!”

Yoongi forced himself to give the boy a grateful smile.

“It was agreeable”, Madame Yu confirmed. “But it will have to do… I’m prepared to employ you, Min Yoongi-ssi. Choose a name for him, honey bee”, the old woman turned to her son and Yoongi held his breath.

“I want him to be called Sugar”, Taehyung already had the answer ready. “Because of the sparkly white skin that looks like sugar crystals spread out on the surface of the moon.”

Yoongi imagined his saliva to be glue in order not to talk back. Madame Yu and Crow exchanged a look.

“We had a Pepper once, didn’t we?”, Madame Yu asked her assistant.

“Yes Ma’am. And a Salt as far as I remember. That snappy girl who was always salty about everyone and everything. But we haven’t had a Sugar yet.”

“So be it”, Madame Yu shrugged.

“I’ll write his name tag!”, Taehyung exclaimed with excitement and disappeared into his own room.

Okay… but what had happened to Salt and Pepper?

“New employees have to wear a name tag for the first couple of weeks until our regular customers have gotten used to them”, Madame Yu explained while producing a white sheet of paper from one of the drawers of her desk. She climbed on the chair in front of it with visible effort and when she was seated, her feet didn’t touch the floor. Sitting practically next to her on the piano stool, Yoongi watched as she lay her wrinkled and bony hand, that basically looked like someone had stretched a piece of leather over a wire-rim, on the sheet. Her long red-painted fingernails travelled over the paper and Yoongi forced his teeth into his own tongue when he saw lines appear where they had touched it. Magic ink. That became gradually visible under the light of the tiffany lamp. A short and sweet explanation to shut his mind up. He would stick with it. And as if to assure him that he wasn’t supposed to waste any further thought on how the ink worked, a knock on the door raised everybody’s attention.

“Enter”, Madame Yu said briefly. A wave of comforting surprise washed over Yoongi when he recognized a familiar pastel pink shock of hair in the doorframe. Pumpkin was carrying a tray with a crystal carafe and a couple of cups. He made over and set the tray on the little tea table before he dropped to his knees and his forehead, as well as both of his palms, touched the floor.
“Yeah yeah, get up Pumpkin, introduce yourself and pour our new staff member some ice tea. I’m sure he’s thirsty after eating a good amount of our food”, Madame Yu mumbled without looking at the boy she was addressing. Pumpkin got up from the floor and rearranged his hairband that had almost slipped off with the bow. Then he gave Yoongi a brief nod.

“I’m Pumpkin. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you”, Yoongi echoed the lie. “I’m Y-”

“His name is Sugar!””, Madame Yu cut him off.

Pumpkin caught Yoongi’s glance. Unlike Crow’s, his eyes spoke volumes. What a ridiculous name, buddy he was currently saying.

“Your old name is history. From today on, you are Sugar, not only to us but also to yourself”, Madame Yu declared. “Should you ever be caught using your old name in front of others or – in your case – addressing your friends with their old names, you will be punished.”

Again, Yoongi tried to meet Pumpkin’s eyes. The little red heart. It’s a punishment. Was that what he had done to get it? Use his old name?

“And I kindly inform you that the walls have ears in this place. If I, personally, don’t catch you using it, somebody else will.”

And even though he was still looking at Pumpkin, Yoongi didn’t miss the brief glance she threw at Crow. “The most important rule in this establishment is to not offend the guests in any way. Do as they say. Always. There are more rules. Pumpkin will explain them to you. He will take you to the dormitory, provide you with appropriate clothing and show you where to put your futon. Crow, get me the box.”

Crow turned over to the shelf and took a heavy looking silver box from it. It cost him visibly a lot of strength to lift it onto the desk. Madame Yu flicked the lid open with her unusually long nails and Yoongi couldn’t really see the content but he wasn’t even surprised when she took a big golden anklet from it. He only frowned at the golden key she then produced from a pocket of her blue dress.

“Help him put it on”, she commanded Pumpkin. “And then pour the drinks. What are you waiting for? Christmas?”

Pumpkin dropped to his knees next to the piano stool and Yoongi flinched when he reached for his leg and let the golden anklet snap shut around it. The second he had locked it with the little key, the crack where the two halves met seemed to disappear as though they had melted into each other. And where had the keyhole gone?

“You must not take this anklet off at any time. It’s made of brass. You can shower with it. Also, don’t take it off when you go to bed. Never, basically. Even if you tried… you most likely wouldn’t manage to. You need the key for that.”

As an answer to her sentence, Pumpkin handed her back the key and got up.

“What is it good for?”, Yoongi asked.

“It’s just an indication that you work here. It shows your status of belonging to the staff.”

“How come Taehyung wears them, too? He doesn’t work here, does he?”, Yoongi couldn’t shut himself up. “Ma’am”, he threw in with a polite smile when he noticed a shadow spreading over the
“Did you just dare to call my son by his first name?”, Madame Yu raised her voice to a point where she was almost yelling. Yoongi froze at the threatening sound.

“We address him with Young Master”, Crow informed him soberly.

“I’m really sorry”, Yoongi bowed his apology. “He introduced himself to me with his first name.”

“That’s because he doesn’t follow my order to not talk to the employees. And since he doesn’t follow the rules, the more you will have to follow them. Stay away from my son, will you?”

As if to block off the angry command, Pumpkin stepped between Yoongi and Madame Yu and handed him a glass of the very same hibiscus ice tea that he had gulped down with his baozi. Its sweet smell was almost as penetrating as Pumpkin’s body odor and made Yoongi’s stomach turn. He couldn’t help but associate it with the nausea that was still lingering somewhere deep inside his bones.

“Thank you very much but… I’m not thirsty”, he said as politely as possible but Pumpkin refused to take the glass back. His purple eyes screamed at him not to be such a fucking fool and reject the generous offer of a free drink. Crow also poured himself half a glass from the carafe and briefly raised his glass at Yoongi before he drank. It was what made Yoongi lift the glass to his lips eventually. He took a couple of sips that were pure politeness and then discreetly placed the glass back on the tea table.

Taehyung came back from his room, carrying a little nametag on his palm.

“I finished it!”, he announced but then something else caught his attention. “Pumpkin!”, he exclaimed happily and only a piercing glance from his mother prevented him from throwing himself at the pink-haired male.

Pumpkin indicated the obligatory bow but his attention was focused on the little brooch on the boy’s hand.

“Uhm… Young Master… I… I could be wrong but… I think… Sugar… doesn’t end with an “a”. There might be an “r” missing…”, he ventured. Yoongi felt one of Crow’s glances dart past him and slap Pumpkin in the face.

“That was an unnecessary remark”, he stated but his eyes definitely added a “fool” at the end of the sentence. Madame Yu slowly turned around to Pumpkin. Yoongi couldn’t tell whether her age made the movement hard for her or whether she just wanted to add more drama to it.

“If my son writes Sugar without the “r” then that’s is how it’s written. I have it in for you, Pumpkin. The promotion was no invitation to forget where your place is. You’re not in the position to voice your insignificant opinion. Remember what I’ve done for you. Where you would be without me and without Taehyung. And then watch your big mouth. Ugh… sometimes I think you’re the worst of them all. You think you’re oh so clever. But you know what clever people do? They keep their mouth shut.”

“I’m sorry”, Pumpkin mumbled and the second Madame Yu returned her attention to Yoongi’s contract, he rolled his eyes, shoved his tongue into his cheek and winked at Yoongi. Crow had seen it, too. And the judging look on his face didn’t really seem to impress Pumpkin but it sure did impress Yoongi.

“Well then, Suga…”, Madame Yu handed Yoongi the contract and the fountain pen after dipping it
into the ink vessel bottle. Yoongi pressed his tongue against his palate and signed the piece of paper without having read a single line of it. It didn’t matter what it said. He would break it tonight.

“Alright, Pumpkin. Take him to the dormitory.”

*

“Here”, Pumpkin muttered and handed Yoongi a neatly folded pack of clothes. It was a black long-sleeved shirt … and black harem pants with golden embroidery. All of a sudden, Yoongi was overcome by a new kind of panic.

“Can’t I… can I just keep my hoodie on? I… I get cold easily and…”

“No. You’ll have to wear the uniform. You’ll get your pouch and your belt tomorrow. They are downstairs in the equipment room.”

“What are they for?”, Yoongi asked, holding the clothes in his arms like a sleeping newborn. He still didn’t make a move to change. They were standing in a dressing room paved with worn out straw mats. The wardrobes were built into the wall and just like the walls on this floor, their doors were made of paper. Once white, a little yellowed over the years, painted with the occasional flower, the same pinkish plush blossoms Yoongi had noticed on the lampshade in Madame Yu’s office. At this point, he was sure they were supposed to depict peonies.

“What do you think they are good for? They hold the necessities.”

“Such as?”

“We’re a spa, Suga. What do you think you will need them for? Your tools. Massage oil, bath additives… you know… all that stuff.”

Yoongi had been waiting for the “condoms”.

“You won’t have to wear it all the time, though. Only when you’re in charge of the wellness area. When you’re playing piano at the bar, you obviously don’t have to carry bath supplies around. You’ll do the donkeywork in the mornings and the afternoons… Tasks such as cleaning bathtubs, restocking towel supplies, cleaning the floors, getting water from the well, preparing the private rooms… And in the evenings you’ll come here to change clothes and then switch to your role as a piano player in the Midnight bar. It’s on the topmost floor, the one above Madame Yu’s office that can’t be reached by elevator. You can see the sky from there. We actually have a decent piano player down in the Red Rose bar, that’s why I’m sure that the old witch wants you for the Midnight… that’s also what the bathhouse is called. The Midnight Rose. In case you wondered. But yeah, the Midnight bar is the more exclusive one… it’s reserved for our VIP guests… I dance there.”

“You… dance there?”

“Every other day. We don’t have enough skilled staff at the moment… so I have to help out with other tasks as well. That’s basically the reason why the old hack is so stoked to get a new dancer and a new piano player all at once… But I was employed here as a dancer, too… back in the day. Dancing used to be my hobby before I turned my life into a complete mess… I know how to move my body. That’s why I’m so good in bed… but you’ll find out for yourself soon anyway when you come back to my initial threesome offer. You can learn some from me then. I can teach you how to be a good sub… how to get exactly what you want without admitting that it is what you want. We’ll have fun together!”

“You told me to run while I still can”, Yoongi interrupted him, lowering his voice.
“Shhh”, Pumpkin hissed, his eyes scanning the dressing room like a map of minesweeper. “You heard the old witch. The walls have ears in this bathhouse.”

Yoongi’s defiant reaction was to step closer to Pumpkin, courageously braving the pink smell.

“Listen, Pumpkin. I want to get out of here as fast as possible. You said I should. Now take me to my friends and tell me how to get out of here.”

He had no other choice but to trust him. And he did trust him. Ever since that glance they had exchanged after stepping out of the elevator, he knew that Pumpkin was on his side just like he had predicted that Yoongi would be on theirs.

“It’s too late for that… Suga”, Pumpkin replied and he said the name with great reluctance to make him feel how bad his decision to sign that contract had actually been.

“I don’t care about the contract I just signed. I didn’t even use my real signature. They don’t know my address. I live in Seoul. Far from here.”

“They have your name. That’s all they need. And when I say they have it, it’s exactly what I mean… it’s not yours anymore.”

“What do you mean? How could they take a name away from you?”

Pumpkin snorted.

“Say it.”

“Huh?”

“Say your name.”

Yoongi opened his mouth. They looked at each other. And then he closed it again.

“You don’t remember it.”

It wasn’t a question.

Yoongi was tongue-tied with panic. He felt as though his legs were about to give in. There was nothing. Like a locked vault that he didn’t have the passcode to, he couldn’t access the information that told him who he was.

“I can’t remember it”, he whispered, shaking his head as if doubting his own words.

“Told you to write it down”, Pumpkin shrugged.

“Do you remember it?”, Yoongi asked. His words more plea than question.

“I do”, Pumpkin said curtly.

“Tell me!”, Yoongi whispered, his voice was shaking too hard for him to raise it.

Pumpkin rolled his eyes and the next second his fingers were digging into Yoongi’s shoulder and his forehead was pressed against his.

“Your name… is Min Yoongi. Fucking write that down somewhere. And now listen up, boy. Don’t you try run away like this. It won’t get you anywhere. If you live by the rules you are safe here. If
you break them, you break yourself. You made enough stupid decisions for one night. Stop now. You screwed up. But don’t make it worse.”

He pushed Yoongi away and gestured at the pile of clothes in his arms.

“Now put these on. My time is limited. You know first hand that I have a shit load of appointments tonight.”

Yoongi turned away. Not to hide his naked body from Pumpkin but the tears of frustration that welled up in his eyes as he pulled the Thrasher hoodie over his head to take it off.

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The clothes fit perfectly, as if they had been custom-made for him. Yet they didn’t feel right. He felt dressed up like he had just gotten ready for some costume party when he glanced at himself in the dressing mirror that was literally the only object in the room. Pumpkin was looking over his shoulder at his reflection as though they were a couple, studying a painting in a museum.

“Suits you”, Pumpkin said to break the silence. Maybe he meant it, maybe he didn’t. But obviously, he felt the need to be friendly. His angel face was troubled by a gloomy expression. Yoongi wondered whether the boy knew just how pretty he really was.

“You’ll wear the black pants for everyday work. But when you play piano at the Midnight bar…”, he walked over to the second to last sliding door on the right side of the closet that had a particularly big peony blossom on it. “You’ll change into one of the dark blue pants that are kept in here. They are… really pretty. They have stars and constellations embroidery. See…?”

He slid the door open and took out one of the pants he had just advertised to Yoongi. They were beautiful. Like someone had crafted the night sky into fabric and made clothes from it. Yoongi just nodded briefly. He didn’t have the strength to fake a smile. He still felt the tears sting in his eyes and he would try his everything for them not to fall.

“Make sure to take good care of them. Regular staff members don’t get to wear them… they don’t even get to see them since they have no access to the Midnight bar. You’ll have to do your make-up for the evenings as well. There is a beauty room with vanity tables and makeup mirrors 3 doors further down the hall. You can use everything you see there. The frogs take care that the make-up, the brushes and stuff are clean and sanitized after every use. You’ll get your own set of eye pencils and more private stuff though. It’s being prepared for you as we speak. There are detailed samples of how the make-up has to look for different occasions. Just follow those instructions. I saw you have your nails painted… so I fathom you’re not that much of a newbie to make-up, are you?”

Yoongi shook his head. He sometimes used foundation to hide pimples and dark-circles and had started using eyeliner regularly after Hoseok had said something about how it made his eyes look beautifully mysterious. A sudden noise at the paper sliding door that separated the dressing room from the hallway made them turn around. Yoongi froze when he spotted the obnoxiously big frog push the door open further so it could enter. Just like the ones he had seen on the bridge, the creature was dressed in a small size light blue kimono top. He wondered if it was the same frog he had seen earlier. He wondered if Pumpkin was able to tell them apart. As the creature came closer, Yoongi found himself holding his breath, pressing his lips shut with irritation. He was afraid of frogs. He couldn’t really pin down the reason but they just put him off. The wet and sticky sound their rubber-like feet made when landing on the floor after a jump. It came hopping towards them. Only when it had gotten close enough it sat up on his hind legs and Yoongi’s eyes widened with horror when it bowed and then extended its hands, finger-like bones connected by webbing.
“He asks you to give him your old clothes”, Pumpkin explained. The frog lowered its head as if to confirm his words.

“N… no!”, Yoongi forced out. “Where is he gonna take them?”

“The garbage incinerator.”

“Excuse you?!?”

“You won’t need them anymore. You’re not allowed to wear them around here anyway. The bathhouse is always nice and warm… that’s what Bird is there for after all… you won’t get cold without the hoodie… don’t worry. We have woolen jackets for the winter when we have business to do outside.”

“You don’t understand this… this… hoodie, it… it has a symbolic value for me. Can’t I keep it?”

He sought Pumpkin’s glance to reinforce the urgency of his question. They couldn’t take this sweater from him… It was like a home… it was the last thing that still held that warm feeling of the day he and Hoseok had gone on their first date at the shopping mall… and Hoseok had kissed him on the roof terrace after smearing some of the cream of his hot chocolate on Yoongi’s lips. It had been their first kiss.

“What kind of symbolic value would that be?”, Pumpkin asked.

Yoongi found himself unable to hide the truth. Unable to hide his true self after he had been stripped of the hoodie that had been his safe haven, his cave to retreat to when things got tough.

“Got it the day my ex… the redhead… and I started dating.”

He lowered his eyes because he couldn’t stand Pumpkin’s glance any longer, was afraid of a complacent smile accompanying the second he learned that he had been right all along. This way he missed the actual reaction: a compassionate sparkle in the other’s eyes when his words hit home. Pumpkin sucked in the bar of his labret piercing and let out a sharp breath through his nose before he turned to the frog.

“Alright, fine… I want you to take his clothes to the cellar to Blue Bird’s room. Tell him I ordered you to… He’ll recognize the Thrasher hoodie and probably be able to tell what’s going on.” He turned from the frog to Yoongi. “We can store it there for you for the time being… until you’re ready to let go of it.”

The frog took a deep bow in front of Pumpkin to indicate that he had gotten the order. Pumpkin, however, was occupied with catching Yoongi’s questioning glance.

“Don’t worry… the frogs are your friends. You can trust them. Wanna know why? They are not intelligent enough to be as insidious as most of the humans in this establishment. He doesn’t know that it’s against the rules to keep personal clothing… And he won’t tell anyone because he will have forgotten about it as soon as he carried out the task… there’s just one thing. Make sure nobody sees you on your way to the boiler room”, he turned to the frog again who reinforced his bow. Pumpkin then drew another one of those coupons and a pen from his belt pouch. He scribbled something on it and from the corner of his eyes Yoongi caught him drawing a heart under it. The note said something about being free after the 22 h slot was done and needing to get fucked really really hard. Pumpkin threw a side glance at Yoongi and grinned bashfully as he handed the coupon note to the frog.

“Give it to him. Don’t you lose it.”
Yoongi watched with a mixture of horror and fascination how the frog stored the little note away in the breast pocket of his kimono top.

“Give him your clothes, then. Don’t worry, you won’t get in trouble. They won’t find them in Bird’s room. Barely anyone ever goes down there… except for me and the frogs.”

“Give me a second please”, Yoongi gulped. “Can I borrow your pen?”

Pumpkin arched one of his perfectly shaped eyebrows at him but still handed him what he had asked for. Yoongi sat down next to the pile of his own clothes that he had dropped in front of the mirror and fished into the back pocket of his jeans. He produced Namjoon’s empty cigarette package from it, opened it and bent back the lid. Min Yoongi, he scribbled on the inside of the lid and then shoved it into the deep pocket of the harem pants he was wearing. Pumpkin observed him with a graceful smile that didn’t give anything away about what was going on behind his purple eyes.

“I didn’t see that”, he then stated when Yoongi handed his Thrasher hoodie and the black skinny jeans over to the frog who accepted it with caution and respect, before he waddled away to carry out the tasks assigned to him.

“Well then… Suga… I really gotta hurry down to the wellness area now, I’ve got my first client for the night in less than ten minutes. You can rest now. I’ll show you where you can put your futon in the dorm… I sleep there, too. But I won’t be back until the early morning hours tonight. So don’t wait for me. Your friends are there, too. I suggest you just try to get some sleep. I’ll wake you up a little earlier and then give you a tour of everything you need to see before you start your actual work. And Suga… promise me you won’t try to run away tonight.”

He grabbed his shoulder and made him turn and look at him. “Promise me.”

“I promise”, Yoongi lied with a straight face.

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The dormitory as well was paved with tatami mats. One big red paper lantern illuminated more than 2 dozens of futons that lay there on the floor in rank and file. Each of them was equipped with a small white pillow and a purple woolen blanket. Only two futons were occupied. Yoongi hurried over to the beds. Both the brazen ring around his ankle and the unfamiliar cut of the harem pants made running uncomfortable, bordering impossible. He dropped to his knees next to the first futon and his heart clenched so hard that he felt like suffocating when he saw red strands of hair poke out from under the blanket.

“Hoseok-ah”, he whispered and shook him by the shoulder. Hoseok stirred a little but the regular and slow rhythm of his breath didn’t alter. He was fast asleep. When he moved his leg a little, a soft jingle made Yoongi notice that he was wearing two anklets on one leg. Yoongi bit his lip and pushed back his blanket a little only to find him dressed just like he had expected: in a black shirt and the very same harem pants he himself was wearing. Only with a slightly different embroidery. They all seemed to be handmade and vary in pattern. Yoongi’s had triangular shapes on it, Hoseok’s had circles and swirls. Didn’t Pumpkin’s have little hearts? Hoseok’s ugly windbreaker jacket and his 90s sneakers were gone. And Yoongi had never deemed himself capable of missing them. But he did. The sight of Hoseok in those working clothes somehow made him unbearably sad. He leaned over his sleeping body to touch Namjoon’s arm who was softly snoring on the futon next to him.

“Joon-ah”, Yoongi whispered. Even though they were completely alone in the dormitory, the fear of being overheard had already become ingrained. Namjoon as well did not react. Maybe they had been given tranquilizers. What even had they done to cure their blood poisoning? Was it really a
procedure that didn’t take longer than half an hour or so? Was there an antidote that just had to be injected? They looked perfectly healthy. Their skin was glowing and their hair looked freshly washed. They looked like they always looked when they had fallen asleep watching TV in the living room of their shared apartment. From one second to the next, Yoongi’s initial emotional relief to see them again turned to anger.

“Wake the fuck up, will you?”, he hissed and slapped Hoseok’s arm with unnecessary force. Or maybe it was necessary. Either way, it was well deserved. Hoseok’s relaxed facial expression turned into a frown but he didn’t wake up. The anger inside of Yoongi’s chest died down as fast as it had risen up.

“Please… come on, Hobi!”, he begged, running the back of his hand over his cheek. “My God… You never do what you’re supposed to do, huh? All those nights you lay next to me you kicked and stirred and blabbered and now… now you sleep like a dead man. Great.”

The caressing touch of his fingertips below Hoseok’s ear that traced the delicate outlines of his tiny sun tattoo opposed his annoyed tone. It said “wake up.” It said “I love you, still.”

Right after having thought the words to himself, Yoongi’s hand stopped. There was someone here. He was being observed. No sound had triggered the feeling. It had just been there from one second to the next. Yoongi tensed and stiffly withdrew his hand, placed it on his own thigh before slowly turning his head to glance at the paper sliding door that he had entered the room through. He had drawn it shut behind him and it was still all the way closed. There was the occasional shadow walking by, staff members and frogs on their way to and from the dressing and make-up rooms. But the dormitory lay in silence, the only sound coming from Namjoon’s soft snore and Hoseok’s steady breathing noises right beside him. But the feeling got worse. Yoongi felt eyes on his body and whoever’s glance it was, it seemed to burn its way through his skin to paralyze his insides. Yoongi was overcome by a wave of fear that literally rendered him immobile. His palms on his thighs, he just sat there next to Jung Hoseok’s bed and tried to breathe in and out while his lungs grew tighter with every time he inhaled. The only thing he still dared to move were his own eyes. He scanned the empty beds next to Namjoon that lay prepared for the other staff members to return. Yoongi’s eardrums seemed to start vibrating with the silence alone. He harked, trying so hard to register the faintest sound that he started to hear phantom noises. A distant wailing… like somebody screaming under water. His eyelids flung up and that was when he noticed the silhouette on the balcony. Because the dormitory itself was illuminated by that one big red paper lantern, the shadow outside wasn’t visible very clearly. Through the thin white curtains that covered the large windows and glass doors lining one entire side of the dormitory, he could only see the outlines of a body, an upper body at least, head and torso, the rest of it blended in with the shadow of the balustrade outside. But the piercing sensation in his chest told him that the person’s eyes were trained on him, obviously, they were perfectly able to see him inside the illuminated room. And with that, he also realized that they were definitely able to tell he had noticed them, was returning their glance. He felt his fingernails dig into his own skin through the thin fabric of his harem pants. The only person he would not mind seeing now was Pumpkin. And at the same time Pumpkin was the only person he could rule out to be standing there. He had dropped him off at the dorm and then left with a goodnight and a “don’t wait for me, I’ll come back late”. Most likely he was already busy with a guest… whatever that meant. Could it be Taehyung? In for another round of hide and seek? Sneaking out his mother’s office once again to sneak under one of the employee’s covers? That wouldn’t be too bad, would it? He would find ways to tell him off. But something made him very sure that it wasn’t Taehyung either. Taehyung had an unsteady, playful atmosphere around him. And whatever was observing him from that balcony felt threatening. What if it was one of the guests? Yoongi remembered the thing staring at him on the bridge. The face that wasn’t a face… The mask looking so dead that the face hiding behind it couldn’t be alive either… Yoongi clenched his teeth to keep them from jittering. And he started counting… 2… 3… At 10, he would get up and walk over to the glass sliding door
that opened onto the balcony. He would have to face this situation. Whoever was standing there was not only a potential threat to him... but also to Namjoon and Hoseok who were defenseless in their sleep. If he didn’t get his courage up to protect them, nobody would.

7... 8... The second Yoongi mouthed the 9, the person outside tilted their head to the side. And the pale moonlight illuminated the outlines of a bunch of feathers in a messy hairdo. Yoongi exhaled a part of his heart. He got up and faltered a little since there was literally no blood in his legs but the second they started to tingle and come back to life he was already throwing himself against the door, pushing it open.

Crow was perching on the balustrade, arms resting on his knees, glance pulling Yoongi towards him as a smug smile played around his M-shaped lips. Yoongi came closer even though he wouldn’t have had to, they were already within earshot of each other. Crow jumped off the railing and stepped in front of him closing the last bit of distance that Yoongi had kept.

“Did I scare you?”, he whispered with a smirk and it wasn’t him who started the kiss. Still, his glance seemed to be pulling Yoongi closer. As though he was tugging at a leash around his neck, it wasn’t Yoongi himself operating his body when his arms closed around Crow’s hips and his lips pressed against the mouth that welcomed his tongue with a voiceless chuckle. The kiss ran along Yoongi’s nerve tracts like a bright white light. It spread into his limbs and his brain and those who would have looked at his body from outside would have seen it radiate in shades of silver. Their tongues met in waves, Yoongi felt like he was drowning in the boy. His strong arms wrapped around the small of Yoongi’s back and pulled him closer like the tide drawing him further away from the shore. He was so afraid of this courage that didn’t even seem to be his own and yet it took over completely when his hands sought the way under Crow’s black shirt and he started running them over his abs. He traced them with only the very tips of his fingers as if mapping them, learning their curves and dents by heart. The raven boy’s answer to his bold move was to let his strong hands slide down just a little bit further and dig his fingers into Yoongi’s butt cheeks, forcing his crotch against his thigh. The harem pants were really just a touch of fabric. He felt the warmth of Crow’s skin through it, the flexing muscles of his thigh gently press against his private parts. Yoongi paused the kiss and held his breath in order not to moan. He bit his lower lip and looked up at the slightly taller boy’s eyes, the intricate pattern underlining them like a swirl under someone’s name written on an envelope with a quill.

“Did Taehyung kiss you before he named you?”, Crow whispered with a cheeky smile, raising his eyebrow with the little inked diamond right above it.

“Obviously not. Why do you ask?”, Yoongi returned the question, his hands still under Crow’s shirt, palms pressed flat against his chest.

“You sure do taste like sugar…”, Crow winked and then leaned in again to continue the kiss where they had paused it. Yoongi just let it happen, allowing himself to float on the younger boy’s lips like a piece of driftwood being carried to wherever the ocean decides. He had no idea where this was leading but it felt too good to stop. There were a hundred good reasons not to do this. Kissing Crow was probably the last thing he should be doing in his current situation. But what should he do, anyway? The warmth of the boy’s breath against his lips, his strong arms holding him tight like a lifebelt... it was exactly what he needed right now. Someone to hold him. And tell him things were going to be okay. But Crow didn’t bother hiding the fact that there was more that he wanted than just to hold Yoongi. He nibbled at his lower lip, gently sucked on his tongue while his hands kneaded his hips, butt and the backside of his thighs. But the heat that had started to coil in Yoongi’s lower body was extinguished by a bucket full of ice-water as the realization hit him that Hoseok might be watching them. He broke the kiss and threw a nervous glance over his shoulder. You indeed saw everything going on inside the dormitory from out here. And Hoseok and Namjoon were still fast
asleep, their position unaltered.

“My friends won’t wake up”, he turned back to Crow answering his unasked question as to why he was breaking the kiss.

“They’ve been given tranquilizers”, Crow explained, whispering the words against Yoongi’s lips. “They’ll wake up soon… don’t worry.”

His words lead back into the kiss. As if, just like Yoongi, the younger hadn’t had enough yet. With a determined move of his arm, his left hand shifted from Yoongi’s butt to the front of his harem pants, grabbing his dick and firmly groping it a few times, giving it a soft pull. His action coaxed a moan from Yoongi’s lips and Crow laughed into his mouth when he felt Yoongi’s crotch press against his palm for more.

“I don’t have a lot of time”, he whispered in an apologetic voice and withdrew a little to step aside and grant Yoongi the view of the ocean. The moon reflected on the black surface of the water, it was a light that looked like the gateway to another world. There were two new ships approaching. For Yoongi’s challenged eyes, their golden and red lanterns blurred into one giant bouquet of light. It was like looking at Christmas lights from afar. It mixed with the milky shimmer of the moon and the sound of the waves added a fourth color.

“Wow”, Yoongi whispered as he felt Crow’s arms wrap around his waist from behind.

“I’ll have to welcome them now… promise me we’ll continue this another day. I need to find out how sweet you taste down there”, he whispered against Yoongi’s earlobe and made the latter sigh at the tickle.

“What even did you come here for?”, he asked, turning in Crow’s embrace to face him again.

“Kiss you… maybe?”, Crow suggested and Yoongi found himself falling for the timbre of his voice all over again.

“What gave you the idea that I would want to kiss you as well?”, Yoongi asked, aware of the fact that his question was totally superfluous.

“The way you looked at me on the bridge. The way you looked at me in Madame Yu’s office. I want you and we both know you want me, too. Why waste time pretending that we don’t?”

“Fair enough. But why did you claim I wanted to work here? You know very well that I wanted to pay her back in cash.”

“But you don’t have any cash.”

“Did you take it?”

“No… but I know who did.”

“Who?”

“I’ll tell you when the time comes.”

Yoongi lowered his hands and his body language said that he wanted Crow to let go of him. The younger obeyed.

“Tell me what is going on here.”
“You’re in danger. But I’ll watch over you. Trust me and everything will be alright. Promise me one thing though… Don’t try to escape tonight.”

He reached for Yoongi’s face and ran his finger along his jawline.

“I promise”, Yoongi lied, avoiding his interrogating glance. His eyes were way too powerful. Looking into them for more than just a few seconds made Yoongi feel physically sick in his stomach.

“You’re a good boy”, Crow smiled.

“How old are you?”, Yoongi asked.

“I’m 21.”

“I’m you’re Hyung.”

“You’re my good boy”, Crow returned and Yoongi sighed when he forced his lips apart with his tongue once more. The kiss was hurried and messy this time. The way Crow’s tongue entered his mouth told Yoongi that he actually didn’t have time for that kiss, should be on his way already. Still, he took his time to press a couple of parting kisses on his closed lips, like sealing the one he commenced knowing that he wouldn’t be able to finish it properly.

“I gotta hurry now”, he eventually let go of him. “Try to get some sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow. Sweet dreams… Suga.”

He pressed a last kiss on the corner of his mouth before he slipped through the curtains into the room and was gone.

The second he was alone on the balcony, vertigo shot into Yoongi’s limbs with full force. He held his breath and groped his way along the windowpane until he had reached the passage back into the warmth and safety of the dormitory. He pushed the sliding door shut and remained like this for a couple of seconds, palms pressed against the cool glass. Only after a minute or two, he raised his head and looked at his face in the reflection staring back from the glass. There was a flush of excitement and arousal staining his cheeks. His lips were still glistening with Crow’s saliva. And there was something broken in his glance… eyes shimmering with the realization that his heart had not yet moved on from Jung Hoseok. It felt like he had cheated. When it should not.

“You’re pathetic”, he whispered at himself with a scornful frown. But then something else caught his attention. There was something missing in his face. The wound. It had been there on his right temple. He had felt it. Crow had seen it. Bird had. They both had remarked that he was hurt. And there had been blood, sweat washing into it on the bridge, burning like hell. He raised his hand to look at it and there were literally still some remains of dried blood stuck under his black painted nails. And there was some blood left on his temple as well. A faded brownish trace. But there was no cut, no scar. Only smooth unharmed skin. Yoongi lowered his hand and stumbled over to his futon in a trance. He dropped to his knees on the flat mattress and tried to get ahead of the situation. There was no explanation. He could not blame this on the acid anymore. There was something going on in this place that exceeded the realm of the world he was used to. Time. Space. They moved differently here. Things seemed to change while he was watching or rather every time he wasn’t paying attention and they felt unobserved. Was he slowly losing his mind? Had the LSD caused some damage beyond repair to his sensory organs? He caught himself shaking, panic causing his heart to race while he didn’t even move. The room blurred in front of his eyes and with the last bit of self-composure, he forced himself to start counting again. At 10 he would be calm. At 10 he would… he felt the tears well up. Stubbornly he dragged his sleeve across his eyes to catch them before they could fall. Crying wouldn’t help anyway. It never did.
His raging thoughts were put to a sudden halt when Jung Hoseok stirred, mumbled and eventually turned his head to blink at him. He looked at Yoongi with a confused, almost suspicious expression on his face.

“Hoseok-ah!”, Yoongi forced out and his hand reached for the redhead’s before he could prevent it. “I’m so glad you’re awake…”

“Who are you?”, the boy asked with a frown and withdrew his hand.
Chapter Notes

Thank you for checking back for the update. The next chapter is called "Peonies" and will be split into 2 parts again. The second half is scheduled for between the holidays as my next project will be a Spirited So Far Away themed Christmas special to be released on either Christmas Eve or Christmas day. It will tell the backstory of how Sope got together in Spirited So Far Away and even though it won't necessarily be plot-relevant for understanding SSFA, it might make a nice addition so you might wanna stay tuned for it^^ The title, a teaser moodboard and also the exact release date will be published on my Instagram (@iamspringday_fiction) and my Twitter (@iamspringday) so feel encouraged to follow me there :3

Have fun with Peonies Part 1 and make sure to leave kudos/a comment if you enjoyed it. <3

Chapter 4: Peonies

He would have to leave without them. It was the LSD, this much he knew now. He had taken about 100 micrograms. And had been left with severe sensory disturbances that still lingered on. Hoseok and Namjoon had taken five times as much. And forgotten who they were. There was no time to wait and see whether their memory loss was only temporary. Every second counted now. He needed to get them out of here and into a hospital where a professional toxicologist could take care of them. Something else was already certain: they would not exactly volunteer to undertake this trip with him.

The dormitory lay in semidarkness. Pale moonlight was seeping through the curtains, casting hard shadows on the futons around him. Almost all of them were occupied by now. One by one, the employees had returned from their nightshift, their anklets softly jingling until they had found their way under the covers. Around midnight, the big red paper lantern overhead had gone out by itself. And ever since then, Yoongi had been lying there; keeping his breath shallow and his eyes open wide, allowing himself only to blink when it was really necessary.

Jung Hoseok was sleeping on the futon next to him. He had fallen back asleep shortly after clarifying that he had never seen Yoongi before and that he was obviously mistaking him for someone else. He had not been surprised by the surroundings he had woken up to. Not in the slightest. Only been surprised by the strange young man holding his hand and calling him by a name he didn’t recognize to be his own. Namjoon had not woken up yet. And Yoongi did not need to talk to him in order to know what to expect. Namjoon had taken even more tabs than Hoseok. What was Yoongi to hope for? Nothing.

He would have to leave on his own tonight and bring help. Sneak out of the dormitory, down the hall. He would use the stairs instead of the elevators for he couldn’t risk being trapped in there with a guest. He would not say a word like Pumpkin and Crow had taught him. Make for that curtain that separated the bathhouse from the kitchen and the cellar. Retrieve his Doc Martens. Down the stairs. Not get caught by Bird. If he even was still down there. Most likely he was busy with Pumpkin in some unoccupied private room. Yoongi would escape through the cellar. Make it over that red wooden bridge. Through the valley towards the train station. Back to the car. Hotwire it like he had
learned it from the kids he had hung out with to avoid his abusive father. Head back for Seoul… as far as the remaining gas lasted him. Hitchhike from there. Maybe find a gas station with a payphone first. He would call the police. And ask them about an alleged brothel in an abandoned theme park somewhere in the mountain… or at the cost? He had spent the last couple of hours repeating those steps to himself. Imagining different scenarios and outcomes along the way to be prepared for whatever situation he might find himself faced with. He had no idea what time it was. But if he were to guess, he would go with 4 AM. The night was currently at its darkest. And a certain air of tranquility had settled over the bathhouse. He was sure that there was still business going on but the employees’ floor was quiet as a mouse at this point. There was a nightlight in the corridor to guide those still returning from their shift. But the steady breathing noises coming from all around him created the illusion of peace. Pumpkin wasn’t back yet. Yoongi had listened closely to every pair of naked feet tiptoeing over the bamboo mats. The boys and girls returning from work had all smelled sweet and clean, had obviously showered before bed. But none of them had smelled pink. In addition to that, Yoongi was sure that he would recognize Pumpkin’s way of moving about a room by now. He walked like he talked. Very straight forward. Clumped a little. Running into him on his way out was the worst-case scenario. Him or Crow, that was. Everyone else would most likely perceive him as one of the employees going about his business, hopefully not mind him at all.

It was probably time. He couldn’t afford waiting much longer. But something kept him from finally getting up. His heart was hammering in his throat, had been for the last couple of hours. And there was this taste on his tongue. Crow’s taste. It just wouldn’t go away. Like swallowing a spoonfull of cinnamon it had glued his tongue to his palate, it was everywhere. Under his tongue and stuck to his gums, he couldn’t swallow it and it kept him on the verge of coughing. The kiss kept flashing through his mind like movie stills, a new wave of physical arousal washing over him every time he let his thoughts slip. There was a voice inside his mind telling him to fuck everything, go look for Crow instead and let himself be consumed by the raven boy until he lost the rest of his mind for good. And it scared him just how loud that voice actually was. What the fuck was wrong with him? In a situation like this, how could he be torn between forging out escape plans and ridiculously explicit sex fantasies about someone he had met only a few hours ago? This wasn’t his style. He had been toying with the thought of letting himself get laid by a stranger tonight, alright… In order to get his mind off Hoseok for at least some hours… and to prove him that he, too, was able to move on just like this. But now, the situation obviously suggested different priorities and yet he could not stop thinking about Crow’s strong hand pressing down between his shoulder blades as he pounded into him relentlessly, the occasional smug chuckle of his letting Yoongi know who was boss. It was as though he had been bewitched. As if the saliva that Crow had left in his mouth was some kind of potion. Like liquefied lust still lingering on and being absorbed by his mucosa. Like an LSD tab… It made him want to stay. Get up tomorrow morning with the other employees and look for a way to sneak out with Crow again. Again and again.

Yoongi jumped a little when Hoseok all of a sudden let out a dry cough and stirred under his woolen blanket. He turned his head to the side and found himself almost face to face with his ex-boyfriend who was about to slip from his pillow, obviously not used to the limited space of the makeshift bed. The white moonlight made his skin appear particularly soft, powdered almost. Like one of those beautifying filters that came with his favorite camera app and that he had always used when taking selfies with Yoongi because he was somewhat insecure of his bare face. He found his eyebrows too sparse, skin too oily and dark-circles too big. Found that his laugh lines made him look old. But they were what Yoongi missed most as he looked at his whitewashed softened face that, even in his sleep, was troubled by a serious expression.

“I’ll be back”, Yoongi mouthed. His hand reached for Hoseok’s hair but in the end his fingers remained hovering over his ear, too afraid to touch and wake him up. “I won’t let you forget me this easily… asshole”, his glance added. Then he held his breath, got on all fours and eventually stood up
in slow motion. He remembered the brass ring the moment it slipped all the way down to his ankle and the feeling of it moving around as he took the first couple of steps made him flinch with discomfort. Walking only on the balls of his feet, he made for the sliding door without even glancing at the futons he passed by. If anyone was awake and watching him he needed them to think he was leaving for the toilet or something. So instead of moving particularly slowly, he went over to the door quickly and with determination. But the second he slipped through the crack and pushed it back shut behind him, he was already about to go deaf from his own heartbeat. The nightlight turned out to be a single candle placed on a little plate next to the entrance of the dormitory to mark it. The flame was dancing and so was Yoongi’s shadow on the opposite wall. Unsteady like this, the light was more threat than comfort and Yoongi decided it was best to not take unnecessary breaks. He continued down the corridor into the direction where he remembered the elevators to be. The excess fabric of his pants kept getting caught between his knees as he hurried on, muffled sounds like wind punching laundry on a clothes line. In the dark, Yoongi’s eyesight was even worse. He squinted to make out whether the outlines in the distance really were the elevator doors, when suddenly a person appeared behind the corner he was approaching. The person was limping. Dragging their right leg, one hand tracing the wall for support. Yoongi froze. The person’s silhouette was all blurry and for a horrifying second he was sure to recognize Pumpkin’s devil horns until the person cleared their throat and their voice turned out to be female. The girl came closer, not really minding Yoongi, slogging along towards the dormitory. When she was about to pass him by, he realized the two triangles on her head to be cat ears.

“You… you okay?”, he asked, not able to hold back. She was wearing the midnight blue harem pants that Pumpkin had shown to him earlier but the girl’s uniform obviously required pairing them with a bra like crop top. It was exposing her flat tummy and granting a generous view on her perky round breasts.

“Never mind me”, she forced a laugh. “Was my own damn fault… I wanted the tip so badly… Could have said no.”

“What happened to you?”, Yoongi asked, unable to shut himself up. The girl stopped and shook her head with a smile. “You don’t want to know… Who are you though? You’re new here, huh? I don’t think I’ve seen you around. I would have remembered your face. You look like a cat. I like cats.”

She smiled again and something about her smile was contagious. Yoongi returned it.

“I’m… I’m Suga”, he finally said. And a faint trace of his usual self came through as he continued: “Let me guess… Your name’s Kitty.”

The girl exhaled a laugh.

“Close. It’s Kitten. Nice to meet you, Suga. Happen to have a smoke?”

“I… I’m sorry. I could use one too but… my pack is empty.”

“Aw, what a pity. Newbies sometimes still have cigarettes on them… Usually they only take their money and phones away.”

“What do you mean?”, Yoongi burst out.

“Oh, no no… You’ll have to ask somebody else to explain that to you. Or figure it out yourself. I can’t risk telling you. Let’s make a deal, though… if one of us manages to get their hands on some cigarettes, we’ll share.”

She extended her hand to him and clenched her teeth as the movement seemed to cause her a lot of
pain. Her whole weight was on her left leg, she kept the right one slightly bent and only rested it on her toe.

Yoongi took her hand to support her first and foremost. He kept holding on to it when he asked his next question.

“Where can you get cigarettes in here, though? Are we allowed to smoke?”

“The guests give us some sometimes… to tip us off. Some of us have figured out how to make the frogs steal cigarettes for them… We’re technically not allowed to smoke. But there are ways and places. I’ll show you if you manage to get me one. Deal?”

“Deal”, Yoongi replied half-heartedly. If he returned here together with the police, he would make sure to bring that girl a whole carton of smokes. And a doctor…

Kitten gave him a smile soft as satin before she let go of his hand and limped on, leaving Yoongi with a bad conscience that felt like hot tar dripping into his stomach. But he could not waste time on carrying her to bed. If only he at least had been able to give her that cigarette she craved now... He took a deep breath and proceeded to the corner, glanced around it before he moved on to the balustrade. His fingers caught the handrail and he exhaled deeply before he finally forced himself to look down at the atrium. His stomach turned upon the sight and his arms and legs started to tingle but his eyes continued scanning the hall with unyielding determination. He had no time to be afraid of the height right now. On some floors there was still light. Red light. Yoongi counted and confirmed that the busiest place had to be the private rooms on the 6th floor that Pumpkin had mentioned. And probably the bars. Staring up at the topmost floor he could make out a bluish purple neon sign that most likely read “Midnight Bar” and that was located somewhere above the general direction of Madame Yu’s office. The elevator and the stairs were illuminated with dim yellow lights now. The bright golden and almost festive illumination he had encountered upon his arrival had given way to a much more secretive atmosphere. The occasional frog was still hopping by on the ground floor or waddling on his hind legs, carrying something from A to B. Apart for them, the coast was clear. Yoongi pushed himself off the handrail and hurried over to the stairs, his anklet dancing around his leg as he ran down flight after flight, steps muffled by the red velvet carpet that covered them. On the second to last flight of stairs he almost ran into a frog that was struggling to carry a pile of used towels. The second he noticed that they were covered in dark stains, Yoongi tripped and had to catch himself against the banisters in order not to crash into the small staggering body. As though it had been his fault, the frog did his best to indicate a bow before he struggled on, leaving Yoongi to himself and the tormenting thought of “what if those really were bloodstains?!”. As soon as the frog was out of sight, Yoongi gave up on his resolve not to come off as someone who was running for his life and darted across the entrance hall towards the curtain leading to the cellar. The moment he pulled it shut behind him, he was already on his knees groping for his boots that still stood where he had left them. Only to find that he couldn’t force his leg in with the anklet around it. With wavering hands he half-heartedly tried to break it open but even though he remembered brass to be quite bendable, the material didn’t give an inch. Once again he tried to press all the way down into the shoe but the metal cut into his skin and so he just gave up and slid on the next best leather slippers instead. They would have to do. He was already past the kitchen when he finally managed to fix the back over his heels, half jumping half stumbling forward. His hand caught the handrail of the stairs and he could swear Pumpkin’s heavy odor was still trapped in the narrow hallway leading down into the cellar. Yoongi rushed down the stairs as fast as the inconvenient cut of his pants and the loose slippers let him. For the fraction of a second, he considered looking for his Thrasher hoodie in Bird’s room but rejected the idea right away. After all, he didn’t really need it, did he? He could do without it. The only thing that really mattered was to get out unnoticed in order to help Hoseok and Namjoon. He would have to stop clinging to the past now.
A sudden noise from out of nowhere made Yoongi freeze in mid motion. He had made it to the foot of the stairs and halfway through the hallway leading to the little door that opened into the boiler room. But suddenly his eyes fell upon the strip of light coming from another door that he had not noticed the first time he had walked past it. It fell upon the stone floor and the opposite wall like a laser beam separating him from the promised land of the boiler room that led into freedom. Yoongi knew what he was about to see and yet he approached the door, his footsteps drowning in Pumpkin’s frantic moans. Blue Bird was holding him up against his bedroom wall, a bedroom that was nothing more than a dirty mattress on a naked stone floor. Pumpkin was just as naked, while Bird’s overalls pooled around his ankles, wife beater still on while he was thrusting into the body of his boyfriend, holding him up by the thighs, muscles flexing just like when he had been shoveling coals. Pumpkin’s head was just lolling around, hair messy, devil horns no longer on. He wasn’t even moaning on purpose, the sounds just escaped his lips as Bird fucked them out of his body. It was more like a constant whining, cut into pieces by the blue-haired man’s forceful thrusts that were obviously so satisfactory that Pumpkin was bordering unconscious with lust. Bird was visibly struggling to keep his body up against the wall as Pumpkin wouldn’t help support himself any longer and the second he made a quick pause to readjust Pumpkin’s legs around his hips and prop him up once more, Pumpkin’s eyes flung open and caught Yoongi’s glance. For a few seconds he held on to it, eyes veiled with arousal, his flushed cheeks stained with the soot from Bird’s hands. But then he just let his head drop back against the wall and let out a lengthy, this time very purposeful moan when Bird pushed back into him. Yoongi whisked around and ran. He threw himself against the door to the boiler room, didn’t waste a single second to glance at the smoldering ashes of what had been a burning fire when he had gotten here. His hand caught the handle of the entrance door and found it open. He made up the outside staircase practically on all fours. Hands always reaching for the step ahead for support. Throwing a glance over his shoulder, he noticed that he had left the boiler room door open but neither Bird nor Pumpkin seemed to make any effort to catch him. And even if they were currently getting dressed to go after him… they would not find him. Not taking a second to catch his breath, he dashed through the front yard, using both arms to cover his face as the branches kept slapping him like hands trying to hold him back. He dropped on all fours to crawl through under the fence and was back on the red wooden bridge. A reassuring look at the coast told him that only one of the ships was still anchoring off shore. The wooden planks creaked under the soft heels of his slippers as he crossed the bridge, already feeling a stinging sensation in his lungs that weren’t used to any kind of workout. On his way over the hill and into the village the taste of blood started to creep up as he didn’t pause to cough. Still challenged by the slippers and his clothes he struggled forward but was suddenly fueled by new energy as he recognized the tables where they had eaten last night. Just like before, the city appeared like a morgue, red Chinese paper lanterns casting a gloomy and surreal light upon the tabletop that was now empty and cleaned of all the rotten food. Yoongi dropped to his knees and once again checked under the table for their belongings. There was nothing. All the bones were gone, too. Everything except for a small round item. Yoongi crawled towards it and picked it up. It was a purple glass marble. Had Taehyung lost it here? While taking their belongings? Yoongi let it slip into the cigarette package in his pocket and struggled back to his feet, threw a glance over his shoulder but there was still nobody following him. Upon reaching the carrousel, he had to stop for a few seconds to catch his breath and the rest of the way towards the train station he gave up running in favor of just walking quickly, thinking himself safe already. The door was where he remembered it and he pushed it open without a second thought. The station hall lay in silence. Instead of the bright summer afternoon sun, moonlight now fell through the multicolored glass window of the church-like building. The colors it threw on the weathered floor were much less intense than those that had lingered there this afternoon. The solemn silence inside these walls slowed Yoongi down. He stopped and his eyes got caught on the hole that Hoseok had tripped over. Was leaving them behind really the right thing to do? Would they be safe until he returned with help? He remembered the limping girl and the allegedly blood-soaked towel the frog had been carrying. What was going on in that bathhouse? In that place that seemed like a parallel universe, a reality opposing the one he was used to. Out of nowhere, a gust of wind blew him in the
face. It seemed to be coming from the corridor that led out of the theme park. Maybe it was the wind he had encountered on the red bridge earlier… that had retreated to the station hall for sleep. And Yoongi had woken it up again. It rustled through the dead leaves on the floor and the sudden chill made Yoongi shiver. Another gust followed, an even stronger one this time. As if an invisible hand was trying to chase him back to where he was coming from. And as if to oppose it, Yoongi took another step forward towards the way out. Another gust. Another defiant step. And that was when the pain hit him like a bullet. It forced him to his knees within a matter of seconds and made him double over and try to break free from something he could not escape. The anklet around his left leg was glowing and seemed to melt his skin where it was touching it. It smelled like burned flesh, burned hair and Yoongi found himself too paralyzed by the pain to still figure out what to do. He lost his shoes, coiling on the floor trying to kick the ring off, screaming in terror when a strong arm reached around his hips and dragged him to his feet before also grabbing his legs and lifting him up.

* He must have blacked out for a second. The moment he came back to his senses, he found himself lying in the high grass next to one of those stone apes, staring up at Bird’s pierced and tattooed face. He was hunched above him on all fours, hands left and right next to his head. His beautiful face painted by grave concern.

“I fathom my boyfriend told you not to try and make a run for it tonight”, he hissed reproachfully. It was only then when Yoongi noticed that the anklet wasn’t glowing anymore. His skin however was still burning with pain, he propped himself up on his forearms to look down and found the lower part of his left leg covered in a giant burn wound. The sight made him drop down to the floor again.

“How the fuck did that thing get that hot all of a sudden?”

Bird sat back on his calves contemplating Yoongi with a mixture of pity and disbelief.

“It’s a spell…”, he finally said drily.

“Spell?!”, Yoongi echoed as if trying to block off the word and return it to its owner. “As in magic spell? You gotta be fucking kidding me, Mr. Blue Bird.”

“It’s up to you if you believe it or not. Just like it was up to you to listen to Pumpkin’s advice. Go ahead and try to leave again if you feel like it. I won’t stop you. But let me tell you. That flesh wound is already God fucking awful. I might be able to save your leg if we make it back quickly. But I won’t guarantee for nothing if you go back in there and get it roasted some more.”

Their eyes fought a battle until Yoongi put up the white flag. He raised his arms to close them around Bird’s neck and allowed him to pick him up.

* Bird had carried him all the way back to the bathhouse. Only on the stairs leading down to the boiler-room, he had put him down in order to hold on to the handrail while keeping his arm around Yoongi’s shoulders guiding him down step by step.

“Go to my room. Pumpkin’s waiting there. I’ll join you in a minute”, he ordered after closing the door behind Yoongi who was biting back tears at this point as the brass ring kept getting into contact with the raw flesh of the wound. He used the wall for support and slowly made back to the room he had caught them in. Pumpkin was sitting cross-legged on the mattress wearing nothing but a pair of boxers… and Yoongi’s Thrasher hoodie. The whole room smelled of Marijuana for he was holding a half-smoked blunt to his sinful lips. A faint hint of red was still painting his cheeks, he didn’t make
a secret of being completely fucked out. Yoongi greeted him by letting his glance drop to the floor. With a listless move of his head Pumpkin signaled him to come over. Gathering his last bit of strength, Yoongi made it to the mattress and plunged down next to Pumpkin who immediately put an arm around his shoulders to catch him and offered the blunt to him by holding it to his lips. Yoongi took a long drag and then let his head fall onto the pink-haired boy’s shoulder, blaming the tears that welled up in his eyes on his numbing odor.

“You’re maybe gonna lose that leg”, Pumpkin commented in a rather unimpressed voice and deeply inhaled his next drag from the blunt. “That sure is worse than most of the burn wounds I’ve seen so far.”

As if he had told him to, Yoongi opened his eyes, threw a glance at Pumpkin’s foot on the mattress and really found what he was looking for. The additional little ankle bracelets were there to cover up the white burn scar that the big one had left there three years ago.

“So you tried to escape, too”, Yoongi mumbled, fingers accepting the big cigarette from Pumpkin’s once more. “You could have warned me, you know?”, he added before putting it to his lips. As far as he could tell it was perfectly ordinary weed. And maybe it was the best damn thing that he could have offered him right now. Besides a shot in the face maybe.

“I did warn you”, Pumpkin shrugged and took the blunt back as soon as Yoongi had inhaled a couple of times. “You could have picked a more convenient time for your escape, though. You knew very well what I was up to after work.”

“I’m sorry for ruining it for you”, Yoongi mumbled, still propped against Pumpkin’s body in order not to collapse. The entire left side of his body was paralyzed with pain, his eyes were still watering.

“You didn’t ruin the sex. I like being caught. I came super hard thanks to you. You ruined the after-sex-cuddling part though when Bird had to put his clothes back on and come for your help as soon as he had finished me. You should feel sorry for that. It’s my favorite part after all.”

“Sorry for that”, Yoongi whispered and Pumpkin caught his head as he threatened to lose conscience again. It was when Bird entered the room, holding his hands in front of his body. They were covered in soot. He kneeled down next to the mattress and reached for Yoongi’s ankle, gently propping his naked foot up on his knee.

“Give him something to bite on, Baby”, he advised Pumpkin who just reluctantly drew his arm back into the Thrasher hoodie a little and put the end of the sleeve on Yoongi’s mouth.

“Bite it”, he nodded when Yoongi’s eyes flung up at him with a thick expression. The second Bird’s hands closed around his leg, he understood the order. Bird started rubbing the soot into the open wound, he could literally feel the little particles scratch like exfoliating pearls in a face scrub. His scream was muffled by the fabric of his own sweater that Pumpkin kept forcing into his mouth. Yoongi struggled in the younger’s tight grip, ready to kick Bird off in order to make him stop as the pain got unbearable. It was not only the soot. There was this feeling of an electric current again that Bird’s hands seemed to emit as they kept massaging the coal dust into Yoongi’s burned flesh. Much stronger than the buzzing sensation he had felt upon touching Taehyung’s hands. But no matter how hard he protested, Bird would not let himself be deterred. He kept pressing onto the wound, shoving his long fingers under the anklet to reach every inch of the skin it had destroyed. And all of a sudden, the pain was gone. Completely. As though it had never been there in the first place. Bird let go of his leg and brushed off his hands on his overall.

“You’ll be okay”, he commented. “It’s scarred already.”
Pumpkin helped Yoongi sit up and when he glanced down at his leg, he almost choked with surprise. The wound was gone. His lower leg was covered in soot… and smooth white scars.

“Usually I can prevent scarring… but not with a wound this big. I suggest you let Pumpkin organize you some of these ankle bracelets to hide them. Or this will earn you a big fat face tattoo.”

“This is what you get them for? Trying to escape from this place?”

“That’s like the most popular way to obtain them, yeah…”

“But why…? Why tattoo people’s faces then?”

“Use your brain for once”, Pumpkin rolled his eyes and offered the remaining butt of the blunt to his boyfriend who finished it before putting it out in a small ashtray next to the bed. A lot of stuff cluttered the floor around it. Comic books, magazines, a package of tissues, earbuds and Yoongi counted at least three boxes of condoms in different styles and flavors.

“They see you are trying to get back to the real world… they will make sure you won’t fit in there anymore.”

“Fit in?”

“Can you imagine something worse than a face tattoo in South Korean society? It’s a life-ruiner. Depending on what you did before ending up here… or what you plan to do in your future… a face tattoo has the potential to destroy a career, a life… Our guests fancy them. Because they look exotic… forbidden. But look at Bird… what could he still do except for maybe become a tattoo artist himself? Face tattoos are a stigma. The old witch is counting on society’s intolerance to keep us from trying to escape.”

“Did you try to escape, too?”, Yoongi turned to Bird who was in the middle of taking off his overalls, his boots already standing next to the chair that was the only piece of furniture apart from a small shelf where he kept his clothes and some personal items. The walls of the room were plastered with band posters. “Why do you wear the ring around your wrist instead of your ankle?”, he added, tired eyes trying to decipher some of the English names on the wall behind Bird. They got caught on a David Bowie logo.

“Cause officially I’m not one of the regular employees. Apparently my aunt thinks it makes me feel less like a slave to wear it around my arm.”

“Your aunt?!”

“He’s Madame Yu’s nephew”, Pumpkin informed him, accepting a kiss from Blue Bird as he crawled onto the mattress to sit down with them, wearing only his undershirt and grey boxers now.

“He’s what?!”, Yoongi exclaimed in utter disbelief. “You are Taehyung’s cousin?!”

“Taehyung’s mother is my mother’s twin sister”, Bird explained, turning his septum ring to make sure the little ball was in the center where it belonged. He then proceeded to take his red bandana off and used his hand to rearrange his messy blue waves. Now that Yoongi knew, he realized them to be the same quality as Taehyung’s hair. Big and untamed with a metallic shimmer.

“But… they are… when did she… I mean… Madame Yu is so old already!”

“She’s 51”, Bird replied soberly. “And so is my mother obviously.”
“But… she… she looks like… like… at least 85!”

“I told you it makes you age faster when you’re constantly grumpy and self-centered”, Pumpkin snorted. “Plus she’s a smoker… just like you…”

Yoongi couldn’t keep his jaw from dropping.

“Madame Yu gave birth to Taehyung when she was 34. And she didn’t look a lot different then. I was born when my Mom was 24. I’m ten years older than Taehyung, I turned 27 in June.”

“But… but… if you are her nephew… how come you… work down here… and have your face tattooed… while Taehyung is treated like…”

“A prince?”, Bird finished the sentence for him. “Well… he’s my aunt’s everything… which does not exactly apply to me as well. I didn’t get my face tattoos as punishments, though. I got them cause I wanted them. Out of solidarity with the employees… to piss off my aunt… and cause I think they look cool. I regard myself as one of the staff members… I’m on their side. And that’s the main reason I was expelled to the realm of the boiler room. Because I caused too much trouble.”

“What did you do?”, Yoongi inquired, using his sleeve to gently wipe off the soot from his scarred ankle. It wouldn’t really come off.

“He saved a few too many lives”, Pumpkin said with pride.

“I offended the guests”, Bird toned down the words of his boyfriend. Yoongi’s glance travelled over his butterfly neck tattoo again. He was about to ask where he got the scar. But once again Bird seemed to feel his eyes on his skin and blocked the question off by asking one himself.

“How do you feel? Does your ankle still hurt?”

“No it… how… how did you do that?”

“I told you soot has disinfectant properties”, Bird smiled as his hand travelled into Pumpkin’s pink hair and brushed it off his forehead. Like a coin hitting the bottom of a well, the realization echoed in Yoongi’s mind.

“So it was you! The scratch on my temple. You fixed it when you touched it. But how?! How would you do that?!”

“The soot balls annoy the fuck out of me most of the time but sometimes they are pretty helpful creatures.”

“He can’t follow you”, Pumpkin chuckled, interpreting Yoongi’s doubtful expression correctly. Bird caught his boyfriend’s smile as he reached for Yoongi’s ankle that was still smeared in thick black soot. He gently slapped his calf.

“Yo, fuck off his leg now, it’s enough.”

And once again Yoongi had to witness how the soot seemed to curl up to tiny little cotton balls, rolling over his foot and dropping down from his toes. And did they make noises? Automatically his glance travelled over to the ashtray.

“That was just some generic weed to help calm you down and ease the pain. It’s not responsible for what you see. They are real”, Pumpkin explained and extended his palm. One of the soot balls jumped onto it and Yoongi was ready to slap himself in the face upon watching how it curled up like
a tiny hamster or something.

“Is this… is this magic?”, he asked, sounding stupid even to himself.

“I’m afraid it is”, Bird confirmed and flicked his fingers against Pumpkin’s palm to make the soot animal jump off with a start while letting out a complaining little sound. He then leaned over to get a little jar from next to the mattress. It contained tiny multi colored candy pearls that looked like they consisted of 100% sugar. There were pink, green, yellow and white ones and they were star-shaped. Bird shook a good amount on his palm and then threw them on the floor as though he was feeding chicken. Immediately the soot balls darted for the candy and seconds later it was gone. Had they freaking eaten it?! Yoongi suddenly felt very weak. Once again he sunk back against Pumpkin who was ready to steady him with his shoulder.

“But… I thought…”

“This is not the magical world of Harry Potter, Yoongi. Magic is nothing but canalized energy… Energy bundled and sent the right way.”

“Wait… wait. Hold on. If you say energy… this is why… why you buzz. Why Taehyung buzzes. You… you’re.”

“He’s a witch”, Pumpkin cut him off with a cocky move of his upper body. “Just like his aunt Madame Yu… Just like his mother Madame Z. And like his cousin Taehyung, our spoiled and bratty young master who’s probably the most powerful witch alive in all of Asia… without knowing as his mother won’t let him explore his powers.”

Bird extended his hand and put two fingers on Yoongi’s. It was a feeling like touching a non-isolated power outlet. The young man was buzzing with energy.

“And now go ahead and imagine how it feels to have his dick inside you”, Pumpkin raised both of his eyebrows. He wasn’t wearing the purple lenses anymore. His natural eye color was a cool dark brown, bordering black. Without the lenses his glance looked less artificial… but definitely not less sassy.

“Baby”, Bird chuckled reproachfully and gently slapped the back of Pumpkin’s head.

“Were you… born like this?”, Yoongi asked, lacking other words.

“Yeah… but as I said. Magic… witchcraft if you will… is just energy. Those born with it can transfer it onto other things. As you saw… I transferred it onto the soot. We transfer it on everything we touch. Intentionally and unintentionally. Show him, Pumpkin.”

Pumpkin reached for his own ankle and took off one of the golden bracelets, it was a small chain with little stars and moons as charms. He closed his hand around it and pressed it shut firmly. Bird watched him with an adoring smile. And when the pink-haired male unclenched his fingers again, two identical bracelets lay on his palm.

“You can have one”, he addressed Yoongi who didn’t really know whether he wanted that much of a proper explanation for Taehyung and the marbles. He just watched as Pumpkin fixed the little chain to his scarred ankle.

“Did he… was he able to do this because… you just had sex?”

“Bingo. I passed some of my energy on to him. It will last him some time. We didn’t have sex in quite a while and probably won’t get around to doing it again anytime soon so there’s not really a
build-up. But let’s say you’d sleep with a witch on a very regular basis… it would earn you a constant level of this energy so to speak… and you’d be able to perform some basic magic. Multiplying things is one of the easier things… You’d probably be able to do this after I kissed you hard enough. But there are other things that require a lot more energy… like healing abilities or mind-control. Even my powers are limited in that respect. They are very limited actually. A very powerful witch can even revive people who have been lethally wounded … but I can just heal flesh wounds… I can’t cure illnesses and stuff… I’m only half-blooded. My father is a white American who doesn’t possess any magical powers. My mother, aunt and Taehyung above all are way stronger than me. That’s one of the reasons why she… Madame Yu… doesn’t treat me like her own flesh and blood. But it’s less me being half-blooded than my Mom stealing the man she wanted away from her. I guess that’s nothing you need to know, though. Nothing you need to know in order to survive here.”

“My friends have lost their memory. My ex… Ho… Hope… he doesn’t remember who I am”, Yoongi suddenly couldn’t hold back anymore.

“That’s what you get for using chemical drugs”, Pumpkin shrugged.

“You’re saying this is the reason?”, Yoongi interrogated, sitting up again to look Pumpkin in the eye. He was at a point where his olfactory sense had either gotten numb or used to Pumpkin’s multitude of perfumes.

“What else would be the reason?”, he said in a sassy voice and caught the glance of his boyfriend over Yoongi’s shoulder.

“So how do I get out of here? Is there a way to get rid of the anklet?”

“You don’t want to get rid of it. More than a shackle that heats up when you try to escape it serves as a protection against the guests.”

“How?!”

“It’s better if you don’t know…”, Bird and Pumpkin mumbled in one voice.

“As long as you stick to the rules, you’re safe in here… Eventuaylly you’ll come to the conclusion that you’re better off here than anywhere else, really… At least for me it was like this…I was doomed. But getting here meant getting a second shot at life in my case… And I met the love of my life here… who accepts me as I am. Who’s not afraid of me. Who treats me like I couldn’t even treat myself… like I deserve love.”

Bird threw Pumpkin a loving glance that once again made Yoongi’s insides clench with jealousy.

“I’m not taking back what I said earlier… this place is hell. But more than being worse than the outside world… it just mirrors it on a smaller scale.”

“Are you prostitutes?”, Yoongi asked quietly. He figured that he and Pumpkin didn’t work when they unleashed their personas on each other. But the more honest he became, the more approachable the pink-haired male presented himself.

“Define what you understand a prostitute to be.”

“Someone who sells their body for money… or food and shelter in your case.”

“I don’t like to think of it as selling my body… I sell services, you know. I’m taking my body with me at the end of the day. And do with it what I want. Let my boyfriend have it, for example. But
yeah… sex work is making up a large part of this establishment. Basically, we first and foremost really are a spa. The guests come here for wellness and entertainment… They like to discuss important business deals while getting a massage… or socialize while enjoying a pole dance performance… all of them are criminals. Hitmen, drug lords, gang bosses and members… just every organized kind of crime you can think of. As you might have figured they aren’t human… and yet they are. Just like Bird. Like Madame Yu. They are humans with some superhuman powers… and some superhuman needs. Why else do you think the police are entirely helpless against the kkangpae, the mafia in our country… The Yakuza in Japan and the Triades in China… They, too, know how to canalize energy… Anyway… There are a lot of different favors they will ask from you… Starting off with hand massages and ear cleaning, leading up to a back scrub, a lap dance, a blow job and some of them have very peculiar demands… Fetishes so to say. Bird used to take care of the more common fetishes… he’s a professional domina. And I use that term cause I don’t believe in gendering. We have an SM studio on the third floor where he used to work when the wellness area closes and the fires can be left unattended. He served the customers that looked for any kind of physical and psychological humiliation to fulfill their sexual desire. I was more than fine with it, in case you wonder… they were not allowed to touch him at all. It’s part of those dynamics. There has been… an incident… however… after which it was considered safest for him to only take care of the boiler room for the time being. He only still occasionally agrees to sessions with some of our most important regulars. Those that refuse to accept the services of the other staff specialized in that field… cause they deem him the most skilled. To which I 100% agree. He’s a beast in bed. Not only because his dick is this buzzing magic wand… “

“If you don’t really mind the sex work… and not even all of them demand sexual favors… then why do you insist that this place is hell?”, Yoongi asked, sticking to the careful and upright tone that had proved itself to work on Pumpkin.

“Because sexual favors… even sexual intercourse itself… is by far not the worst thing these creatures will ask from you.”

“So what is the worst thing?”, Yoongi ventured.

Pumpkin and Bird exchanged a meaningful glance. It was dark and heavy. Then Pumpkin shook his head.

“Don’t you think you should tell me? Don’t you think I should be prepared? You told me not to run away… fair enough. If you had mentioned the risk of my leg getting fried like a fucking chicken piece at KFC maybe I would have listened to you.”

“You won’t get in the situation of someone asking a favor of that kind from you… It’s against the rules to ask newbies for any kind of sexual favor. As long as you are wearing that nametag, you’re safe either way. If someone approaches you with a shady request you can always send them to me… I’ll take care of that. I have experience dealing with their kinks… I do almost everything… well there’s this one thing I can’t do… but that’s fine cause it’s forbidden anyway.”

Yoongi noticed the sharp breath Bird drew in after Pumpkin had finished his sentence.

“Anyway… Your main tasks will be to help prepare the wellness area during daytime and play piano at the Midnight bar after sunset. It’s gonna be fine… It’s up to you if one day you agree to more… The more you do, the better they pay, obviously… It depends on the life you wanna live here… I regard it as self-care to smoke weed once or twice a week. So I make sure to suck enough dick to make the money to afford it.”

“You could also just let me pay for it”, Bird mumbled and rolled his eyes.
“But I don’t want that. We’re a working couple. Meanwhile I know how much of a privilege it is to have a job and be able to care for myself and treat the one I love to something I’ve earned with my own two hands. It hasn’t always been that way… and as I said, I like my job… I love sex. And it doesn’t make my body less mine to share it with those who pay an appropriate sum for it.”

Yoongi just stared at the Thrasher logo on Pumpkin’s chest. As much as his words impressed him, he didn’t have the strength to express it anymore. Meanwhile exhaustion felt like a thick layer of insulating material wrapped around him. His body was dead tired. But still his heart and mind were racing with the constant pondering over how he was supposed to escape now. Now that the initial shock over the anklet incident had died down, that the pain had faded and his brain was finally starting to process what was actually going on, his body seemed to shut down. It was simply too much. The only man he had ever loved had forgotten who he was. Together with him and his best friend who most likely didn’t remember him either, he was trapped in a brothel that catered to the mafia. And magic existed.

“What’s with that face, Yoongi Hyung?”, Pumpkin asked, mockingly using honorifics. “I mean I get it… must all be quite a lot… but in the end, nothing actually bad happened, did it?”

Yoongi’s glance shot up at him. He opened his mouth and felt his jaw contract when he started talking.

“You heard me, didn’t you? My ex doesn’t remember who I am… and neither does my best friend… at least that’s what it looks like… I nearly lost my leg and just learned that I might still get my letter from Hogwarts after all… What else has to happen before you grant me the right to feel a little irritated? I fucking loved this man, ok? And maybe I didn’t show it enough while I still could. But I wanted him back, ok? Even though I know there would have been no second chance for us, I still wasn’t over him. And now he mistakes me for a fucking stranger.”

He stopped there cause his tongue felt like a dry heap of fabric in his mouth. He swallowed around it.

“All the better, ain’t it? That means green light for you and Mr. Raven… I fathom you don’t need your ex to make a scene about you getting into his nest… And now you can also accept our offer without having to worry about him being a bitch about you having a little fun with us…”

“Pumpkin”, Bird scolded him but it was already too late. The tears had spilled over Yoongi’s lower lid. Too embarrassed to wipe them off he just glared at Pumpkin with sparkling eyes that still spat fire so fiercely it was a miracle the tears didn’t evaporate right away.

“I motherfucking don’t want to have sex with you! Hear me, boy? And I told you… I fucking told you that it has emotional value for me. And still… you wear that sweater like… do you have like… no shame at all?!”

He angrily used his sleeves to brush the tears off his cheeks as though they were dirt he tried to brush off the sidewalk now that they had started to audibly drop on the mattress between them. A deep frown appeared on Bird’s forehead, Pumpkin was worrying his bottom lip.

“I was cold after sex…”, he finally mumbled in an apologetic voice. “How would I know that…”

“I thought you knew everything. Where has your talent to read people gone all of a sudden, huh?”, Yoongi barked, using attack as a self-defense. He never cried in front of others. He had wanted to cry in that café. Cry in front of Hoseok and let him see what all of this did to him. And maybe tears or at least some honest words had been what Hoseok was expecting from him in that crucial moment. But instead of showing his true self, he had gone ahead and ruined it all.
“No need to come at me like this…”, Pumpkin muttered in a tone that could be best described as sulky. “Go ahead and comfort him…”, he then added, addressing his boyfriend. “I’m not good at this shit…”

If Pumpkin had been wearing a mask until this point, he had taken it off now. The sassiness was completely gone from his voice. Usually, he stressed every single word, now he was just mumbling them to himself, in a low and awkward voice. He ran his fingers through his still slightly sweaty pastel hair and avoided Yoongi’s glance altogether. Bird, however, followed his boyfriend’s wish and approached Yoongi, moving closer to him on the mattress. Yoongi looked up at him with reluctant bewilderment. He was ready to push him away should he go ahead and try to hug him but Bird caught him very much off guard when he leaned in without further ado and brushed along Yoongi’s jaw with his index finger.

“May I?”, he whispered while his lips already pressed against Yoongi’s who found himself too baffled to even think of protesting.

For the second time that day, he felt an unfamiliar tongue part his lips and gently feel for his own. When they touched, Yoongi jumped a little and breathed his surprise into Bird’s mouth. It felt like drinking happiness from the other’s lips. A cocktail of hot chocolate mixed with adrenaline. And then it was like putting your tongue to an electric fence. His kiss buzzed so much harder than his hands, Yoongi almost felt a soft vibration against his lips, a pleasant tingle and as the blue-haired male started moving his tongue with more force, a feeling similar to being on LSD spread through his body. A blissful state of oblivion. Of having your cares extracted from your body like a splinter from your heart. When Bird tried to back away, Yoongi found himself holding on, actively kissing back, his hand reaching for the other’s undershirt, grabbing it tightly. Bird laughed a little into the kiss and an almost unbearable wave of comfort ran down Yoongi’s throat. He gasped at the feeling and opened his mouth even wider, realizing how he was in the middle of climbing onto Bird’s lap, arms instinctively wrapping around his neck as his eyes kept falling shut with the calming sensation.

He purposefully ignored Pumpkin’s amused snort in the background and captured Bird’s lower lip with his teeth until Madame Yu’s nephew eventually shoved him away with a self-satisfied grin.

“Can’t let you overdo it. You’re not used to magic. Too much won’t do you any good. It’s like getting drunk. A lot worse actually…”

And Yoongi could already feel it. All of a sudden, he was very dizzy. It felt like a swarm of mosquitos dancing in his forehead and the room around him was so blurry that even his glasses wouldn’t have helped.

“You feeling better?”, Pumpkin asked and Yoongi was too occupied with himself to notice the caring softness in his voice. He just nodded and awkwardly withdrew his legs from around Bird’s hips. How did they even end up there?

“You can sleep here”, Pumpkin offered. “You need some rest. And I figure you won’t sleep a wink next to your ex in the dorm… I’m also not going back there for tonight. I spend the night at Bird’s whenever I get the chance to. And then sneak back to the dorm before the others wake up. Which is pretty late. Since we work past midnight, usually until the early morning hours, we’re allowed to sleep in. So you don’t have to worry… just… stay here with us and try to relax a little. This mattress is not exactly a kingsize bed but… if we snuggle a little, it will do…”

Having said that, he pulled the purple woolen blanket free from under his legs and made himself comfortable on the right side of the mattress. Yoongi just stared at him, his face as blank as his mind.

“Don’t worry…”, Bird chuckled noiselessly. “Chances are we won’t harass you in your sleep. We just had sex… and I figure I stilled his thirst… at least for the time being.”
“You fucking demolished me”, Pumpkin giggled into the pillow that he had squeezed under his head and was now hugging. Bird blinked discreetly.

“What I’m saying is… Just wanting to fuck you wouldn’t pose a reason for him to invite you to our bed.”

“I figure things will look differently after you had a good night sleep”, Pumpkin agreed, addressing Yoongi. “I may… not sound like it but… I do know how you feel. Exactly how you feel.”

Bird gestured for Yoongi to lie down between him and Pumpkin and his exhaustion decided for his mind and body to obey. He awkwardly went for facing Pumpkin’s way, figuring that there was significantly less sexual tension between them than between him and Bird. He started to regret his decision when seconds later he felt the witch boy spoon him from behind, casually flinging an arm over his waist in order to caress Pumpkin’s side. Like standing in front of a big billboard, Yoongi felt the energy between them prickle on his skin. Awkwardly, his glance travelled up to meet Pumpkin’s eyes and see if he had already closed them. He was returning the glance, contemplating him with a gentle frown.

“I’m sorry”, he suddenly whispered without a warning and his fingers surfaced out of the depth of the Thrasher hoodie sleeve to gently brush over Yoongi’s hand lying flat on the mattress.

“Sorry for what?”, Yoongi asked bluntly to indicate that they were already done with it, that he had – if you will – forgiven him.

“A lot”, Pumpkin returned and withdrew his hand again, shoved it back under the pillow, literally the only one they had. “I’ll get the hoodie washed for you… and I won’t wear it again”, he gave him a brief smile before he closed his eyes and his face relaxed. Yoongi felt Bird stir the slightest bit behind him, snap his fingers and the next second the lights went out. Yoongi decided to not acknowledge it. Once again, he found himself in some kind of semidarkness, a little bit of light falling through the door crack, most likely the first light of the day that got in through some cellar window. He focused on his lips and still sensed the slightest trace of a burn caused by Bird’s drying saliva. He had been kissed by two strangers today. But under the fading effects of Bird’s serotonin kiss, he could still taste the black tar Crow had poured into his mouth. There were two things he would do again tomorrow. Kiss Jeon Jungkook. And try to escape.
Peonies Part 2

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Sorry that the update took longer than planned but I’ve been really busy with work and my private life. On Christmas, I released a OS based on this story called “Like Sun and Moon”. If you haven’t yet, I really recommend checking it out before reading this chapter. It is like a prequel to “Spirited so far Away” and tells the story of how Yoongi and Hoseok got together. Having read it might enhance the reading experience of “Peonies 2” and deepen the general understanding for the whole plot of SSFA but of course it’s not mandatory. You can watch the teaser here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bgCAGM0avc
Find the story in my works :)

Please note that the graphic smut starts in this chapter. And for those who haven’t made themselves familiar with the tags yet: This is a bottom!Yoongi fic. :)

If you like this fic and want me to continue translating it into English, please leave feedback and show some support! Thank you for reading <3

Peonies 2

“Harder”, Pumpkin forced out. “Come on!”

Yoongi had already broken into sweat. He gasped for air and gathered the last remaining bit of strength to put more force into his movements. Their heavy breathing was mixing, it was out of synch, Yoongi was panting way harder than the pastel-haired boy in front of him.

They were kneeling in an empty whirlpool that was big enough to fit at least 10 people. His fingers were clenching around the scrubbing brush so hard that the knuckles had turned white but big parts of the pool’s walls were still covered in algae.

“That pool hasn’t been used in months”, Pumpkin panted and paused to catch his breath, steadying himself on his own scrubbing brush. He turned around to roll his eyes at Yoongi. His cheeks were flushed to a point where the little red heart below his eye did not even stand out that much anymore. His hairband was missing. He had parted his hair in the middle and tied it up in two pigtails after he, Yoongi and Bird had swept Bird’s room for the devil horns hairband for almost half an hour this morning. Pumpkin had panicked after finding it gone when they had gotten up to get dressed. Apparently it was a crucial means of identification, a uniform that had to look put together at all times. Yoongi wondered what kind of accessories they were going to give him once the time was ripe.

“Actually there should be three of us dealing with this mess right now. At least it said so on the cleaning plan. Kitten was scheduled for this tub, too, but she didn’t show up. I guess it doesn’t make sense to keep trying, we might as well give up. We can’t finish on time. You’re supposed to show up on the sixth floor in like ten minutes for the cleaning of the private rooms.”

“What did you just say? Kitten didn’t show up?”, Yoongi asked, unable to hide his surprise.
“Kitten… one of the few people I trust in this shithole. She is a good girl. I actually get along with her very well. A pretty small girl, with a bob cut, wears a kitten ears headband… you’ll meet her tonight, she’s a waitress at the Midnight Bar. Usually she’s very reliable. No idea why she’s not here today.”

“She’s wounded…”, Yoongi informed him gravely.

“Say what?”, Pumpkin let the scrubbing brush drop next to the drain and frowned at Yoongi. “You know her already?”

“I met her on my way… down… last night”, Yoongi whispered, already having adapted Pumpkin’s nervous way of glancing around himself before he spoke. “She couldn’t walk… almost looked like her leg was broken. Asked me for a cigarette…”

“Don’t you ever give her one!”, Pumpkin came at him with an alarmed expression.

“Why not?”

“She’s been caught smoking a couple of times already. Next time Madame Yu sure won’t cut her a break.”

“Oh… I see… She said there are ways and places to smoke here…”

“There are… but you still always have to be on the watch. I suggest you only smoke down in the cellar when either Bird or I are with you.”

“Do you have cigarettes down there?”

“No, the both of us only smoke weed.”

“Where can I get cigarettes then?”, Yoongi asked impatiently.

“You get them the same way you get everything else here… be nice to the guests. They will tip you off… either with money or the very thing you desire. Almost all of them smoke. It’s the easiest thing to get your hands on. But I don’t think this is the right moment to explain the entirety of the Midnight Rose’s black market to you. I should go look after Kitten now. Should have checked upon the rest of the employees this morning… instead of looking for my fucking headband. We’ll leave this tub to the frogs. It’s a frog task anyway. I’m not scrubbing my hands bloody, oh no. You go up to the 6th floor now. I’ll come pick you up and assign your next task to you after I’ve taken care of the girl. I’ve recently been given the status of somewhat of a personnel manager… It used to be Crow’s job but now that he’s become Madame Yu’s right hand, they needed somebody new for that job. And that stupid old heck trusts me cause she damn well knows I’m fucking her nephew. And that I’d ruin her fancy little business if she doesn’t treat me according to my rules. If you want some good advice, work hard and earn yourself her respect. It will make a lot of things easier for you. She’s a disgusting human being but she plays fair. There are worse people than her in this establishment.”

“For example?”

Pumpkin just snorted and rolled his eyes. And Yoongi had the definite feeling that the name on the tip of his tongue was Crow’s.

“Suga?”, he then said, making one of his infamous changes of subject.

“What?”

“I signed you up for the same room as Hope.”
“You what?!"

“It’s all I can do for you right now”. Pumpkin mumbled and turned away, signaling that the conversation was over.

*

Hoseok was already busy in the room. Yoongi paused in the doorway and watched him crawl around on the floor, picking up trash and throwing it into a bucket. The room was pretty similar to Taehyung’s chamber. There was a bedlike sofa draped with heavy curtains, cushions scattered all over the floor. But instead of an old fashioned record player, there hung a big flat screen TV on the wall and golden karaoke microphones were lying on the table among a collection of empty bottles and dishes. Hoseok didn’t even seem to notice him. He was completely absorbed in his work, scanning the floor for more empty cans of energy drinks and beer, fluffing up cushions on the go. It wasn’t as if Yoongi had to keep himself from running towards him. Something held him there right where he stood. He was scared. Scared to speak up and make the young man notice him. How do you approach someone who doesn’t remember who you are? What is more important in this situation? The old intimacy that used to be between the two of you and that you still feel aching in your bones? Or the very fact that they regard you as a stranger now and might get really uncomfortable if you impose on them with the feelings they have forgotten?

“Uhm… Hope?”, Yoongi asked in a low voice. The boy winced a little for obviously he hadn’t been expecting someone but when he turned around and looked up, there was a bright smile on his face. Something contracted deep inside Yoongi’s chest. The pearly white grin was identical to the very first smile Jung Hoseok had ever given him. When Yoongi had opened the apartment door on him the day he had come to apply for the room they were renting out. Yoongi’s room. Namjoon had suggested looking for another roommate to cover the heating costs that they couldn’t afford back then. For Yoongi spent his nights in the studio anyway. And so fate had led Jung Hoseok to their flat, a young ambitioned dance teacher who had just recently moved to Seoul, looking for a cheap room and some fun company. The first thing to pop up in Yoongi’s mind upon seeing Jung Hoseok’s flashy grin had been a BoJack Horseman meme. And he had quickly arrived at the initial misconception that Hoseok was nothing but hot air, a noisy and self-obsessed douche that had come to disturb Yoongi’s cave of bitterness and self-pity. But he had fallen in love. In a wink. And there it was again. The BoJack Horseman grin. The unpreoccupied and friendly interested smile… of meeting Min Yoongi for the very first time.

“Hi, I’m… I’m Suga.”

For a few seconds, Yoongi had hoped to encounter recognition in his eyes. Hoped for him to blurt out something like “Shit, Yoongz, where’ve you been all morning?! How do we get out of here?”. But the second he had seen that smile, he had known that it wouldn’t come. It was hard to send a weak smile after his self-introduction. Because internally, he was screaming. Because the tears welled up in his throat once again but he wouldn’t let them rise any higher. He clenched his teeth and imagined the corners of his mouth to be dragged up by safety pins.

“Didn’t you wake me up last night?”, Hoseok asked, a genuine glimmer of curiosity in his pretty eyes. They always had been these open doors to Yoongi. Welcoming, asking him in. And they still were. Hoseok contemplated him with a warm expression, willing to get to know him, ready to make friends. He might have lost his memory, but he hadn’t lost himself. The sight of his face brought Yoongi to his knees. Or maybe it was just that his legs didn’t support his own body weight anymore. His stomach seemed to be in flames. He crawled towards Hoseok and sat down next to him as though something in him was hoping that his ex would remember him once they were face to face.
“Yeah, I… I’m really sorry for that. I… mistook you for somebody else”, he said and stared directly into Hoseok’s open-door-like eyes. It’s me, Hobi. Don’t you remember? We used to kiss on that shopping mall’s roof terrace. You smeared the cream of your hot chocolate on my lower lip and told me I had something in my face. It was the cheesiest first kiss I ever had with someone. And I loved it. I loved you.

“Never mind”, Hoseok smiled encouragingly. “We all have a couple of twins walking around on this earth, isn’t it what they say? Maybe I do indeed look like someone you know. I don’t judge you for it. Are you okay, though? You came off very troubled last night. And now you seem hella tense. Is something wrong with your stomach?”

It was only now that Yoongi realized his own hand pressing against his belly. He lowered it and shook his head in disillusionment.

“It’s… it’s nothing”, he finally said. Nothing. It wasn’t even a lie. He felt everything all at once. Pain, anger, fear, frustration, helplessness. And it boiled down to nothing at all. Hoseok didn’t even question how he had gotten here. Did he even remember signing the contract yesterday? Because right now, he apparently deemed himself where he was supposed to be. On the floor of some brothel’s private room, cleaning up the remains of last night’s high jinx.

“You’re also new here, aren’t you?”, Yoongi ventured.

Hoseok nodded eagerly.

“Yeah… I started working here just yesterday. You can’t even imagine how lucky I was. When they found me unconscious, took me here and treated me. I most likely would have died if it wasn’t for them.”

“Oh… how… how did that happen? I mean… that you’ve been unconscious and all. What happened before?”

Hoseok lowered his eyes.

“That’s the thing… At first, I couldn’t remember what had happened like… at all.”

“But now you can?”

“Yeah… fortunately, the owner, Madame Yu, recognized me. And was able to jog my memory… I used to work in the village as a kitchenaid ever since my parents passed away. She knew me from running errands for the bathhouse. One day I disappeared from the restaurant that supplies the bathhouse with a certain kind of steamed fish. She asked where I was and they told her that I got fired because I got more and more unreliable. I… looks like I… I don’t even know what made me go this far but… apparently I tried to take my own life… I overdosed on some stuff that was apparently laced. And I almost died from it. I had a blood poisoning when they brought me here. Madame Yu really is a kind person. She said that she felt sorry for me already back in the days. I’m really grateful… and the last thing I wanna do is disappoint her. How did you end up here, though?”

Yoongi didn’t react. He was gaping a little and somewhere in the middle of Hoseok’s monologue he had stopped blinking. This was what they had made him believe? So what had they told Namjoon? Or had they been separated upon arrival? Did everybody get the same tragic backstory?

“Suga?”, Hoseok asked and waved his hand in front of his face.

“I… oh… oh… I am sorry… your… your story really… shocked me. You… indeed… you were really lucky. Yeah… I guess.”
There was a lump in his throat that felt like a stone.

“Don’t you wanna tell me for how long you’ve been working here?”

“Me too I… started just yesterday. I… they… there… piano. Yeah, that’s it. I auditioned as a piano player. They were looking for musicians and…”

“You play the piano?”, Hoseok’s eyes lit up. “I love the piano. I’d love to be able to play it myself!”

I know, Yoongi thought to himself with a bitter smile.

“What a strange coincidence that we both started just yesterday”, Hoseok shook his head in genuine amusement.

“Yeah… what a strange coincidence”, Yoongi whispered thickly. But then he raised his head.

“Yesterday yet another guy started working here… His name is moon… a tall skinny guy, hair dyed ash blonde. Did you already meet him or… did you already know him before?”

“Oh really? I may have seen him in the dormitory. If that’s the guy you’re talking about, he slept next to me. He gave me a very strange look this morning… I thought it’s cause I’m new. But probably he himself was still somewhat insecure and didn’t know how to start a conversation with me.”

“Yeah… probably”, Yoongi exhaled and for some time they both fell silent.

“Let me help you”, Yoongi eventually mumbled and reached for a seemingly empty package of cigarettes under the table. When he made a move to throw it into the bucket next to Hoseok’s leg, a couple of leftover cigarettes slipped out and scattered over the oriental carpet.

“Oh sh…”, Yoongi mumbled weakly, not even realizing the possibilities that discovery bore. He was already collecting the cigarettes and about to throw them in the bucket when he stopped as the image of the girl with the cat ears flashed through his mind.

“Do you smoke?”, Hoseok asked. As if he didn’t know. As if he hadn’t spent hours of his life trying to talk Yoongi into quitting. To which the latter had always replied with putting the next cigarette between his lips and giving him a disinterested look. Because he didn’t know how to quit. Sometimes, cigarettes were the only thing to hold on to.

“I do”, he answered, voice still shaking with tension.

“Then you’re hella lucky, I figure”, Hoseok beamed. “Go ahead and take them. I don’t smoke. You can have them all to yourself.”

Yoongi swallowed awkwardly and then pulled out Namjoon’s cigarette package from the pocket of his harem pants. He was genuinely surprised to find the little purple marble as he had totally forgotten putting it in there over the events that had followed its discovery under the table in the village. He put the total of five cigarettes next to it and when he was about to close the lid, his eyes got caught on some messy Hangul syllables written with a ball pen and in a big hurry as it seemed.

“Min Yoongi”, it read there. And he knew what it meant. It was his name. He had jotted it down there in order not to forget it. And he hadn’t forgotten it since. He was painfully aware of who he was. Or rather the discrepancy of who he wished to be, was supposed to be and who he was right now. He remembered what Min Yoongi meant. It meant being a semi-successful producer located in Sinchon, Seoul. It meant being in love with a dancer who taught at the Seoul School of Dance. A dancer who had always been more successful than him. A dancer he was over with. Being Min
Yoongi meant being in love and yet never being able to really admit it. He had said it a couple of times. But had he ever really acted accordingly? He had shown his love the way he would have liked to see other’s feelings for him. In some sort of silent and unconditional support. Folded laundry on his lover’s bed. An umbrella in their bag when the weather forecast had announced rain. A kiss on the forehead instead of a rose for Valentine’s. But what is a book that nobody reads anyway? Is it even a book? Neither Park Jimin nor Jung Hoseok had been able to decipher his confessions of love. They had never been strong enough, not been transmitted in a language they both spoke, so it seemed. He stared down at the cigarette pack in his hand and wondered how bad it would actually be to lose Min Yoongi. Wouldn’t it mean freedom after all? If his old life vanished together with his old name then what was it that he lost? And Jung Hoseok… he was gone, too. Just yesterday there had been this awkward tension between them. The tension of having loved and failed. The duty to act normal in front of each other, pretend they were friends again after having been so much more. They were still depending on each other. Sharing an apartment together with Kim Namjoon because neither of them was able to afford a place of their own. Well, maybe Hoseok was at this point. But he had chosen to stay with them for some reason. Not kicked Yoongi out of his room, their shared room, the room that had used to be Yoongi’s, after the breakup. Yoongi had been the one to retreat to the cave of his studio and made himself comfortable on the hard little couch once again. It wasn’t hard to avoid Hoseok even when living together in the same house. Hoseok was barely ever home, anyway. He was always busy being fabulous. Out and about, at work or at some nightclub making new contacts and cultivating old established ones. After the breakup, Yoongi had never been out with him again. Lost touch with Hoseok’s best friends that had been his only connection to the outside world. Lost touch with his ever-nagging ex Park Jimin who had been the one friend to keep him down to earth. Had helped him and Hoseok overcome some meaningless conflicts more than once in a while. But Jimin was happy with his new boyfriend so why bother him? Yoongi was sure that Jimin’s occasional texts asking how he was and whether he was up to grab a coffee together were a mere act of sympathy. Because he knew damn well that Yoongi failed at being a social human being. But he missed him, he really did. And sometimes, he missed himself, too. So wasn’t this a chance? Having Jung Hoseok sit here on the floor of a room in a house built on a different layer of reality? Not remembering just who he had been yesterday. Not remembering what they had been yesterday. It was as if meeting for the first time… again. Min Yoongi could not win Jung Hoseok back. But maybe… just maybe… he could win him anew.

“Min Yoongi?” Hoseok asked all of a sudden and Yoongi flinched so hard that a little gasp escaped his lips. But Hoseok had not remembered his name. He had just read out what it said on the lid of the cigarette pack that Yoongi had been staring at as though it was the philosopher’s stone.

“Who’s Min Yoongi?” Hoseok asked curiously. Yoongi flipped the cigarette pack back shut and slipped it back into his pocket.

“Oh… he’s no one. Shall we clean up this mess now?”

He got back on his feet and looked around the room figuring where to continue. It smelled of sex. Of alcohol, cigarettes, incense sticks and dust. But above it all wafted a thick layer of sex. It wasn’t even the faint hint of sweat and body liquids. Maybe it wasn’t even something you could actually smell. Just some sort of kinetic energy that still lingered in these four walls, the ghost of the lust that two or more people had exhaled into each other’s mouths. Yoongi bent down to pick up some of the pillows that seemed to belong on the bed-like sofa and a small noise of repulsion escaped him when he lifted the second one only to discover a used condom right under it.

“Ugh”, he forced out, looking around in search of something to pick it up with. There was no way he would touch it with his bare hands.

“Looks like somebody had fun last night”, Hoseok shrugged lightheartedly and produced a pack of
wet wipes seemingly out of nowhere. He handed it over to Yoongi who reluctantly opened it and fumbled for a sheet. The condom was tied with a knot at the end and Yoongi had meant to just wrap it into the wet wipe without taking a closer look at it but there was something that caught his intention against his will. The outside was coated in coagulated blood.

“I’m not exactly sure whether… all participants had fun”, he mumbled, contemplating the disturbing sight of red traces on the wet tissue. Hoseok leaned in to see what he was talking about.

“Oh dear”, he swallowed. “Put that away.”

Yoongi used another wipe to properly wrap the condom and then threw it into the trash bucket together with the image of the limping girl he had encountered last night. He would give her one of those cigarettes he had just found. Never mind what Pumpkin had said about not tempting her to smoke.

“Hey, look. Whoever worked here last night lost something”, Hoseok called from under the table where he had resumed to pick up empty drink cans. He crawled back out and raised something that made Yoongi feel as though someone had just thrown a bowling ball into his stomach. It was Pumpkin’s devil horns hairband. The blood red sequins shimmered in the dim light of the ceiling lamp.

“Give that to me!”, Yoongi croaked and snatched the hairband from Hoseok’s hand.

“Do you know the person who lost it?”

“I… I think so”, Yoongi stammered. So that was what the man with the Oni mask had requested in the elevator last night. What Pumpkin had agreed to without batting an eyelid. And he had come here to fulfill his duty… and then gone down to the cellar to have sex with his boyfriend as though nothing had happened. As though he hadn’t been brutally wounded. So that was what had made him feel cold at the end of the day. Why he had sought comfort in Yoongi’s Thrasher hoodie. It hadn’t been the physical kind of coldness of the cellar after the fire had burned out. He had been cold in his heart. “Hey… you ok?”’, Hoseok asked compassionately looking up at him from the floor with a concerned expression. In this moment, there was nothing that Yoongi would rather have done than throwing himself in his ex-lover’s arms and break down. Kiss the memory of their time together back into his mouth. Jung Hoseok you fucking idiot… was that trip worth it? I knew it would happen one day. Your carelessness would fall back on you. And here we are… we lost each other for good… because of the drugs. Don’t you fucking remember me?

“Hey… Suga. Suga was your name, right? What are you so upset about suddenly?”, Hoseok brushed back a bright red streak of his hair, frowning with expectation.

“Are you for real?”, Yoongi huffed with a dry sound that couldn’t really decide whether it wanted to be a chuckle or a sob.

There was a knock on the door. And Yoongi had simply no idea how to react when the owner of the devil headband slipped into the room. Pumpkin’s face looked troubled but he threw a brief smile at Yoongi.

“Ok boys, there’s a slight change of plan. Hope… you’ll have to finish this room on your own. Suga you’ll have to take on Kitten’s next task… which is to go get water from the frog’s well. It’s a special kind of water we need for sauna infusions. A girl called Amber will meet you at the main entrance and accompany you. I set that up because… because I think it’s good if she shows you around. Would have done it myself but… there’s something else I need to take care of. And after that I’ll meet up with you, Hope. We’ll have to go through the choreography for tonight. There is an event at
the Midnight bar, a birthday party of one of the guests. You and I… we’ll perform together. And you will play the piano, Suga. After I taught Hope the dance moves, I’ll help you get ready for the night. We still need to work on your looks. That goes for the both of you…”

“Pumpkin”, Yoongi spoke up. “Where is Moon?”

“He’s preparing the gambling area of the Midnight bar with the rest of the staff specialized on that very discipline. We have some Go tables there… But also a pool table and you can also play poker… and roulette.”

Yoongi exhaled deeply. Then he would get the opportunity to catch up with Kim Namjoon tonight. There was a last shimmer of hope, a glimpse as dim as the last strip of light in a midsummer night’s sky. Maybe he still remembered who he was.

“Okay”, he finally said to confirm Pumpkin’s order.

“I’ll accompany you to the ground floor, I have business to do there”, Pumpkin explained and waved him over. Yoongi looked back over his shoulder. Hoseok waved at him, the confusion about the recent situation still painted across his face.

*

As soon as Pumpkin had pulled the door of the private room shut behind them and they had walked a few steps, Yoongi grabbed his arm firmly to make him stand still.

“What’s the matter?”, Pumpkin hissed, evidently very stressed about something that he didn’t want to share with Yoongi.

“How is Kitten?”, Yoongi whispered, his eyes darting left and right to make sure nobody was in hearing distance.

“She’ll be okay”, Pumpkin replied curtly. “Her ankle is dislocated. And she is… covered in bruises and wounds. But the frogs are currently treating her. I managed to convey the severity to Madame Yu. She agreed to send Taehyung to assist them.”

“Will he heal her with magic?”

“He doesn’t have a medical degree”, Pumpkin snorted in a situation where a joke was entirely unnecessary. “He can make bruises and that stuff go away by just running his fingers over the harmed skin patch. But Madame Yu doesn’t really want him to use his energy on unimportant things like that. So it’s always a drag convincing her that it’s necessary. She’s not exactly fond of Kitten either. So… but anyway. We need to go.”

“Wait. How are you?”

“What do you mean how am I?”, Pumpkin frowned. Yoongi raised the headband as his only reply.

“Oh my fucking God!”, Pumpkin exclaimed and threw a glance over his shoulder to make sure nobody was looking before he quickly snapped it from Yoongi and put it back on, removing the hair ties of his pig tails in the process of adjusting it in his thick unruly pastel hair. “Bless you for finding it, seriously. I had to endure some inconvenient questions about its whereabouts already.”

“We found the condom, too”, Yoongi whispered and searched to meet Pumpkin’s purple glance. The lenses were back in their place.
“So what?”, Pumpkin asked, defensively.

“He hurt you, didn’t he? Forced you to have sex with him… And the weed… It’s not a lifestyle choice or self care or whatever… you depend on the tips to afford it… cause you need it to numb the pain, don’t you?”, Yoongi asked inquisitively.

“He didn’t force me. He paid me very well. And as you found out yesterday, my boyfriend’s a witch with healing powers. Why would I need drugs to mend the pain?”

“Cause Bird’s powers are not strong enough to heal that kind of wound… a wound that’s not actually physical.”

Pumpkin just gave him a defeated glare.

“But speaking of physical… There was blood on the condom.”

“But there was a condom. As long as there is, the blood doesn’t matter”, he stared directly into Yoongi’s eyes, his soft plump lips curved downward, pressed together to a mere slit. “Listen… our business is discretion. You’ll witness things in this bathhouse… some of which you’ll find mildly irritating… and some of which will make you lose your faith in God. But you shut your mouth about all of it. Thank you for retrieving my hairband… but the conditions under which I lost it are none of your fucking business.”

“You can wear my Thrasher hoodie if you want to… I don’t mind sharing it with you”, Yoongi hissed back and even though Pumpkin didn’t reply, the frown on his forehead let Yoongi know that his words hit home.

*

Crow was leaning against one of the red-painted wooden columns that supported the canopy of the entrance doors. Knee bent, foot propped against the wood and arms crossed he observed the hustle and bustle of frogs and people coming and leaving. There was a group of frogs carrying big baskets loaded with raw vegetables and fruits. Apparently they had been to the village to run errands and were now on their way to restock the kitchen. To Yoongi they all looked the same. He wondered whether the one who had been sent off with his clothes and Pumpkin’s little note was among them. He felt the need to thank him for carrying out his task with so much sure-handedness.

Crow looked different today. He was wearing the same clothes as yesterday, the uniform they all wore, but the feathers were arranged a little differently and the cornrows on one side of his head were braided in a different pattern, too. Yesterday, they had been three straight perfectly parallel lines. Today they were running crisscross, forming little rhombuses. He also wore significantly more make-up. His eyes appeared to by veiled by black silk shawls today and when he turned his head to face the two young men approaching him, the shimmering highlighter on his cheekbones that accentuated his dainty tattoo sparkled like solid gold.

“Oh, that little prick already dolled himself up for the night. It sure must be an important opportunity for him”, Pumpkin hissed without even moving his lips.

“Opportunity for what?”, Suga asked back but the second Pumpkin lowered his head to maneuver past Yoongi past the raven boy, he pushed himself off the column and stepped in their way.

“Where you headed, Pumpkin Pie?”, he asked, arching his brow and his voice sent an army of ants off to crawl under Yoongi’s skin. They had made out. He had tasted that boy’s tongue last night, groped his abs. He had said that he wanted him. He staggered a little and bumped into Pumpkin as
his view fogged with the intensity of the memories.

“I’m taking Suga to Amber. She’s supposed to be waiting here and accompany him. Madame Yu demanded to send one of the newbies out to get the water from the frog-well today”, Pumpkin explained in a matter of fact way while at the same time every single word was a verbal middle finger at his opponent.

“I’ll accompany him to the well”, Crow stated with an amused smirk. Yoongi held his breath.

“But”, Pumpkin started and Crow didn’t let him finish.

“But nothing. Madame Yu changed her mind. Amber is needed in one of the saunas. Everyone is exceptionally busy today. But now that the frogs are back with the groceries, I can spare some time.”

His eyes landed on Yoongi who felt them pierce right through his clothes. And he could physically feel Pumpkin’s dismay as well. The pink-haired boy nervously shifted from one foot to the other right beside him, reluctant to send him off with Crow. The tension was cut by two frogs seemingly appearing out of nothing next to Crow, each balancing an empty wooden bucket on their head.

“Take one”, Crow prompted and Yoongi found himself accepting the bucket from the small creature before his brain had actively passed on the order to his arms. From the corner of his eye, he saw Pumpkin purse his lips again and judge the whole situation with a dramatic glare of disapproval.

“Very well then… Look for me in the dressing rooms of the dormitory floor when you come back, Suga. You’ll get your makeover for the night then.”

Crow got another withering glance from him.

“I see you got your headband back, Pumpkin Pie?”, Crow purred with pure scorn. “Must’ve been a wild night for you. Did the guest know about the risk he was taking?”

“You can suck my dick, Crow. Fuck you.”

Pumpkin whirled around and was gone, leaving behind a cloud of his heavy pink odor that cut off Yoongi’s breath. But maybe it were also his words.

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A joyful sun was smiling down at the red wooden bridge. The waves splashed ashore in a steady and carefree rhythm. Yoongi felt like being wrapped in a thick coat of cotton walking next to Crow like this. He just couldn’t think straight. With every step further away from the bathhouse, he felt a few grams lighter. Suddenly nothing else mattered anymore. Only the clean and revitalizing sea breeze that entered and left his lungs as if to cleanse them from the dusty and heavy scents of the bathhouse… and the dark-clad, dark-hearted boy by his side that demanded all of his attention, making his thoughts rotate around him like the sun did with the planets.

“Did you get some sleep last night?”, Crow asked casually, sliding his feet through the gravel that paved the way along the dune. They had turned right after crossing the bridge, were moving even further away from the village, entering a part of the alleged amusement park that Yoongi had not sat foot on before. He suddenly recalled losing his leather slippers in the train hall. Bird had not picked them up, had he? This morning Yoongi had just used a different pair on his way up from the cellar together with Pumpkin.

“Suga?”, Crow claimed his attention.
“I… uhm… woke up a couple of times”, Yoongi made his way around the truth.

“I came to the 10th floor dormitory to wake the staff up this morning. You and Pumpkin were missing”, Crow remarked just as causally. For a moment Yoongi toyed with the thought of confessing that he had tried to run away. But something was still holding him back. Pumpkin’s voice was echoing in his mind, telling him not to get too involved with Crow.

“I… slept down in the cellar…”, Yoongi decided on the semi-truth. “I… needed someone to talk to after finding out that… my friends lost their memory.”

He voiced the last part of the sentence as the accusation it was supposed to be. Crow had told him they had been given tranquilizers. Told him they were going to be okay.

“Oh, did they?”, Crow asked and there was definitely a trace of irony in his voice. It confirmed that he knew it already. He wasn’t the least bit surprised. Yoongi stopped and put the bucket down.

“How come you already know?”

Crow didn’t stop. He walked past Yoongi and turned around only a couple of steps later, a particularly uncommitted expression on his face.

“It doesn’t surprise me… didn’t you say the reason for their blood poisoning was an overdose on chemical drugs? This stuff sure doesn’t do the brain well.”

“We took LSD”, Yoongi declared bluntly. “And that doesn’t cause blood poisoning no matter how high the dose.”

“As long as it’s clean, I fathom… Apparently wasn’t, huh?”, Crow shrugged. But then he finally stopped walking. “I love how your hair shimmers a little bluish where the sun hits it… Black hair looks so hot on you. Too bad they are gonna dye it tonight.”

“They are what?”, Yoongi burst out but then something else caught his attention. It shut him up for good. There was someone approaching them. A tall dark figure. He squinted as hard as he could but the person was still too far away for him to see them clearly. It was when Crow turned around and froze that his darkest premonition was validated.

“Get on your knees”, Crow hissed and threw himself in the gravel, a formal bow with his hands and forehand pressed to the ground just like the one he had performed to greet Madame Yu. Yoongi followed his example and stared down at the little tufts of grass between the stones that he was almost touching with the tip of his nose. There were footsteps approaching. Little pieces of gravel grinding against each other under the bodyweight that was focused on just the balls of the feet. When he glanced up the slightest bit, he was faced with the tips of black patent leather high heels. The person stopped in front of them and the hem of their coat fell over the heels again, hiding them from Yoongi’s view.

“Get up”, Crow breathed next to him and bopped up, brushed the dust of his shirt while Yoongi was still struggling to his feet, still not used to the inconvenient cut of his pants. Something in him had been expecting it and yet the shock ran through his body like a shortcut when he was greeted by the black empty eyes of the Kabuki mask he had seen on the bridge upon his arrival. The person was taller than him by a head but maybe it was also due to the shoes that Yoongi just had discovered them to be wearing. The dead expression on the mask’s white face made him shiver with the same nausea that he had woken up with in the village. The person seemed to be emitting some kind of coldness like a freezer compartment left open. Yoongi could see nothing of their body. The black cape was covering them from head to toe, the hands that poked through the holes were gloved. It
looked as if someone had put a death mask on a burka.

“Sir… welcome back”, Crow whispered in a register that Yoongi would have used in front of the Korean emperor. If Korea still had an emperor. The person didn’t reply. Yoongi couldn’t tell whether they were looking at them. Whether he was looking at them. According to Crow it was a man. If it was human at all.

“And if I may be so bold…”, Crow continued. “I wish you a very happy birthday. Many happy returns”, he lowered his head again and Yoongi mimicked him for what else should he do. It was Kabuki mask’s birthday tonight. The event they were preparing at the bathhouse was in his honor.

“I kindly invite you to directly head for the wellness area, to receive a relaxing massage before the sauna is prepared for you. As requested, a special performance will be held at the Midnight Bar starting at 8 PM and after that we'll proceed to the banquet. Our best dancers and musicians will entertain you and your guests.”

He had no eyes. And yet he was watching Yoongi. He was listening to Crow, evidently, but with the black holes in his mask he was beholding Yoongi, contemplating his face.

“May I introduce to you?”, Crow stepped in, following his glance. “Our newest staff member… Suga. He will delight us with his piano skills tonight. He joined our team just yesterday. It’s his first day and he is already looking forward to serving you in the best way he can.”

Yoongi didn’t quite know how but Crow managed to stay completely still and yet nudge him in the ribs to make him say something.

“Very much looking forward”, Yoongi parroted and indicated a bow. The dead face didn’t reply. There was no gust of wind replacing a human voice. And suddenly Yoongi knew what Pumpkin had meant by saying that the ones who didn’t talk at all were the actual scary ones.

“I am also… exceptionally glad to inform you that… the birthday gift you asked for is… on the way. Everything is currently being arranged and it will be carried out to your satisfaction, this I guarantee. I have yet to… determine a time and place convenient for everybody involved but… it will go as planned.”

This time there was a reaction. The man – if it was a man – cocked his head under the hood of his cape. And then he made a noise. A soft and almost feeble noise. “Ah.” It was a boy’s voice at best. And the word… the syllable that had made it over his lips was muffled by a layer of fabric that apparently additionally covered his face behind the mask. There had been a slightly surprised tone to it. Like someone reading a book and suddenly stopping because they had come across an entirely unexpected information. “Ah.” It resounded in Yoongi’s ears, seeming to liquefy the insides of his bones.

“You have my word, Sir”, Crow nodded modestly and cast his eyes to the floor, indicating that he was unworthy of looking at the man for longer than absolutely necessary. Yet the center of the man’s – the thing’s – attention was still Yoongi. He had no eyes and yet he was staring, he had no mouth and yet there seemed to be a smile blooming on the lower half of his face. Crow saw it, too.

“If you will excuse us now. We’re on our way to get the frog well water you demanded for your sauna infusion.”

“Ah. Ah.”

“You… you what, Sir?”, Crow asked and Yoongi didn’t dare to turn his head and look at him but he
could literally hear the frown in his voice. Just like Pumpkin was able to read words in the wind, he apparently knew how to interpret the sounds the man was making.

“Ah.”

“You want Suga to… wash himself with the water before it’s used for your sauna infusion…?”

Yoongi’s windpipe seemed to crumble together. And there were invisible razors cutting into the backsides of his thighs. This time the thing didn’t make a sound but its silence was a definite answer. That was exactly what he had requested with just that one syllable.

“We will arrange that for you… of course we will, Sir”, Crow decided over Yoongi’s head. In front of Madame Yu he had been submissive. But right now he seemed scared. And if not scared then at least keen on not making the smallest mistake in front of this special guest. Yoongi just lowered his head as if to show that he felt deeply honored. When in reality he was stupefied. This thing obviously had a sexual interest in him. Had imagined his body naked and decided that he wanted to taste and smell it. He saw him as some kind of item that he was able to purchase. A human bath bomb. It took him a word to get something as intimate as someone’s bathwater. What if he liked it? The scent it would add to his sauna infusion? What if it left him wanting for more?

* * *

“What is this thing?”, Yoongi forced out trying to keep up with Crow. The second they had finished bowing their apologies to the man, telling him that they really had to leave now in order to finish all preparations in time, Crow had basically started running. He was hasting along the narrow path as fast as his loose slippers and the bucket in his hand would let him. The bells around his ankle were chiming lively.

“He’s not a thing. He’s one of our most valued guests”, he returned without taking the time to turn around to Yoongi. They were struggling uphill a little. Their way had led them into a valley right behind the dunes and now they were making up a small slope. Once again the landscape seemed to be changing whenever Yoongi didn’t pay attention. Only when they had made it all the way up to the elevation, Crow finally decided to slow down a little.

“We call him No Face. Few of us have actually seen him without his mask. But those who have, insist that he’s breathtakingly beautiful. Pretty young still. In his mid-twenties. We don’t know how old he’s turning today. Madame Yu assumes either 26 or 27. Rumor has it that he’s the son of the head of a human-trafficking ring that sells underage eastern European girls and boys to brothels in Asia, mostly Japan and South Korea though. And rumor as well has it that his father has already chosen his younger brother as his successor. Because he doesn’t deem No Face capable of that job. As you heard, he’s as good as mute. And as far as we figured, this muteness is part of a severe post-traumatic stress disorder from experiences he has suffered through as a child. Understandable, I don’t think it’s exactly fun to grow up in an environment where those who won’t obey to sell their bodies are slaughtered to at least sell their organs for a decent price”, he took the time to shudder before he went on. “Most likely his father deems him too weak to follow in his steps. But at least in our opinion he’s not that weak at all. We experienced him as pretty irascible. And if there’s one thing you want to avoid at all costs then it’s making him angry. He really does have… a bad temper.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t worry… as long as do what he wants he’s the most desirable customer ever. You should be very happy that he immediately showed interest in you. Madame Yu values him because about 30% of our monthly intake comes from him and his family. He gives incredibly high tips. There was this girl called Salt he really liked… he once gave her a high-carat diamond collier as a token of his
“What happened to Salt?”, Yoongi asked, remembering the name from yesterday’s conversation between Crow and Madame Yu.

“She doesn’t work here anymore”, Crow said briefly.

“Is she dead?”, Yoongi asked, unblinking.

But as if the landscape had come to Crow’s aid, helping him to get around an answer, nature suddenly presented a view that made Yoongi shut up and forget his question. There was an ocean of pink in front of them, spreading to the horizon and beyond. It was a field of peonies, the plush rose-like flowers that were painted all over the bathhouse’s furniture. The field again lay in some sort of valley, most likely they had only climbed the hill for that view. Never in his life had Yoongi seen so many flowers in one place. The sheer quantity left him mesmerized, let alone their smell. It was the sweet heavy odor that Pumpkin emitted. The pink smell. All the components that Yoongi had interpreted into it, the coconut, the rose, the vanilla had just been nuances of the smell of these peonies that he recalled to not have a scent at all. In the afternoon heat it unfurled even more intensely and seemed to benumb his senses within a matter of seconds.

“Wow”, he mumbled, out of breath, and put the bucket down to the floor once again, suddenly not able to carry it anymore. The scent came with a slight nausea. He could taste it on the back of his throat and it made him remember the flavor of the ice tea.

“Pretty impressive, huh?”, Crow smiled, casting Yoongi a side-glance. “They are peonies… though a special breed. We call them Midnight Roses. That’s where the name of the bathhouse is derived from. During daytime they are bright pink. But at night they turn darker… red… blood red almost. And the time of the day they are picked and processed determines their effect.”

“What effects would that be?”, Yoongi asked.

“Oh… there are plenty. The daytime harvest… the pink blossoms… are processed into etheric oils… we make perfume out of it… that is a remarkably well working aphrodisiac. The night harvest even has a narcotic, intoxicating effect… pretty similar to drugs. The smell also changes. During daytime the blossoms have this sweet vanilla and rosy kinda smell. At night it turns darker. And ranges from hibiscus to jasmine.”

Yoongi’s brain was working slower than usual, on the best way to stop working at all. He blinked up at Crow and shamelessly took in the handsome man’s face as if feasting on it. Crow returned his look, his eyes played on Yoongi’s lips like children in a garden.

“Now that we are finally alone with each other… can we stop talking like strangers?”, Crow asked and held out his hand to Yoongi. “You know me better than you’d like to admit.”

“What do you mean?”, Yoongi replied sluggishly.

“You’re in full bloom like those peonies, Suga. In bloom for me. So mind if I pick this blossom?”, he whispered and took Yoongi by the wrist. “Follow me.”

Yoongi was barely able to grab his bucket before Crow dragged him along down a small slope and into the field. Now that Yoongi was surrounded by the peonies, he had to accept the fact that they almost reached up to his shoulders and seemed to be growing still. The further they dove into the field, the higher they got until it was a forest and until Yoongi found himself buried under Crow’s body, pressing him down into the moist soil that no sunbeams had reached yet.
“What are you doing?”, Yoongi panted, out of breath from running, the petals in his lungs and the weight of the black-eyed boy on his chest.

“What does it look like…?”, Crow breathed into his ear before his lips searched for Yoongi’s mouth blindly, his eyes had already fallen shut with the arousal that he no longer bothered to hide. He licked the protest from Yoongi’s tongue and filled the cave of his mouths with moans instead. Yoongi didn’t even notice how he got rid of both their shirts. All of sudden he felt the cool air engulf his naked upper body as Crow was kissing and sucking his way down his neck, headed for his nipples. He flicked his tongue against them a couple of times but didn’t really come to a halt as his ultimate goal was further down south.

“This is going too fast”, Yoongi forced out between gritted teeth, eyes pressed shut as he felt Crow palm him through the fabric of black and gold.

“You knew you wanted to feel me between your thighs the second you first saw me. We both know… they all do.”

The words he said became opinions in Yoongi’s head as they entered it through his ears.

“There’s nothing wrong with admitting you feel alone and you’re longing to be touched, Suga. You don’t have to act tough in front of me, I can see just how soft you are… Baby Boy.”

The name made Yoongi so uncomfortable that his whole body stiffened and even his toes curled. It made him uncomfortable because it was the name he had imagined Hoseok to call him in his most secret dreams. He tried to prop himself up on his elbows but Crow kissed him down again.

“Forget about your ex… The connection between us doesn’t have to be put into words. I won’t make you say I love you 20 times a day. It’s not about telling people either way, is it? It’s about making them feel…”

“You’re right”, Yoongi sighed as Crow’s fingers slipped into his pants. Again, being with Crow felt like drowning. His kisses were waves that flooded Yoongi’s body and washed it empty. They flushed away his restraints, his doubts and his self-composure. His memories, his whole mind. He felt himself growing hard in Crow’s hand as his whole body was trembling with desire.

“Don’t stop please”, he heard himself moan and instead of being embarrassed about it as he usually would be, he accepted how it sent an additional rush of lust through his core. His reaction obviously also fueled something in Crow. He jerked him hard and arhythmically as he stretched to reach for something next to Yoongi’s head.

“Open your mouth”, he commanded and Yoongi choked and coughed when he forced one of the peony blossoms between his lips that were about the size of a human palm. Yoongi involuntarily immediately bit down on it and an unbearably sweet taste of nectar started to unfurl on his tongue. With it came another rush of arousal, so intense that it almost hurt. His lower abdomen felt like being torn open with the pressure of how hard he longed to cum.

“You’re too loud, Baby Boy”, Crow hissed. “We don’t want your cute little moans to give us away, do we? I’m gonna fuck you so good you’ll lose your mind about it and we don’t want the people working in the field to hear.”

Yoongi’s eyes flung open with alarm. He wasn’t prepared for them to go this far. As if waking up with a start, he suddenly realized what was going on. He was about to cut Hoseok off by letting another man penetrate that well hidden place in his heart where he had remained faithful to his ex even after the breakup. But Hoseok had done it, too, hadn’t he? It had been his way to show Yoongi
they were actually through. By carrying out what Yoongi had only threatened to do. Sleep with that barista.

“He did it too, didn’t he?” Crow whispered as he pulled the elastic band of Yoongi’s harem pants down his thighs. Yoongi felt the cool damp breeze that smelled of soil and roots ghost over his throbbing sex. He was too far gone still to ask himself how Crow knew. He only knew he was right. So right, it felt so right to finally take this step himself. He’d be free after it, wouldn’t he?

Jeon Jungkook. He recalled Crow’s name like a message in a bottle suddenly popping up at the crest of a wave. He bit harder on the blossom in his mouth in order not to let it slip, anxious what kind of reaction it would provoke. Anxious that it would make him stop.

“He did it too, didn’t he?” Crow whispered as he pulled the elastic band of Yoongi’s harem pants down his thighs. Yoongi felt the cool damp breeze that smelled of soil and roots ghost over his throbbing sex. He was too far gone still to ask himself how Crow knew. He only knew he was right. So right, it felt so right to finally take this step himself. He’d be free after it, wouldn’t he?

“Please fuck me”, he mouthed around the petals instead, swallowing the sweet liquid they bled out into the cave of his mouth. His eyes were open and yet he didn’t see... did not see anything except for the tattooed face above his own, the grin on this youthful face as Crow’s fingers travelled further down between his legs.

“I imagined you like this when you were so snappy asking for an appointment with Madame Yu… exactly like this. Lying in front of me in the dirt, your pretty little cat eyes tearing up with lust and ropes of sparkles and white leaking all over your belly. You’re so cute.”

“Crow, fuck me”, Yoongi repeated, the taste of the blossom spreading under his tongue. His lazy eyes followed the younger as he sat up and pulled a little glass bottle of massage oil from the supply pocket on his belt before he took it off and threw it somewhere in the direction where Yoongi’s clothes had gone.

“D’you have a condom?”, Yoongi mumbled and it seemed as if the flower was muffling his words on purpose.

“Say what?”, Crow asked, raising his eyebrows as he rubbed the oil between his palms and spread it on his fingers.

“Whether you have a- ah”, Crow’s finger was all the way in before he could even catch his breath. And he started moving it immediately without giving Yoongi time to adjust to it.

“What was your question?”, he asked teasingly as he arched it and moved it around in a stirring motion.

“What was your question?”, he asked teasingly as he arched it and moved it around in a stirring motion.

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to speak more clearly”, Crow hummed and he recklessly pushed in a second finger all the way. Yoongi whimpered and let his head fall back onto the cushion of peony blossoms that sure as hell hadn’t been there before. He turned his face to the side and spat out the blossom, a few petals remained stuck to his tongue.

“I want you to use a condom!”, he repeated, voice desperate now.

“Condom”, Yoongi coughed into the blossom and moved his hips to meet Crow’s thrusts that seemed to enter his heart instead. Fill the hole there with their slick warmth.

“I want you to use a condom!”, he repeated, voice desperate now.

“Maybe… but I insist”, he managed to get out while wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Now that the peony blossom was gone, he suddenly was able to think a little clearer. HIV wasn’t a joke. He knew someone who had caught it under really tragic circumstances. And he had promised that person to stay safe no matter what.
“Ugh…”, Crow rolled his eyes but he obeyed and withdrew his fingers from Yoongi’s body to reach for his belt pocket again. He signaled Yoongi to sit up and look for it himself. Maybe because he was forward-thinking and knew that he wouldn’t be able to tear the package open with his oily fingers or simply because he didn’t want to deal with it. When Yoongi had found what he was looking for, Crow pulled down his own pants and since he was on his knees while Yoongi was sitting up, basically forced his crotch into the elder’s face. Yoongi sighed at the sight of his dick. It was pretty, delicate in the same way his slim fingers were. It was very slightly curved to the left side and his pubic hair was almost completely shaved.

“If you want me to use a condom, you gotta make up for it”, Crow whispered and let his fingers run through Yoongi’s hair to draw him closer. Yoongi let his eyes fall shut and opened his mouth, pressing the remaining petals against Crow’s skin as he started bobbing his head up and down. Crow rolled his head around and hummed a laugh. Once again the warm, slightly uncomfortable feeling in Yoongi’s mouth seemed to fill a different void, one that was hidden in a place in his chest that usually only cigarettes and Whisky were able to reach. He gave in to the urge of moaning and Crow sighed a little at the vibration that his lips sent along his skin.

“Look at you… Suga… you don’t even know my name and yet you suck my dick like the obedient Baby Boy that you are. You’re so pretty when your eyes water. I’d love to see you cry some day.”

Yoongi stopped. He wiped his cheeked and stared up at Crow, lips still closed around his length.

“I’m just joking, you know”, Crow winked and then gave him a deep doe-like look. “I figured you’d like it when I talk to you this way.”

Yoongi indicated shaking his head.

“Well then… let me try something you’ll definitely like”, he laughed and pushed Yoongi back to the ground, took the ripped-open condom package from his fingers and rolled it on before he guided himself to align his erection with Yoongi’s body.

“Use more oil”, Yoongi gasped when he felt Crow press against him, obviously not getting in.

Crow bent down, placing his palms left and right next to Yoongi’s head in order to kiss him. He sucked the remains of the peony petals from his tongue and spat them to the side.

“How about I use more force?”, he then whispered and pushed into Yoongi, making him see stars.

“Fuck”, he groaned, propping his lower body up to fight the pain.

“We both know you like it rough… we both know that’s exactly what you need after everybody kept bothering you with their stupid lectures about feelings. I know how to make you feel good, Suga. Trust me.”

And that was what Yoongi did. Trust him. He closed his eyes and bit his lower lips as Crow started thrusting hard and slow, making a puff of air escape his nose with every time their bodies collided. He imagined every breath he exhaled to be a little piece of the memory of Jung Hoseok. But not only Hoseok. Also Jimin. All those he had wanted to love, had loved but never been able to convince just how much. Maybe this was really what he needed. A young man like Jeon Jungkook who was here for the fun and the thrill of fucking someone he had just met in the shelter of a flower field while they were supposed to be working. They wouldn’t get attached to each other, would they? This was what he had been planning to do either way. Let himself get laid by some fellow raver… in the bushes behind the main stage while Hoseok was somewhere in the crowd looking for him. Or maybe not… cause he was too drugged up to even notice. Crow slammed the revenge into his body that Yoongi
had meant to take on his ex. There were no strings attached anymore. It was Hoseok’s fault that he had lost his memory. He had been too careless after all. Had risked everything that was between them in favor of being loved the way he imagined it. Had he ever wasted a thought on how much it hurt to have the person you love the most in life constantly doubt your feelings for them? Hoseok was used to being in the sun. How could the pale light of the moon ever be enough for him?

“Stop thinking about your ex”, Crow hissed and paused, holding Yoongi’s legs up by his calves.

“How would you know I’m thinking about him?”, Yoongi snarled, feeling way too exposed.

“I’m reading your mind”, Crow mumbled casually and gave Yoongi a particularly hard thrust. “Been doing it ever since we got here. The less you try to contain your thoughts, the easier it gets. And your mind is all over the place with thoughts about your ex. Don’t fool yourself. Even if you tell yourself it’s for revenge, you’re still imagining his face while I’m fucking you…”

“My love was never enough for him”, Yoongi mumbled, making blunt honesty his defence. He looked up at the boy with the feathers in his hair so he could read in Yoongi’s thoughts just how pretty he found him.

“Did you hear what I just said… Baby Boy? I can read your mind”, he rocked his words into Yoongi’s body slowly and deeply. “Now how does that sound? How about you surrender yourself to a man who doesn’t have to be convinced by your feelings for him? Who doesn’t give a shit about words. Who can look directly into your mind… your heart. The only validation I need is your pleasure… the things you’ve been most embarrassed about… that you couldn’t tell your ex… how much you wanted him to call you Baby Boy and just take good care of you… you don’t need to voice them for me to fulfill them.”

The tattoo was dotted across his nose like pearls on a necklace, his strong jawline and his beaky nose were the markant beauty that Yoongi had always missed in Hoseok’s face whose face was harmonious with symmetry and brightness. This boy was the night. His eyelids were the wings of a black raven darting across the sky in the last light of dusk. Jung Hoseok’s had been open doors, inviting, through which you could see directly into his warm heart. The big black circles of that boys pupils veiled the secret whether he had a heart at all, they were like the entrance to a dark forest, the last trees standing a little apart before the thicket.

“I’m about to come”, Yoongi breathed.

“I know…”, Crow smirked majestically. And then paused his hips. “So how about that? Be mine?”

“Are you asking me out?”, Yoongi breathed, eyes rolling back, an incredulous smirk playing on his lips. The wave was just about to break.

“I’m asking you to come for me”, Crow whispered and it were his words that sent Yoongi over the edge. It felt like a touch from inside, not on the skin. As though Crow had clenched his hand around his intestines until this point and was now letting go for them to extend and fill his whole body. Yoongi growled with ecstasy and his fingers dug into the soil, his cum dripping down the side of his hip as Crow didn’t bother to jerk him through his orgasm. He just watched him come apart on the ground beneath him, winding in the dirt, panting for air. The aftershocks of his orgasm gave him the dry heaves.

“I guess that means we’re dating now”, Crow laughed before he continued thrusting.

*
“You shouldn’t smoke in the bathhouse”, Crow clarified and helped himself to a cigarette from Yoongi’s pack. “And you should… by all means… not let anyone find this package”, he added and threw it back at Yoongi’s lap after flipping the lid with his name shut. Yoongi took the white lighter from him with a last trace of the reluctance he didn’t manage to fully hide. Those cigarettes were for Kitten, first and foremost. He needed one after sex. But Crow didn’t exactly make the impression as if he was satisfying an urgent need. He took a few casual puffs, didn’t actually inhale the smoke and then just held the cigarette like some sort of chalkboard pointer as he went on.

“Especially when you plan on smoking them with Kitten… She keeps getting caught. It’ll get her in trouble eventually.”

“So… do you know a safe place to smoke in there? Just cause… I don’t think I can get rid of that habit so easily. I’ve smoked my first cigarette when I was 12.”

Crow didn’t seem moved by his confession at all. Would you ask for the reasons when someone told you they started cigarettes as a child? You’d ask if you just had sex with them and you could sense that they were trying to open up a little now. But he either didn’t want to know… or didn’t need to ask.

“It’s cute of you… saving up those cigarettes for her cause you think it will make her feel better after the incident last night”, Crow smiled and blew some smoke through his nose. He still wasn’t inhaling it into his lungs.

“How do you do it?”, Yoongi asked. “Read my mind.”

They were leaning against the catch basin of the frog well. It was carved into a solid rock and the water indeed sprang from a stone frog’s mouth. It was a small little stream, dancing happily from the pursed lips of the empty-eyed creature. Every now and then, a few drops sprinkled down on their heads, a few got caught in Crow’s hair and the feathers decorating it. The little clearance in the middle of the peony field was drenched in sunlight. Where it fell onto the drops in Crow’s hair, it was broken open into rainbows. Next to them stood the two buckets filled with water from the well. Yoongi had washed his hands and face over one of them, rinsed his mouth and spat the water back in the bucket. It would have to do. Crow had suggested using the water to wash his crotch clean as well but Yoongi had refused.

“Madame Yu taught me to read people’s minds. There are definitely certain perks to being her personal assistant.”

“Could you… stop maybe? I mean… it makes me slightly uncomfortable”, Yoongi mumbled awkwardly and his lips closed around the filter. The smoke burned so good in his lungs. It was a distraction from the burning sensation he felt elsewhere.

“Then stop giving me access to your brain…”, Crow arched an eyebrow and pursed his elegantly curved lips. “If you don’t want me to read your thoughts, I won’t be able to…”

“You mean I can control it?”

“Yeah… you spend too much time in your head. You’re thinking is so loud. If you focus on the here and now and stop having second thoughts, there’ll be nothing for me to read anymore.”

“First you ask me to stop smoking… now you ask me to stop thinking”, Yoongi rolled his eyes and contemplated the orange tip of his cigarette by rolling the filter between his fingers.

“Well… if that’s easier for you, I could also just leave it be… like… leave your thoughts alone.”
“That possible?”

“Sure.”

“Then when did you start looking into my thoughts?” Yoongi asked and picked up a wilting peony blossom from the ground. It was dark red. Apparently they turned to their Midnight color when they fell off and faded. He suddenly started to ask himself just how much Crow knew. But at the same time tried to focus only on the blossom to not give him insight into the details that he didn’t want him to find out. The fact that his ankle still ached with last night’s scars that were now hidden under the anklet and a variety of additional little chains that Pumpkin had given him this morning.

“Oh don’t worry… only when we started making out”, Crow shrugged and scratched the cigarette along the stone basin in order to extinguish it long before he was down to the filter. Yoongi frowned at the waste.

“Then let’s make this a rule… You can read my thoughts in bed… and that’s about it.”

“I knew you were going to suggest this without reading your mind”, Crow smirked and then he leaned in without a warning to steal a couple of kisses from Yoongi’s lips.

“Just this one last thing before I stop reading them… Did you enjoy it? Tell me the answer in your mind, you don’t have to say it aloud.”

I didn’t come this hard in ages, Yoongi said without moving his lips. I want to do this all over again. You’re so fucking good for a kid your age. I can’t wait to suck your dick in one of the private rooms while we should be working.

And he said all of that just to camouflage the questions that were actually running through his head. What if he was lying? If he had accessed Yoongi’s mind way before? Yesterday on the red bridge. If he had heard everything he had thought up to this point. But Crow just gave him a dirty wink. Apparently he had really only heard the compliments.

“Sex in the bathhouse is a little risky. But we will find a way to make that fantasy of yours come true”, he nodded and winked again.

“Will you leave my head now?”, Yoongi asked and put out his cigarette next to the butt of Crow’s.

“Sure, I’m already out.”

“Promise not to get back in until we have sex the next time?”

“Promise”, Crow returned and touched the left side of his chest with his hand.

“Then do you know a place where I can smoke?”

Crow closed his arms around his bent knees.

“Try the balcony we kissed on last night. The dorm is usually empty during daytime. Then it should be safe. Guess it’s also safe as long as everybody is still at work. If you mean to smoke there tonight try it around 1 AM. Then the red lantern is already out and chances are nobody’s back yet.”

“Thanks”, Yoongi nodded and allowed himself to lean in and press a kiss on Crow’s tattooed cheek. It was something he normally wouldn’t do. Always way too afraid to do something against the person’s will, afraid of being told off. Afraid of showing that soft side of himself. But Crow had seen him come. Maybe that changed things between people.
“Don’t let yourself be caught, Baby Boy. If you do then there’s not much I can do for you…”

“Will they tattoo my face when they catch me smoking?” Yoongi asked.

“Probably not… but you’ll get a warning and if you add up then they might end up giving you a piercing or something just so you don’t forget your place.”

“What did you get your tattoo for?”

He regretted the question already when he hadn’t even finished it all the way. Crow’s facial expression hardened. He lowered his eyes to his feet and just pretended he hadn’t heard anything.

“I… I’m sorry”, Yoongi ventured and reached for Crow’s wrist. He didn’t want him to be mad at him.

“Whatever people already told you about it… especially that pink-haired little bitch who calls himself Pumpkin… just know that it’s probably not true.”

“Nobody told me anything about it”, Yoongi said and found himself wishing that Crow would read his mind right now to verify that he wasn’t lying. “Especially not Pumpkin… He blocked off all my questions.”

“You’ll learn that you can only trust certain people in this bathhouse. Pumpkin ain’t one of them”, Crow said curtly.

“Why?”

“Wanna know who stole your stuff? Wallet and phone and all that?”

Yoongi’s jaw dropped.

“Hold up what? Are you saying that…?”

But Crow just arched an eyebrow and contemplated him with a mixture of amusement and anticipation, waiting for Yoongi to answer the question himself. And that was when it hit him like a struck of lightning. The memory flashed through his mind like a movie still. They were standing in front of the elevator door that had just closed on the man with the Oni mask. Pumpkin’s hand held out for him to grab it. “Take my hand now, Min Yoongi. It’s too late already, I can’t save you. But I can spare you one thing or another.”

Yoongi had never told him his last name. Neither him nor Bird. But his name was on his ID and his credit card. Which was in his wallet in his backpack... where there were his glasses that had told Pumpkin he was short sighted. -3.5 on both eyes. And the old pictures in his phone sure had given proof that once upon a time he and the redhead had been dating.
Midnight Part 1

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much for stopping by again <3

This chapter is full of cameos. Can you find them all?

You'll finally get to experience the Midnight Bar... are you ready for my homage to Jimin's fan and Hoseok's 3 drums performance?

You'll meet Tae again in this one, too... Yoongi will finally talk to Moon. And No Face's birthday party goes down... Yoongi confronts Pumpkin with the accusation of stealing their belongings... Oh and yeah... there are new hair colors, too :3

Make sure to follow me on Insta if you want to be the first to know the release date of Midnight Part 2. @iamspringday_fiction

Midnight Part 1

Yoongi was staring at himself in the mirror. But was he really? The person staring back bore a
notable resemblance to the familiar sight that had awaited him every morning in the bathroom of their shared apartment. Hooded, uneven cat eyes with a slight squint that he had been bullied for at school but that had never actually bothered him. Rather prominent black eyebrows that gave his face somewhat of a cheeky, sometimes even angry look. Heart-shaped lips, No, really. His upper lip had a peculiar arch, a particular deep dent that made his petite, naturally pouty look like a heart. It opposed the fierce energy of his eyes, toned them down with something that quite a few of his ex-boyfriends had called “cute”. Yoongi didn’t mind his lips either. He had a very average nose. He didn’t particularly like his jaw, his profile was okayish from the side but up front, his chin looked too round for his taste. The three dangly silver earrings on each of his earlobes were in their place, right where they belonged. And it wasn’t even the new hair color that made him question whether the man he was looking at was really him. The mint was alright. It had been some time since he had last dyed his hair. 6 years at least. He had tried different nuances of red in his late teens, the most rebellious of his days. But in order to make it into college and start a career as a piano teacher, he had gone back to his natural shade of charcoal black and not dyed it since. The mint made him look paler but it also made his eyebrows and dark lashes pop a lot more and he liked that effect. As said before, it was alright. Better than he had anticipated. They could have chosen a worse color. Most likely he would never have gone for that much of a dramatic change himself. Nowadays, he preferred to be subtle, private and low key. But that side that wished to attract attention and stand out from the crowd was still there. It hadn’t vanished with becoming an adult. If he was completely honest with himself, the pastel green excited him. He used his fingers to arrange it a little differently and he liked how it went together with his black nail polish. No, the reason for the immense dysphoria he was experiencing in that moment wasn’t the new hair. This was his face. But the expression wasn’t his. The look in his own eyes was what felt unfamiliar. This wasn’t Min Yoongi looking back at him. This was Suga. There was a weird sparkle to his eyes. Not a good sparkle. More dazed than anything else. And there was a soft blush playing on his cheeks. Literally playing. It seemed to be moving. Like blood swirling under his skin, stirred by his raging emotions. It was the same face that he had encountered in the glass sliding door of the dormitory last night after his first kiss with Crow. Maybe disheveled was the right word. But it was not only the sex written across his face. There was more. Something he didn’t recognize. As if a gap between his mind and body had opened and was growing bigger by the second. As if they had cut out his heart and brain and planted them in a body similar to his old one... Or maybe it wasn’t the shell. Maybe it was a new heart, a new brain. And Suga’s heart and brain didn’t feel at home in Min Yoongi’s body yet. Whatever it was... it came as a relief. This state of not being settled in himself seemed to bear an endless array of possibilities. It felt like hovering above himself, looking at who he was from the outside. There were no strings attached anymore. Maybe this was the feeling. This was how it felt to be done with letting go. He was free to do whatever he wanted. He was single. No he wasn’t. He was Crow’s.

The door of the dressing room flew open and a cloud of fabric swooshed past the mirror. Yoongi turned around and froze. Pumpkin looked drop dead gorgeous. After the news of what had happened to their personal belongings, Yoongi had been prepared to greet Pumpkin with a smack across his pretty face the second he got hold of him. But all he could do right now was gape at the divine beauty of the ethereal creature that had been convicted as the thief.

Pumpkin was wearing a Japanese Yukata over the midnight blue harem pants. The Yukata itself was printed with peonies in all shades of pink, purple and crimson. On the perfect body of this superhumanly beautiful man it posed a sight much more impressive than the actual field itself. It was as if he was draped in a silky layer of his opulent scent, there was so much fabric that it billowed around him like smoke and Yoongi bit his own lip at the way it revealed one of the boy's fair shoulders and his surprisingly toned chest. Yoongi had not expected chocolate abs of this kind under the clothes of a boy that might easily pass as a mystic goddess. The Yukata wasn’t tied. Its belt just hung loosely from the loops adding up to that undone, messy kind of look and unrestrained erotic energy. Pumpkin’s make-up matched the pink colors of the Yukata, his purple eyes, the violet tint of
his lip gloss and also his hair was a darker shade of pink. Apparently, he had toned it with some purple. It wasn’t pastel anymore. It just screamed my little pony. Instead of the golden labret stud, he wore a golden ring now that enclosed his sensual lower lip in a way that made Yoongi downright uncomfortable.

“Uhhh… mint looks smoking hot on you, Sugar Boy”, Pumpkin smirked and reached out to touch Yoongi’s hair.

“Fuck off!”Yoongi burst out, waking up from his momentary stupor. He slapped Pumpkin’s hand away and took a step back, butt colliding with the drawer behind him so hard that the perfume and make-up bottles started shaking.

“What’s wrong with you? Got your period?”, Pumpkin frowned and made a cocky move with his head to get rid of a wave of hair that was poking into his eye.

“I think you’ve got some explaining to do”, Yoongi murmured and threw a glance at the frog that had just entered behind Pumpkin, carrying a jar with freshly cleaned make-up brushes.

Pumpkin just gave him a presumptuous look, not bothering to ask, just waiting for Yoongi to go on. Once again Yoongi reassured himself that, except for the frog, they were the only ones in this room.

“Putting two and two together my ass, Pumpkin. It was you. You stole our stuff. Backpacks, phones and all. Don’t even try to lie your way out of it. I have proof. In front of that elevator, you called me by my full name. But I never gave you my last name. You figured that out from going through my belongings. Just like the contents of my backpack told you that I needed glasses and that I used to date a certain redhead… the very fact that I smoke. Of course you weren’t surprised at my age cause you had read it on my ID before.”

“Of-”, Pumpkin tried to interrupt him but Yoongi had already talked himself into a pretty solid fit of rage.

“Let me finish! There is something absolutely fishy about this whole situation. About you claiming you were trying to help by at least sparing me the worst. You actively took part in getting me into this. You stole our shit. It was you who fucking put that anklet on me! I bet there is even more you did!”

Pumpkin rolled his eyes. And then he yawned, patting his lips with his fingertips to indicate his boredom. It had Yoongi at a loss for words.

“Finished?”, Pumpkin asked, pulling the corner of his mouth to the side to flaunt his lack of interest even more. Yoongi just stared at him, panting a little with the anger that the other’s reaction sent flushing through his body.

“You’re either very slow or very naïve”, Pumpkin shook his head. “But congrats, you finally seem to get an idea of just how dangerous this place is.”

“So you’re admitting it?! Just like that? Are you fucking kidding me? What’s with that attitude? I trusted you, boy. I really did.”

“I told you not to”, Pumpkin just casually shrugged. Yoongi was torn between still being somewhat mesmerized by his unbearable beauty and the desire to just punch this pretty face as hard as he could.

“I’ve been honest with you. I told you not to trust me. Not to trust anyone. I tried to help you. Remember? I even advised you to make a run for it while you still could. When you came to Bird’s cellar. We both said to ditch your friends and just leave. It was your decision to stay. So I knew I
wouldn’t be able to save you. And I told you that. I promised you nothing. Only that I can maybe
spare you some things. I already did that. And I’m determined to keep doing it. Spare you whatever I
can. Man forges his own destiny, isn’t it what they say? And you made a decision when you took
that pill. Made another one when you demanded to be taken to Madame Yu. Man will take
responsibility for his action. So what’s your problem now?”

Yoongi opened and closed his mouth as if he was trying to catch the words he was lacking from the
air surrounding him.

“But… you stole our money, our phones… like… why? What do you even want with it?”

“Of course I stole it. I stole it because it’s my fucking job to steal it. And just for your information.
Technically, it wasn’t even me. But Taehyung. He’s usually the first to spot those who arrive ‘cause
he’s always out playing. He followed you around and observed you for a while. And when the three
of you fell unconscious, he called us to do our job.”

“Who’s us?”

“Me, Bird and a couple of others.”

“Wait… hold up. When you say it’s your job… then… there’s a routine to this! And… Bird…
like… the both of you lied… he acted like he didn’t already know that two guys had been taken to
the bathhouse with a blood poisoning. But he did! He was there himself.”

“He carried your ex, in case you wondered”, Pumpkin shrugged. “Two others took care of your tall
friend.”

“Hold up no! You’re lying again! Crow told me that my friends had been taken to the bathhouse by
some of his people… and by that he meant frogs. He told me that they surely didn’t take our money
‘cause they have no use for it!”

“And you really still think Crow is honest with you? Poor baby”, Pumpkin snorted and rolled his
eyes so hard that for a second his pupils disappeared completely. “We were accompanied by some
frogs that were supposed to assist us. They were carrying your bags and stuff. After Taehyung went
through all of them to see if he could find something fun to play with. He found a magic cube in your
friend Moon’s bag and was happy. But he also found the LSD strips that your ex had on him. If we
find drugs we always share them. Bird and I already swapped our strips for weed. So much for the
black market in this place. All of us… all of Crow’s people… have no use for your money and
phones. Phones don’t work here. There’s a spell that disturbs the signal. And we have a different
currency here. Madame Yu takes the money of those who end up here. She uses it for deals with the
guests who accept that kind of money. Personal clothes and bags are burned. And remember? I even
helped you keep your hoodie. Cause I felt sorry for you. And that’s how you show your gratitude…
call me out for lying.”

“Why… why did you leave me behind? Why did you take Hoseo- I mean Hope and Moon to the
bathhouse and leave me lying next to that table in the dirt?”

“Reasons”, Pumpkin shrugged. “Orders”, he then corrected himself.

“Tell me those reasons for fuck’s sake! Who gave that order?”

“How about you ask your pretty little raven boy about those reasons?”, Pumpkin breathed and his
purple eyes pierced into Yoongi’s. “It was him, huh? That little cunt spilled the beans, right? He
pointed out to you how I was the one to steal your shit. That figures. That’s the way he plays. And
he sure plays for keeps. If it wasn’t for this urgent desire to break his neck with my bare hands whenever I see him I might go ahead and ask him for some tips on how to be the slyest little motherfucker out there. Oh, how that prick disgusts me.”

“What about him?”, Yoongi forced out. “He wasn’t part of it, was he? He wasn’t involved in stealing our stuff, was he?”

“Of course he wasn’t. He considers himself too good for this kind of job nowadays. He was right there on his post on the bridge. Waiting for you. To lure you into the bathhouse.”

Yoongi just looked at Pumpkin with the helpless defeat he felt in that moment. It was too much information. He had lost track of who to trust. There was so much to process yet so much left that he didn’t see through yet, that he couldn’t make sense of. It was a fact that all of them lied. But who was lying in his favor? Had any of them ever actually been on his side? Pumpkin studied his face. He had ended his last sentence in a know-it-all manner. But at the sight of Yoongi’s helplessness, his temper seemed to calm down a little bit. He let out a defeated puff of air.

“Listen… Suga Hyung. It’s none of my business. You’re a full grown adult. Two years older than me in fact. You can do whatever you want. And I can see that you are already drawn to Crow more than you probably should.”

“What’s that to you anyway?”, Yoongi tried to defeat himself. “And who are you to call Crow out for being sly when all you ever do is lie? What did he do to make you hate him so much?”

Pumpkin sighed.

“Honestly? I don’t even want to tell you… I really thought you were the slightest bit more clever, Suga. In the end, you’re right. It’s nothing to me. Do whatever you want with whomever you want… Helping you around here means nothing but additional trouble for me anyway. So if you choose his side then… good luck, I guess. I hope you won’t regret it. But I’m already pretty certain you will…”

“Tell me why I shouldn’t trust him then!”, Yoongi urged. “And tell me why to trust you after what you just confessed.”

“I am… still… not telling you to trust me. But there is something I am going to tell you. In your life… you’ll meet people who are exceptionally cruel. And you will dig into their past. And you will find reasons for how they became this way. You’ll feel sorry for them. Try to understand them… help them… heal them even. And for a certain period of time it will look like it’s getting better. But then comes the moment when their cruel face returns. When they eventually turn against you. What I’m saying is… people may have their reasons… their tragic backstories… for acting a certain way. But in the end, they are still monsters for doing what they do. Because having been abused does not give you the right to abuse others. Not every human being has a heart. Some people just lose theirs to the cruelty of others. And that is a tragedy. But you still want to keep a distance from those people. In order to save yourself.”

“Are you saying that Crow is one of those who don’t have a heart?”, Yoongi forced out between gritted teeth. He was shaking with anger and insecurity.

“I’m saying Crow will be his own demise. It’s too late to save him. Others have tried that before. And if you don’t watch out, you’ll be one of his casualties.”

Yoongi had absolutely no idea what to say. He recalled the gentle kisses by the frog well. And holding hands on the way back to the bathhouse until they had reached the dunes again and Crow
hand let go of his fingers, kissing them before he did so.

“You’ve had sex, hm?”, Pumpkin asked. In a low and compassionate voice. Yoongi avoided his glance.

“See… I don’t judge you for it. I see what you did there… Surrendering yourself to a mysterious stranger in a field of flowers sure sounds romantic… And for a moment it will camouflage the things that are actually troubling you. But you can’t fuck the pain away in the long run, Yoongi… Believe me… I’ve tried it. Once you wake up you’ll find the person you spent the night with gone and all your problems still there. The emtness one person left you with… you can’t fill that with someone else’s cum. If you still have feelings for Hope you should try to win him back. And not try to numb them with someone else.”

“Why are you suddenly pretending that you care?”, Yoongi hissed, feeling attacked by the other’s approach that was way too personal for his taste.

“I’ll stop then”, Pumpkin shrugged and took a step back. For a brief second, their eyes met.

“You’ve gotten me into this…”, Yoongi murmured as if to justify himself.

“You’ve gotten yourself into this”, Pumpkin replied coldly. “And now change your clothes and do your makeup. The opening performance is about to start. Hope and I are first. When it’s wrapped up, the buffet will be opened. We need you on the piano for the solo stages then.”

* 

Yoongi was completely out of breath when he reached the top of the stairs. He was on the topmost floor now, where there was Madame Yu’s office. Taking the stairs was about to turn into a habit. The fear of finding himself trapped in the elevator with a guest made it look like a piece of cake to run up 3 floors in less than a minute. He was late. It had taken him far too long to do his make-up following the instructions of a tutorial sheet on the wall next to the mirror. Having finished, he had already been up the first flight of stairs when he had realized that he was still wearing his black everyday pants. Speeding back to the changing room, figuring out where those midnight-blue harem pants were again and changing had cost him another five minutes. His fingers were clenching around the cigarette package in his new set of pants while he was hurrying down the hall looking for the entrance to the Midnight Bar or at least something that resembled Pumpkin’s description.

“When you walk towards Madame Yu’s office, there are two big Chinese flower vases. Stop there. Turn around again and take three steps into the direction you came from. Look to the right. You’ll then realize that the wooden wainscoting is not solid. It’s an optical illusion. Behind it you’ll find a flight of winding-stairs. It will lead you to the entrance door. Don’t be late, hear me?”

Don’t be late. The two vases stood there like two soldiers observing Yoongi who ran back and forth between them and was not able to spot the slightest change in the structure of the boarding, let alone some sort of gap or opening. And besides the muffled steps of his own bare feet, there was absolutely no sound. If there was a bar above this corridor wouldn’t there be some sort of noises like footsteps, voices… or music? Unless… they were all quiet, holding their breath, waiting for the performance to start. Yoongi was about to rub his face in desperation when he remembered the amount of make-up he wore and resignedly lowered his hands again. Pumpkin had left for the bar even before Yoongi had been done with foundation. Said he needed to get ready and couldn’t wait for him. And why would he have waited for him anyway? The initial advances of something like a friendship were gone now, weren’t they? Yoongi had chosen sides. And Pumpkin had… given up on him.
Yoongi jumped and at the same time, the soft low voice made his tense insides relax. He whirled around and greeted Taehyung with a relieved smile. The boy was leaning in the doorframe of his mother’s office. He, too, had changed for the event. He was wearing crimson-colored harem pants and one of those crop tops that Yoongi had seen on Kitten and prematurely labeled part of the girl’s uniforms. Taehyung wore it with the same confidence as her. The pants, too, were worth a second glance. It was some Indian mirror work design, the entirety of the fabric was decorated with silvery reflecting little plates and elaborate embroidery. Most remarkable were the strips of tulle on each side of his body that covered the pants like some sort of skirt but that were also attached to rings on both of his middle fingers. This way, when he raised his arm, he raised the tulle as well and it gave the impression of a pair of elegant, translucent wings. The lightweight motion of the flowing fabric stood in contrast to the heavy look of the multitude of golden necklaces that rested on the boy’s chest. He was still wearing the brazen bangle around his delicate upper arm and the gemstone tiara nestled in his platinum shock of hair. Holding on to the door with one hand, he was touching his lips with the other while observing Yoongi.

“Tae… Young Master”, Yoongi said loud enough for the walls to hear. Who knew if Madame Yu wasn’t sitting at her desk in the room right behind Taehyung, prick-eared. Taehyung just drew the door shut behind him and hurried towards Yoongi, his jewelry jingling happily. He threw himself at Yoongi’s chest and stared up at his new hair color, their noses almost brushing.

“You look so pretty, Hyung. Do you like the color? I chose it for you!”

Not able to hide his surprise, Yoongi took a step back to bring a safe distance between him and the boy.

“You chose it?”

“Yeah, I get to decide the employees’ names and their hair color. And when I get bored of it, I can order to change it. I also demanded Pumpkin’s hair to be changed for tonight. Did you already see it? When he came here, it was bright orange… that’s why I called him Pumpkin. But I got bored of it quickly. It wasn’t cute enough. I really like the pastel pink on him but for tonight I thought he has to look special. So I suggested adding some lavender... to match his beautiful peony Yukata. I also chose the fabric for that. The frogs tailored it this morning. Have you seen it? I was allowed at the fitting. It was my idea to leave it completely undone so you could see his abs… they are… I want to…”

Taehyung blushed and lowered his eyes to the floor, smiling.

“Pumpkin looks really good”, Yoongi said to give Taehyung the validation he was looking for. It was no lie. Pumpkin looked fucking gorgeous. But Yoongi was high key irritated to find out that the employees apparently seemed to be Taehyung’s personal Barbie dolls that he could dress however he pleased.

“What… what color did you choose for… Moon and… Hope?”

“Oh… Moon has silver hair now. I thought it matched his serious and intellectual personality. It’s similar to my shade but without the purple tint. Close to his original ash blonde even. And Hope…”

Yoongi’s heart clenched. He had always loved Jung Hoseok’s bright red hair. It clashed with 90% of what he usually wore, especially since he had this obnoxious love for orange colored sweaters. The dye left persistent stains on white towels and pillowcases and was so bright that it was almost cruel to the eye in sunlight. But having met him like this, Yoongi could not imagine him with any other hair
color. There was nothing that screamed his name, his personality like this super annoying red. The realization that it might be gone now almost felt like a bigger loss than when he was forced to take off his Thrasher hoodie.

“I wanted to see him with dark hair”, Tae beamed and Yoongi’s heart dropped a few inches.

“No…”, he whispered, unable to keep his facial features in check. A frown brought his eyebrows closer together.

“No? But he looks gorgeous like this, Hyung. I figured that his character is already bright red enough… I thought the black would bring his serious, thoughtful side to the fore.”

“He doesn’t have such a side…”, Yoongi mumbled but then he forced himself together. “But I’m looking forward to seeing the color on him… I’m sure you made the right decision.”

Despite learning that Taehyung had taken part in robbing them, his feelings towards the boy hadn’t changed. He still thought fondly of him. Clearly, he wasn’t even aware of having done something wrong. That was how they dealt with newcomers here. He had grown up seeing strangers become the bathhouse’s property and he didn’t mean to do anyone harm when he enjoyed himself picking beautiful names, colors and fabrics for his new human toys. What else did he have? He wasn’t allowed to live on his own, go where he wanted… wasn’t allowed to love. If he was excited to show it to him, then Yoongi would pretend he loved Hoseok’s new hair color. It was the least he could do.

“Listen Tae…”, Yoongi whispered, figuring that hearing his real name might make the boy happy. “I’m looking for the Midnight Bar. The performance will start shortly and I figure I’m already late. I need to work there tonight and… I’d like to watch… watch… Pumpkin and Ho… Hope dance.”

“I’m on my way there, too!”, Taehyung smiled. He really had a remarkably elegant face. How was it even possible that a woman like Madame Yu had given birth to a prince like him? He was too young for Yoongi. Not only because his body was still that of a teenager… he had the mind of a child… was blessed with an irrational kind of innocence that the cruel world was bound to classify as weakness and vulnerability. Yoongi felt the need to protect him. And at the same time, the dark certainty was creeping up on him that he wouldn’t be able to.

“You can’t find the Midnight Bar because you don’t really want to go there”, Taehyung declared in his usual tone of everything being a matter of course.

“What do you mean?”, Yoongi asked, considering himself pretty desperate to find that goddamn bar.

“I’m sure you’re thinking you have to go there… but it’s not the same as actually wanting to go. Most newbies have that problem. But it’s fine… I can take you there.”

The familiar buzzing sensation spread into Yoongi’s right arm when Taehyung’s fingers closed around his hand. They grabbed it lightly, sensually. If there was a sexual way of holding hands then this must be it. Gently tucking, he led Yoongi closer to the wall paneling, running his lean fingers along the wood.

“The entrance is right here”, he whispered and drew Yoongi closer to his body raised their entwined hands and made Yoongi feel across the wood himself. And suddenly he noticed a jut. There was a corner. And Taehyung led him around it and next thing Yoongi knew they were standing in a room paved with black tiles, a plain red carpet leading towards a flight of winding-stairs. There was a neon sign on the black wooden wall. It read “Midnight” and a blinking arrow pointed upstairs. Yoongi just commented on the sight with a small exhale. Still holding on to his hand, Taehyung dragged him towards the stairs.
It felt like stepping into a forest of human bodies. In the darkest hour of the night. All the lights in the Midnight Bar were turned down. There was a dim red shine coming from an LED strip that marked the edge of the stage and it illuminated the smoke that crawled over it like November mist over a grave. Yoongi only caught glimpses of it as Taehyung led him through the trees that were warm and moving bodies. But the wind that rustled through the branches was ice-cold. Their whispers seeped through Yoongi’s bones like icy rainwater dripping into a cave in which somebody was hiding from the storm. They were hissing with anticipation. Yoongi didn’t dare to glance at them but from the corner of his eye he still saw masks fly by as Taehyung dragged him through gaps that opened and closed seconds later, as soon as they had popped through. Thanks to the contacts, Yoongi wasn’t as lost in the dark as he usually would have been but he found himself wanting his bad eyesight back. It had protected him until now, blurred the sharpness of reality. His fingers clenched around the warm, lean hand that continuously sent tickles up his lower arm. When they had made it through the crowd that gathered in front of the stage, Yoongi caught sight of a bar at the back of the room. The shelves with the bottles of the finest alcohol brands were illuminated and he flinched when he saw the black silhouette of the barkeeper turn and spotted the contours of feathers in his unruly hair. Crow had not mentioned that he was working here as a bartender. Had only hinted that they would see each other again tonight.

“Watch out, there’s a step”, Taehyung’s low voice stroked his ear and Yoongi followed him, stepping up onto a narrow pedestal. He exhaled with relief when his hand touched the lid of a piano. The sensation of the cold smooth lacquered surface sent a wave of nostalgia through his veins. And as if his hand touching the wood had triggered it, the spotlights flashed to life and a loud gust of wind went through the audience. Next to Yoongi, Taehyung stood on his tiptoes.

“Oh my God, Pumpkin looks so beautiful!”', he exclaimed. Yoongi craned his neck and all he could do was gape in approval. Pumpkin stood there, frozen in mid-motion like a mannequin holding an orange, feathered fan up to cover the lower half of his face. And then the music started. It was traditional Korean drums played by a group of frogs as another spotlight pointed out. The second Yoongi’s glance shifted from the amphibians back to Pumpkin, he wasn’t alone on the stage anymore. Now he was surrounded by a group of masked dancers, the flowing fabrics of their costumes blending into an ocean on which Pumpkin’s peony Yukata was the ship. They whirled around each other in a wild ecstatic dance and as though it was a baton, Pumpkin directed their every move with his orange fan. He drew an expansive circle into the air and one by one the white fans of the dancers popped open like flowers blooming on his command. Yoongi’s jaw dropped even further when Pumpkin took a run up and then did an aerial, spinning around his own body in clothes that Yoongi couldn’t even properly walk in. When he landed, the Yukata fell from one of his shoulders, exposing it to the hungry eyes that Yoongi knew where prying from behind the masks. He himself couldn’t deny the erotic tension that the young man’s naked skin and the wanton gaze in his eyes sent through the room. pumpkin didn’t bother to readjust his sleeve. He shook it further down and licked his upper lip throwing his head back in a silent laugh. But then he faced the audience again and spun around, giving way to one of the background dancers who stormed to the fore. When he took off his mask and chucked it to the side, Yoongi clasped his mouth in shock. It was Jung Hoseok. Dark brown curls with some bright purple highlights falling into his eyes as he pulled a white shawl from one of the pockets of his own Yukata that – as Yoongi noticed now - was a dark ink blue and sparkled like it was covered in glitter. It looked like the night sky under which the peony fields were asleep now and Yoongi wondered whether they had already turned into that poisonous crimson color. As if to expand the image that Yoongi figured their clothes to represent, Hoseok and Pumpkin started dancing with each other, using the white shawl as a tie to hold them together. How? How had Hoseok learned all of this in only a few hours? It was a while since Yoongi had last seen him dance. Oh how he had missed it. To see this utter concentration, this
serious and determined focus in the face that was usually always distracted with smiles and
lighthearted surprises. He was a devil now. Grabbing Pumpkin by the hair to whirl him around,
tearing the Yukata even further off his arm. Using the white shawl like a whip, he knocked the fan
out of the pink-haired boy’s hand and then drew him into an embrace that ended with his lips close to
his exposed neck. The white fans of the masked dancers rotating around them. Yoongi watched
Pumpkin’s carotid pulse and his chest heave with laughter as the roaring applause went loose.
Taehyung was clapping his hands so fiercely that he kept slapping Yoongi’s upper arm. And Yoongi
clapped, too. Both Pumpkin’s and Hoseok’s nostrils were fluttering as they were gulping in air,
trying to get a glimpse of the audience but obviously blinded by the spotlights. Hoseok’s eyes were
sparkling. He was happy. Proud of how well their performance had gone. Most likely high on
adrenaline and endorphins. And Yoongi stood there in the dark, in the back of the room. It was over.
He still felt the presence of the raven boy in his body. If they used a black light on him now they
would find white stains all over his skin even though he had showered for almost half an hour after
returning to the bathhouse. Their hearts had extended their hands towards each other in winter,
seeking the other’s closeness to stay warm. And now on some very random day in August, about 8
months later, they had let go. Yoongi had gotten in the car, having a weird feeling about going to this
party in the mountains with his ex. He had been tortured by the premonition that something was
going to happen. Not knowing exactly what… But in retrospect, he did know. Reading their book in
reverse, starting at the end and going back to the start, it all made sense. They had never been meant
to be. Their entire story had played out, driving towards the ultimate moment of breaking apart.
Because Hoseok was the sun. And Yoongi was the moon. If at all. Maybe he was just the night sky
without any certain source of light. Or not even that. He was the darkness in the back of a bar,
creeping where there light was absent. He felt dirty. Knowing that it was nothing but validation he
had sought letting Jeon Jungkook press him into the dirt. And he had been filled with his validation,
filled with him. And he still was empty. Looking at a boy from afar that he knew he couldn’t have
back. Did he ever actually have him? Once darkness and light united, the darkness vanished. It
evaporated under the sun’s hot rays. And just like that, Yoongi had dissolved in Hoseok’s presence.
Hating himself a little bit more with every kiss he fell deeper in love with him.

Yoongi turned the page of the music book and cracked his knuckles before his fingertips wandered
back to the keys. They had turned the lights back on. And the lights, it should be mentioned, were
floating. Red and yellow lanterns were drifting above the heads of the guests, rising high into the
dome of the Midnight Bar. As Pumpkin had said, you could indeed see the stars from here. Yoongi
had noticed only after the performance but the entire walls and the dome itself were made of glass. It
was funny because – upon entering the bar – it had felt like stepping into a narrow, stuffy club with
low ceilings. Yoongi had somewhat given in to the thought that maybe the architecture was changing
again. From time to time he glanced up just to make sure the sky was still there, threw a glance over
his shoulder to check for the bar and the raven boy shaking cocktails. Crow never looked over to the
piano. Maybe he avoided Yoongi on purpose, keeping work from private issues and maybe he also
just didn’t care about him right now. Whenever Yoongi turned around, he found Crow pouring a
drink or shoving it across the bar holding eye contact with the guest he had prepared it for. Yoongi
almost missed a note as the question of whether Crow also slept with the guests crossed his mind.
Until now he had perceived him as ranked higher than the rest of the normal employees. But then
again so was Pumpkin. And there he was. Spinning around a pole at the side of the stage, Yukata
gone, abs on display. Pumpkin was a fucking professional. Whenever Yoongi glanced up at him,
there was an expression on his face that looked like he was just about to come. The guests were
seated at tables now, enjoying the food from the buffet that was continuously re-stocked by a highly
motivated team of frogs. But they were much rather feasting on Pumpkin’s body. Yoongi could also
see No Face from where he sat. As his fingers travelled over the keyboard, he observed the dark-clad
figure who was seated at a table a little apart from the others but very close to the pole Pumpkin was
grinding against. He wasn’t the only one at the table. There were more men, most of which had taken off their masks to eat or at least shoved them up into their hair. No Face wasn’t eating. He was still wearing his full body cape, the burka with the death mask. Judging by the way he held his head, he was watching Pumpkin and the boy was evidently more than aware of it since he sent a silent moan in his direction every now and then. He was slow-dancing, just swaying his hips and dragging his fingers along the steel pole in the slow rhythm of the piano music flowing by. Yoongi was accompanied by a saxophone and a contrabass both played by mesmerizingly pretty girls, each of them on a pedestal of their own. There was another mesmerizingly beautiful female. Kitten was gliding around the tables, silently filling drinks, replacing plates and laughing with those who stopped her to slap her butt. Yoongi had tried to catch her glance a couple of times already but she was occupied with guests. Or maybe she as well was avoiding to express personal emotions in the realm of the Midnight Bar. The way she rocked her hips and walked like a model, setting one foot in front of the other, made Yoongi hope that she was feeling better. Apparently, Taehyung had done a good job healing her injuries. Had she been in so much pain that she couldn’t get up in the morning, she seemed to do more than alright now. The whole bar smelled pink. Maybe it was Pumpkin’s body, the glistening droplets of sweat that flushed the rosy odor from his pores as he let himself hang down from the pole upside down, leg curled around it as he slid down his arms, hanging freely, a look of surrender aimed directly at No Face. But maybe it were also the opulent bouquets of peonies that all tables were decorated with. There even stood a vase on the piano and Yoongi felt like only 10% of the oxygen he inhaled with every breath actually made it into his lungs. Every once in a while, he had to take an extra deep breath to inflate his lungs all the way and fight the dizziness that made him go weak in the knees even though he was seated. He briefly checked the music sheet to make sure but his feeling that the song had reached an end didn’t betray him. He played the last couple of notes and sighed when the saxophone girl ended the song with a brief solo.

“Intermission”, it said on the schedule that someone had placed next to Yoongi’s notes. And indeed. Pumpkin ended his performance by pushing himself off the pole and Yoongi watched him walk towards No Face’s table with a big lump in his throat. The man in the black cape got up. Even though Pumpkin was still standing on the stage, they were about the same height, most likely the guest was still wearing the highheels. He was one of those who was at a liberty to keep his own shoes on. Yoongi’s throat tightened with discomfort as the gloved hands of the ghost-like figure poked through the holes in his cape and he signaled the boy to come closer. Pumpkin gracefully walked to the edge of the stage and didn’t even flinch when the gloves touched his sides. Yoongi watched the man’s hands travel over Pumpkin’s hips as the boy with the devil horns smiled at the expressionless mask as though it was Bird’s face. He was one hell of a good actor. At the less Yoongi dared to trust him, the more he admired him for his professionalism now. Pumpkin patiently endured No Face’s fingertip tracing the contours of his abs while he bit his pierced lower lip and played all shy as they moved further down. Yoongi gulped when one hand suddenly went ahead and cupped Pumpkin’s crotch. The boy let his head fall back and pretended to feel lust as the masked man palmed him for the entire bar to see. But apparently No Face knew that he couldn’t go any further right here and now. The hands disappeared back into the cloak and when they popped out again, he was holding a fist full of objects that Yoongi could not identify. It almost looked like little wooden badges about the size of a bookmark if he were to estimate. He was sitting far across the room but Yoongi could still tell that Pumpkin’s eyes lit up at the sight of the objects. And when No Face went ahead, pulled at the waistband of Pumpkin’s dark blue harem pants and shoved them under it as if tugging bills into his underwear Yoongi understood them to be money, the different currency that Pumpkin had mentioned. Pumpkin dropped to his knees to properly show his gratitude but No Face made a move with his foot to indicate he should get up. As Pumpkin struggled back to his feet, the masked man’s finger travelled under his chin to hold his head up. And Yoongi shuddered at the absurdity of the situation when Pumpkin leaned in and obediently kissed the mask where the lips should be. He looked tiny compared to the tall black figure. And no matter how much Yoongi should probably hate and distrust him, the sight of the dead mask pressed against his
beautiful face made him so uneasy that he had to look away. He jumped a little in his seat when he noticed the girl right next to him. Kitten was offering a cup of ice tea on a tray but he just shook his head with a smile feeling already way too sick from the sight of the kiss to drink the disgustingly sweet-smelling liquid. Kitten nodded and winked as if she had expected him to reject the drink.

“Mint looks cute on you, Suga”, she whispered and was about to turn away again when Yoongi’s fingers grabbed her pant leg.

“I have a cig for you”, he murmured in her ear when she leaned down to make their talk private. Her eyes lit up.

“You for real?”, she beamed. Her straight cut bob fell against Yoongi’s neck and it tickled.

“Even two if you like. Are you doing better than last night?”

“I’m fine”, she smiled.

“Meet me at the dorm at 1 AM later. On the balcony. We can smoke one together then.”

“I see you already learned about good places”, she whispered and straightened up again. They exchanged a last smile before she went on, acting as if nothing had happened. Yoongi felt for the pack in his pocket. Somehow all he owned was in there. The three cigarettes that were left. One of Taehyung’s marbles. And his name. And the package itself… The last proof that he had been friends with Kim Namjoon and Jung Hoseok before entering this theme park. Yoongi jumped. The music had started again. The two girls were playing and the nervous glance of the one with the saxophone told him that he had missed his entry. He quickly flipped the page for the next song but all it said there was “improvise”. Finding himself confronted with a total blackout, Yoongi just went along with what the contrabass played, earning himself another distressed look from the girls who apparently were counting on him to come up with something more creative. But Yoongi literally stopped playing again when his glance fell on the stage. Pumpkin was gone and the next performer had taken his place. Hoseok. Just like Pumpkin, he had taken off his Yukata and was only dressed in the midnight blue pants, barefoot, anklets dancing around his leg as he moved. A black choker around his neck. He walked over to the pole with a confidence that made Yoongi’s heart yell with protest. Obviously all eyes in the room were on him now, checking him out, expecting a lot after Pumpkin’s sensual showcase. But Hoseok took a different approach. Pumpkin had toyed with the audience, making himself the object of their lust. “You know you want me”, his lascivious expression had said. But Hoseok went with “I know you want me”. His weapon was his self-confidence. Pumpkin had grabbed the pole indicating that the way he danced was the way he wanted to be touched. He had spread his legs and curled them around it to show that he was in the mood to be taken down. The way Hoseok’s fingers closed around the metal, mirrored the way he was ready to grab the body that chose him. Way more sensual, the way he grinded against it was fierce. And it had Yoongi’s breath shaking. He remembered the way Hoseok had used to crawl on top of him, like a leopard creeping up on a prey. A smile so devilish on his lips that it had rendered Yoongi immobile. He had never used handcuffs or ropes on him to keep in him place. Hoseok’s smile in bed had always been enough to turn Yoongi’s sass, his gruffness and his signature boredom into a whining, panting mess, trying his best to keep the last bit of control over his face when he came way too early. And Yoongi knew he wasn’t the only one to feel this way about Jung Hoseok right now. Just like when Pumpkin had danced, he witnessed all heads turning and gazes directed at the stage like the spotlights. This wasn’t right. There was a room full of people lusting after his ex. A boy that only cared for sex in combination with love like he had always used to say. Hoseok had never slept around. He had been single when they first met and proud to tell Yoongi and Namjoon that he was waiting for a special someone, an adventure in a person, as he had called it. Yoongi caught himself slamming the keys in moll as he imagined what was going on in the guests’ heads. What was going
on behind No Face’s mask. The man was watching Hoseok attentively, obviously very interested in what the new staff member had to offer. And Hoseok clung to the pole, apparently not really trusting the rather dissonant path the music had taken. Like a shooting star, an idea crossed the sky of Yoongi’s mind. He let the old melody fade away until contrabass and saxophone had followed him into a neutral state of jamming before he struck up a new one. River Flows in You. Maybe these notes were capable of what his face wasn’t. Maybe it would strike a chord within Hoseok’s mind and help him remember. And if not… maybe it would at least make him let go of the pole. So far so good, it made him hesitate. He stopped in mid motion as though someone had called his name and he was searching for the owner of the voice. But then he seemed to remember what he was supposed to be doing and the next second he let go of the pole. He took a few steps towards the middle of the stage and then raised his arms in a ballet-like pose. Yoongi’s fingers on the keyboard picked up speed as Hoseok started to whirl around himself, making up a choreography of pure elegance as he let the music take over his body. As though there was some kind of muscle memory, as though his limbs remembered what his mind didn’t. The way he moved wasn’t sexual anymore. It was poetic. Pumpkin had danced from his core, his lower abdomen, rocking his hips as he would have on the body of someone lying beneath him. Hoseok drew the energy from someplace else. Someplace higher, at the height of his chest. The saxophone had stopped and also the bass had left him somewhere along the way. The girls had realized that this was Yoongi’s song and his song alone. But they were wrong. It was a shared energy between piano and dancer. Between Suga and Hope who had known each other for way longer than one of them knew. What Hoseok did on the stage obviously wasn’t what the audience was expecting but he was doing it so well that they were still on his side. On the demasked faces, Yoongi saw admiration and positive surprise. And on Hoseok’s face he saw familiarity. The expression of being one with the music. Of having let it take over and do with him whatever it chose to. Yoongi blinked rapidly but some of the tears fell onto the black and white keys.

* *

Next up on the schedule was a 50 minutes vocal performance with playback. Yoongi closed the lid of the piano and looked around. Hoseok’s performance had ended differently. A lot of guests had come to the edge of the stage and placed some of the wooden badges to his feet. No one had touched him and even No Face had kept a respectful distance. At first, Yoongi had feared that they hadn’t enjoyed his performance as much as Pumpkin’s. But then had agreed with himself that it was most likely the fact that Hoseok was new. There lay an old intimacy between the most respected guest and Pumpkin, one of the boys he obviously adored a lot judging by the fact that he had requested his special performance for his birthday. But he had yet to get used to Hoseok… be convinced of his qualities. Hoseok had picked up every single badge with a bow to the person who had left it. And then he had hurried backstage, most likely to shower and then reappear in a new stunning outfit just like Pumpkin.

The pink-haired boy was sitting at the bar, sipping at a drink. Now he was wearing the midnight blue work pants with the shimmering galaxy embroideries together with a black V-neck shirt cut so low that you could see his belly button. There was a rhinestone choker around his neck and thin little chains dangled down from it, sliding over his toned abs like snakes whenever he moved his head. He was flirting. With a group of four sitting at a table close by. Yoongi really had no words for how professional he was. There wasn’t a fraction of a second his body didn’t communicate “I’m ready to be fucked”. From the way he batted his eyelashes to the mere way he turned to reach for his drink, his every move was sensual and conscious. It was like he had two different kits of facial features. One for everyday life and one for the Midnight Bar. Yoongi had even seen him have sex with his boyfriend. But the expressions he presented now had nothing to do with that actual lust that had played on his face in the cellar. Down there it had been real. A dazed state of pleasure, oblivion to the self. Right now it was a weapon he used for attack. He wore the lust on his face like a mask.
Slight flicks of his eyebrows, tongue wetting his almost inconveniently plush lips and a provoking move of his lower abdomen when he turned on the chair were still part of the choreography. He was still dancing but way more subtle now. How on earth could Yoongi trust such a professional actor?

“Can I sit with you for a minute?” Yoongi asked when he had gotten close enough for Pumpkin to hear him but he didn’t look at him directly, just dropped the question next to him in case he didn’t want to pick it up.

“Can’t you see that I’m flirting?”, Pumpkin replied just as casually and without looking at Yoongi.

“Flirting with whom?”, Yoongi retorted pretending to look at the drink menu on the bar. Something in him felt the urge to ruin this for Pumpkin. Just because he could.

“Both”, Pumpkin mumbled casually.

“Both!?” Yoongi frowned and couldn’t keep from turning at the boy eventually.

“There’s four of them, did you notice?!”

“Both couples”, Pumpkin smirked and Yoongi was low key surprised when he turned his back on the table he had been targeting to give Yoongi his full attention.

“Two couples? What do they want from you?”, Yoongi forced out trying to get a glimpse of said table over Pumpkin’s shoulders who casually moved to block the view.

“Easy, Suga. They want a lapdance. That’s all.”

“Don’t try to fool me. They want sex. They want you for an orgy.”

“Oh? Few hours ago you were fuming because I stole your shit and now you’re worried for me? Well that’s kinda cute…”

“I’m not worried for you. I just don’t wanna clean up the mess again tomorrow morning. Picking up one bloody condom was enough. Don’t need to repeat that four times.”

“Did you enjoy the performance?”, Pumpkin changed the topic and took a sassy sip from his drink.

“I enjoyed Hope’s. Yours was alright.”

Pumpkin laughed with closed lips.

“What’s with that song? The one you played when Hope was having his solo stage. You clearly didn’t make that up on the go. And the melody sounded somewhat familiar. What’s it called?”

“River Flows in You by Yiruma.”

“Oh… see. Is that a thing between you and him? Cause it sure made him move.”

“It’s our song. His mind obviously doesn’t remember me. But his body does.”

“Mhhh… you should pursue empiric validation for that thesis. How about you jump start his memory with a little make-out session after the event? Well unless… No Face chooses him for the night.”

“Hold up! What do you mean by that?”, Yoongi interrupted and let himself plunge down on the bar stool next to Pumpkin.
“Well, obviously he will choose someone to spend the rest of the night with when the time has come. See the little gong over there next to the stage? When you hear the stroke of the gong, he has made his decision. To be honest, I tried pretty hard but I don’t think that he’s in the mood for me tonight. He has this thing with newbies and first times. Those he didn’t have yet. He had me countless times. And that, too, is quite an achievement because apparently he doesn’t get tired of me. But there is also a limit to what I can do for him. And maybe he’s looking for exactly that in his birthday night.”

“What would that be?”

“Oh, that’s a thing between him and the boy or girl he chooses. He likes both. It depends on his mood.”

“He’s the most dangerous of all, isn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say most dangerous… most influential yes… most generous as well.”

Yoongi turned around to the bar. Crow wasn’t working anymore. Kitten and another girl were currently taking care of the orders. Nevertheless, he leaned in to whisper in Pumpkin’s pierced ear.

“Crow mentioned this girl called Salt who was one of his favorites. But he wouldn’t tell me what happened to her. She… she’s dead, isn’t she? Did he… did No Face kill her?”

Pumpkin frowned at him but then he laughed through his nose.

“Bullshit. Salt ain’t dead. Bad weeds grow tall.”

“So where is she now?”

“She got away. Together with her girlfriend.”

“Wait what? There is a way to get out of here? But the anklets – how?!?”

“There is a way to get out of here. And that way ain’t running away. For Salt and her girl it was a matter of lucky coincidences. Serendipity, if you will. No Face fancied Salt. So he showered her with expensive presents and money. And Salt fell in love with a girl called Owl who was a little older than her and had been working here for quite a while already. She had a notable amount of savings at that time. Together they were able to make happen what all of those you see here are aiming for. Pay for their ransom. Madame Yu is the manager of the bathhouse but technically she is not the owner. It belongs to her sister, Madame Z. Bird’s Mom. And for a total of 770 Million Spirits, the currency we use here, you can buy your own freedom from Madame Z. It usually never works. Employees never manage to get that amount together. It’s like winning at a claw crane. Like… the possibility exists… it is what makes people put their money in there. But in reality it just never happens. It’s the way Madame Yu and Madame Z motivate the workers to try their hardest for tips. This way they assure the best possible treatment of the guests. But most employees develop drug addictions… mostly because they find no other way to cope with the pain. Salt and Owl found comfort in their love for each other. And it made them achieve the impossible. In this story, they found their happy ending.”

Yoongi was sitting on the edge of his bar stool literally crawling on Pumpkin’s lap, hanging on his every word. So that was the way. They had to team up. Hoseok, Namjoon and he himself had to do like those Salt and her girlfriend had done. Earn their ransom with combined efforts. And if they didn’t manage to make enough money to save all three of them, he would at least help Hoseok and Namjoon get out of here.

“Are those… wooden badges the currency you use here?”, he asked.
The boy with the devil horns nodded.

“They are called Spirits. Originally they used to be something like tokens to order special bath infusions with. That system is not used any longer but they advanced to take on a symbolic meaning. One badge is worth 1000 Spirits. That’s the smallest unit. Everything below 1000 is not dealt in Spirits. But in cigarettes, candies and certain other items of interest. Like… if a guest wants to give you a small reward, he’ll give you a bag of snacks. Magically enchanted snacks that is. They work like drugs. Make you happy and forget the world around you for a while. But yeah… Certain services cost a certain amount of Spirits here. If someone asks you for a blowjob for example, a frog is called, he receives the Spirits for the sexual favor and takes them to Madame Yu. As you’ve witnessed last night… Most people are able to multiply items here. Well, on the guests’ side that is. Nobody comes here carrying a sports bag full of spirits if they want some special sexperience. They just produce it the second it is needed. Apart from me and Crow who are involved with witches, none of the employees are able to perform that multiplication trick. That’s also why Madame Yu doesn’t want the guests to get close to Taehyung. Unable to control his hormones, he would sleep with literally everyone and they’d suddenly be able to produce their own money. That’s also why Madame Yu kinda leaves me free hand with my relationship. Because she relies on me to not work in the employees favor. To be honest, I’m not even capable of reproducing Spirits. It takes me hours to make a second one form an original and it doesn’t even look right. Even Bird has trouble doing it. He can’t do more than five and then it won’t work for weeks. I bet only Taehyung and Madame Yu can do it. Crow also apparently struggles with it. Otherwise he would be long gone.”

Yoongi didn’t know what to do with that truckload of information. It opened up infinite possibilities and questions. All of which he would have to sort out later. Because again the lights were dimmed, preparing the audience for the next performance. And when the spotlight hit the all too familiar shock of metallic hair in which the purple gemstones of a tiara sparkled like stars in cloudless night, Yoongi almost swallowed his own tongue.

“They let him perform?!”, he exclaimed clasping Pumpkin’s upper arm to steady himself on his stool. Pumpkin caught him with an annoyed sigh and shoved him back.

“Yeah… and I fucking hate it. It was Crow’s idea. And somehow he convinced Madame Yu of that shit. I protested but no one would listen to me. Cause Tae really wanted to do it. When Crow brought up the possibility of him being on stage and showing off his vocal talent, he was hooked and started practicing right away. I guess that was the reason the old witch eventually gave her okay. Because she didn’t want to disappoint him. Like… Crow kinda put a bee in the bonnet. That manipulative son of a bitch.”

“Why would Madame Yu expose her son to the guests? It’s super dangerous, isn’t it?”

“Duh”, Pumpkin huffed scornfully. “They are walking a fucking thin line. On the one hand, it puts the bathhouse in a very good light to have the little prince himself take care of No Face’s entertainment. And I think that Madame Yu is also aware of the fact that he turns 18 the day after tomorrow and that she has to be less protective in the long run. She wants to keep him safe by all means… but she also wants him to be happy so… But you’re obviously right. I also think it’s more than risky to expose him like that and make everyone aware of the desirable young man he has become. The guests rarely ever see Taehyung. Most of the regulars still think of him as a child, I guess. But tonight they’ll be disabused. And I don’t like that thought… Taehyung is family for me. He’s sort of my man’s little brother so to speak. Whenever we find the time, we play with him. He’s not like other boys his age. Due to the way he was raised. He has a very … very pure heart. And the thought of what is going on in these creatures’ heads as they watch him perform disgusts me. This… disgusts me.”
He pointed at No Face. The man had risen from his chair. He was standing in front of the stage for a better view. Yoongi felt just as uncomfortable as the concerned frown on Pumpkin’s forehead revealed the other to be. The two young men observed as Taehyung slowly proceeded to the center of the stage, where there stood a clothes tree. The boy causally slipped his arm through the jacket that hung on one of the branches and as he stood sideways to the audience, it suddenly looked as if a person was holding him when in reality it was his own arm caressing his shoulder.

“He’s a virgin”, Pumpkin mumbled out of the blue. “He’s never had sex before. That’s part of the reason he’s so incredible powerful. When witches start to get involved with people, they inevitably transfer some of their power onto them. I’m sure the guests are able to sense it. The energy he emits.”

Yoongi knew that Pumpkin was right. All the masked people were on the edge of their chairs. A few had gotten up, just like No Face. As if invisible strings were drawing them towards the stage. Like wild animals smelling their prey. They moved closer. And Yoongi noticed Pumpkin clenching his fist in his lap.

“If one of them tries to touch him, I’ll cut his fucking dick off”, he hissed. But then Taehyung started singing. An intense rush of goosebumps ran down Yoongi’s spine. His voice was velvet in the color of the blossoms that decorated the tables. The words he breathed into the microphone were peony petals. It was a slow, sensual song. Despite of his young age, his voice was so low, so mature and so soothing. He slid his arm out of the jacket again and the clothes hanger was carried away by a group of black dressed background dancers. One of them passed a white mask to Taehyung, a mask remarkably similar to the one No Face wore. And Yoongi was sure that it was in his honor when all the background dancers suddenly produced the same kind of mask from their robes. The light was dimmed further and it looked like the white faces were floating around Taehyung as the black fabric of their clothes blended in with the background. Taehyung was wearing a giant neonpink plastic earring that read “Loved” and his facial expression was in no way inferior to what had been going on in Pumpkin’s face. His signals were unambiguous. He wanted to be touched, not only by glances.

“Look at him”, Pumpkin nudged Yoongi in the ribs. Crow was standing on the piano pedestal, arms crossed, observing the stage with a self-satisfied smile.

Taehyung’s performance was over and he had left the stage to a girl with bunny ears playing a harp. Yoongi was carrying a glass of Gin Tonic for mental support. Pumpkin had suggested for him to walk around a little and get familiar with the place, get the attention of some of the guests. Talk to people. Flirt. And Yoongi was pretending to do exactly that while holding out for Hoseok who was nowhere to be seen. He had been observing Kim Namjoon for quite a while now but he was still immersed in a round of Go with two people that were hiding their faces behind huge hoods. Yoongi didn’t deem it wise to interrupt them. He passed by the tables slowly, naked feet consciously touching the mahogany floor boards. His ankle still hurt a little whenever the ring scratched over his scars. He ignored the pain and walked upright, feeling eyes on his body. It was when a hand pressed down between his shoulder blades that he froze in mid-motion.

“Hey Sexy”, Crow whispered from over his shoulder. Yoongi let out a shaky breath.

“You look so good with the mint hair… I like it even better than the black.”

“Really?”, he asked. They weren’t really looking at each other, still standing a little apart, not make their conversation too obvious to those observing.

“Really. Are you doing okay… still in pain from… you know…?”, Crow asked, giving him a sidelong glance. Yoongi indicated shaking his head. He was lying.
“Glad to hear that. I’ve been watching you play. And it sparked this fantasy… Have you ever… done it on a grand piano?”

“Excuse me?”, Yoongi asked, highly irritated.

“I just thought… we could try it someday if you like. I pictured you lying naked on that black laquer… Your light skin…”

Yoongi just gulped. He felt uncomfortable in Crow’s presence now. Even though he had decided to stop trusting Pumpkin for good, his words about Crow being his own demise and taking others with him on his way down still resounded in his head.

“Don’t”, he suddenly said on impulse.

“Don’t what?”, Crow pretended to not get what he meant.

“Read my mind”, Yoongi whispered and backed away a little. As if it would help. Was it possible to read people’s mind long-distance? How close did Crow have to be to a person in order to know what was going on in their head?

“I’m not reading it”, Crow chuckled. “I promised to stop, didn’t I? But how about we meet after the event and... I’ll read it again then… so I know how to make you happy… Baby Boy.”

Yoongi flinched. The prospect of getting to step out of his body again for a little while excited him. Sex with Crow meant a getaway from the reality of the bathhouse. He had not felt as good as that morning for weeks. Months even.

“Can we spend the night together? Like… can I sleep where you sleep?”, he spoke his mind.

Crow didn’t answer right away. He also didn’t glance at Yoongi. He just looked straight ahead as if he would find the answer between the Roulette chips that were being passed on from one player to another.

“I fear that won’t work”, he then mumbled with finality. “My room is on the topmost floor. Next to Madame Yu’s office… her bedroom… and Taehyung’s bedroom. I cannot bring guests.”

“I see”, Yoongi nodded and camouflaged his disappointment by scratching the back of his head.

“If you want to, we can try to sneak away and spend a night in the fields one day”, Crow tried to comfort him nonetheless.

“Sure”, Yoongi nodded. “Don’t you think it’s dangerous to have Tae… have the young master perform in front of the guests?”

Crow turned his head to look at him. His charcoal black eyes narrowed with surprise.

“Why would it be dangerous? He was enjoying himself… His mother is rather strict… I figure he should be allowed to gain some experience.”

“Fair enough. But don’t you think the guests might… catch interest in him?”

“They surely already did”, Crow shrugged and tilted his head.

“And that’s not dangerous?”, Yoongi ventured further.

“It’s part of the plan.”
“What plan?”

“Oh, don’t think about it too much. It’s not like there’s an actual plan. I just thought it’s a pretty desirable side effect for the bathhouse… you know… they can look but they can’t touch. But they will try… and spend a lot of money in the process.”

He said that with a stern face that made Yoongi shut up about the topic.

“Where do you want us to have meet after this?”, he asked.

“Garden”, Crow replied briefly. “The risk of getting caught is particularly high tonight.”

“Do you do it, too?”, Yoongi continued and took a big sip from his Gin Tonic.

“Do what?”

“Sleep with the guests…”

“Not anymore”, Crow replied before he left Yoongi right where he stood.

* 

Yoongi’s knees were wobbly when he was walking up to the silver-haired young man counting a pile of Spirits in his lap. Kim Namjoon raised his head when he felt the presence of a person right in front of him. The look on his face suggested that he felt caught. Yoongi meant to say something but he just couldn’t. The person in front of him was his best friend, the only real friend he had ever had in his life. He had cried in those arms and given these palms a high five after signing the tenancy contract for their studio. Those hands holding the Spirits had pulled him out of the bathtub when he had fallen asleep in there, drunk. Had cooked meals for him when he had been tied to the bed with pneumonia. He was his most trusted friend. But he was more than that. Family, yes. Like an older brother despite being a little younger. But most importantly, he was the one who made Yoongi work. In Namjoon’s presence, he constantly felt the motivation to outdo himself, to work harder. Because he made it seem possible. His calm determination, refreshing intellect and the level-headed, almost father-like smile on his face made every obstacle seem less of a threat. There are those friends you drink and get high with. Those you meet for dinner and the ones you text at 3 AM when you need somebody to keep you from giving your ex a drunk call. But the type of friend you can be creative with, get shit done with, who’s compatible with your work ethic and has the same goals as you painted across his horizon… keep that friend closest to you. For should you ever lose yourself, they’ll know where to find you.

There was no obvious sign of recognition on Namjoon’s face. But there was expectation. His entire attention had shifted to Yoongi the moment their eyes had met. The Spirits lay forgotten in his lap. Yoongi meant to give him a sign. But his heart was hammering in his chest, he could literally feel the pores in his arm pits open as he was starting to sweat. He forced a smile. And Namjoon returned it, his dimples cut in his cheek.

“Can I help you?”, he then asked and Yoongi’s stomach seemed to dissolve. So he had lost Kim Namjoon, too…

“I…”, he muttered. “I… wondered whether you… are thirsty. Yeah… I was told to… check upon the staff at the gambling tables to see whether… they… needed anything.”

“Oh. I’m good, thank you”, Namjoon nodded in the direction of a glass that was still half full with what seemed to be whiskey on the rocks. “The waitress with the cat ears just came to ask.”
“Oops”, Yoongi laughed awkwardly. Silence slipped between them like a third person, blocking them off from each other. “So uhm… did you win?”, Yoongi tried to keep the conversation going. There was something in Namjoon’s eyes. This attentiveness that was almost bordering on alarm. But if he recognized Yoongi, he would let it show, wouldn’t he?

“Yeah I… looks like I had a lucky streak. I just won for the third time in a row…”

“Wow… congrats”, Yoongi nodded. Just like Hoseok, Namjoon had apparently lost his memory but not his personality as such. He was still a master at strategy games.

“You’ve… been playing the piano, haven’t you?”, he suddenly asked.

“Yeah I… yeah.”

“You’re very good at it. There was this one song… you played during one of the solo dances…”

“Yeah…?”, Yoongi asked. He was talking about River Flows in You. He surely was. It was a song that Kim Namjoon knew by heart just like Yoongi and Hoseok did. A song that always had used to be his prompt to come to the studio with a cup of tea or a bottle of soju depending on the time of the day. He knew better than any other that it was Yoongi’s song to cry to…

“Did you play by music or… was that a part you improvised?”

“It wasn’t part of the programme… but I didn’t make it up either. It’s one of my favorite songs. It’s called River Flows in You… by a Korean pianist who goes by the name of Yiruma.”

Namjoon nodded slowly, mouth a little open.

“I see… and what’s your name? If I may ask…”

“They named me Suga”, Yoongi replied. “How about you?”

“They named me Moon”, Namjoon answered.

They looked at each other. But then the solidary peal of a gong resounded. He turned around to face the stage and locate Hope but his heart dropped when he spotted Pumpkin hurrying towards him. Dismay was painting his angel face when he was waving Yoongi over.

“Suga. Come here. Hurry”, he commanded and grabbed Yoongi by the shoulder before he could even turn back around to Moon.

“What happened?”, he blurted out, trying to keep up with Pumpkin and the liquid in his glass. Their clothes were getting tangled as the younger maneuvered him around the tables towards the stage. He was about to suffocate from the solid pink layer of peony perfume that surrounded Pumpkin.

“Something must’ve gotten mixed up. But don’t worry, I got this!”, Pumpkin gasped out.

“What do you mean?”

“The card… like… the piece of paper on which he… No Face… was supposed to write down the name of the person he wants to spend the night with… look for yourself!”

He paused, one hand still around Yoongi’s shoulders, and pointed up at the stage. A frog was copying the name from a small piece of paper onto a big canvas with a calligraphy brush for everyone to see. Suga, it said there.
“No!”, Yoongi gasped.

“Exactly! There must be something wrong like… he doesn’t even know you… he… How could he have even seen your name tag from where he was sitting like… you were behind the piano most of the evening and- Maybe he mixed up the new names and he’s actually requesting for Hope… it must be him…”

“He knows who I am”, Yoongi interrupted him, causing Pumpkin’s face to freeze in alarmed disbelief.

“How would he?!?”

“We met… twice already. He saw me on the bridge when I got here. And we met him on our way to the frog well this morning. He… he demanded I wash myself with the water from the well… before it’s used for his sauna infusion.”

“And did you…?”, Pumpkin breathed, at least two octaves higher than his usual voice.

“I… yeah. I washed my hands and face with it. Rinsed my mouth and spat the water back into the bucket. Crow encouraged me to wash… other parts of my body but…”

It was the moment Pumpkin’s face turned to stone for good. He kept inhaling, stretching his lungs to their maximum capacity. Then he let it all out in one breath.

“This motherfucking bastard…”, what escaped with the last puff of air. “Don’t worry. I’ll make him eat one of his fucking balls for that. And don’t worry about No Face either. I’ll convince him to choose someone else instead. I’ll volunteer if there’s no other way.”

“No”, Yoongi replied bluntly. “Stop acting like you’re trying to protect me. I’ve figured you out by now. I won’t leave that money to you. He asked for me. I’d be stupid if I didn’t take the chance.”

Chapter End Notes

I live on coffee, cigarettes and your feedback. So please feed me some comments and kudos :3
Midnight Part 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you for stopping by again^^ Sorry that this update took even longer than the last few but Midnight 2 is twice the length of a usual chapter… I hope that makes up for it. The action actually starts in this one… A lot of the early questions will be answered but I’m afraid it’s also gonna raise new ones :D We’re getting into the whole blood kink thing that’s mentioned in the tags…

I recently made a new INSTA account for my micropoetry. If you are interested in what I write outside of fan fiction please follow me @_paper_peonies_ (3 underscores indeed^^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7: Midnight 2

Yoongi was shaking with tension. The room was overheated, it was humid and sticky and yet his teeth were chattering from the biting chill gnawing its way through his bones. He didn’t dare to go further into the room so he still stood there, right next to the door through which Pumpkin had pushed him into the room. It was a private wellness area. Technically, it was a bathroom. There was a big sunken bathtub, peony petals floating on the Milky water. A spacious shower cabin separated
from the rest of the room by a glass wall, a massage table and a throne-like chair that most likely was used for foot massages as Yoongi assumed from a little stool in front of it. The one thing misplaced was the bed. The thing that gave away that this was not a spa. Three steps led up to it, a king size bed draped with clean white bedding that looked like fluffy white clouds. The whole room was particularly clean and white. It was nothing like the shady, dimly lit private rooms upstairs. The illumination in here was uncomfortably bright even. Once he undressed, No Face would get to see every scar, every single body hair, beard stubble, mole and pimple. There were lamps everywhere, reflecting in the golden chrome fittings on the faucets. But maybe it weren’t even that many. Maybe it was just the mirrors. There was one on every wall. One on the ceiling, above the bed and one above the pool. One in the shower. Yoongi could see himself from 7 different angles without having to move. There he stood in his midnight blue harem pants and the black shirt, arms hugging around his own body since there was no one else to do it for him. Pumpkin had offered to wait with him and go over the rules with No Face again once he arrived. But Yoongi had rejected and told him to leave. Now he wished for the pink-haired to still be here. Never before had he been this scared in his entire life. Physically shaking with fear. Most of us rarely every experience real fear. We’re nervous, stressed, uncomfortable. But fear is a concept that has been widely erased from our 1st world comfort zones. He had never had sex for money. At least not in this way. He had slept with a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. Some of them definitely more shallow than others. And he may have used sex for material reasons a couple of times. To settle bills and get advantages. But not like that… nobody had ever literally paid for his body. Goods against cash. What if he actually sucked? Even if No Face enjoyed first encounters with newbies, he was still bound to compare them to professionals like Pumpkin. Yoongi had his fair share of experience. You needed more than two hands to count the people he had slept with. Less than twenty fingers though… but still. What if he didn’t figure out what it was that No Face was looking for? He was brutally aware that this might not only be his biggest chance… but also the only one. He had to please No Face, convince him of his qualities… win him over, come whatever may. The girl who had managed to buy her freedom back from Madame Z had been his favorite. If leaving this place was building a metaphorical bridge, then he was already standing at the shore with a shitload of wood and a saw right next to him. All he needed to do was fucking get his hands dirty and start working. And maybe he wasn’t even shaking with fear. But with motivation. He was eager to do this. Suddenly there was something to do. Pumpkin had talked about how people never won at the crane game. But as a child Yoongi had been to this carnival and he remembered that young woman walking away from one of these machines with a teddy bear bigger than Yoongi at that time. If Salt had found the motivation to play and win this game in her feelings for her girlfriend Owl, then so could he. The one thing on his mind was Jung Hoseok. Jung Hoseok swinging around the pole, believing that he was supposed to be here. He had made him let go of it tonight by playing their song. But he would make him let go of it for good. Take him back home. Them. Him and his best friend Kim Namjoon. Who had been there for him when he had hit rock bottom. Whether Hoseok remembered Yoongi or not was of secondary importance. Because Yoongi remembered. Their love was safe here in his heart. He had not been able to keep Jung Hoseok and make him happy in their past life. But he would not waste being given a second chance. A second chance to prove his love. With actions. Not for Hoseok to see it and love him back. But for Hoseok to be free.

His eyes fell shut and a heavy sigh escaped his lips when the door behind him opened with a creak. Acting on mere impulse, he let himself drop to his knees in front of the man who was looking to buy him. Pay for his services. He reenacted the formal bow that Crow had taught him this morning. There was warmth radiating from the tiles that his palms and forehead now made contact with. He wondered whether the floor heating system was operated with the energy from Bird’s fires while waiting for a command to get up again. The heels of the patent leather high heels made hollow sounds on the marble and Yoongi figured that No Face was closing the door. It fell shut only seconds later and then the heavy steps moved in his direction. For an absurd second Yoongi imagined the man to step on his hands and by reflex he curled his fingers as he sensed a movement right next to them. It was when he started speaking.
“Ah.”

A friendly sound. The slightest bit asking. Yoongi figured it was a command to get up. And maybe this was a great deal of the magic. Now that he was in the situation, he understood. It really was all about the will to understand them. Maybe a great deal of Crow’s mind reading skills were actually just the ability to read the atmosphere. And if there was a way to get behind the mask, Yoongi would find it. He needed the man to take it off. Look him in the eye and read there how to satisfy him.

Yoongi got up. He brushed the wrinkles from his clothes and then lifted his head to look straight up at the mask. The muscles at the backside of his thighs tensed a little but he managed to keep a neutral expression his face. He did not yet know what his next move was going to be. The only objective at this point was to not let fear show. Now that he was so close to it in the bright, almost neon-like lights, he saw that the mask was old. It was off-white, had a slight yellowish tint that indicated its age. Maybe it was some kind of family heirloom. Maybe he was not the first generation to wear it. Or maybe it was actually really old. Some valuable cultural artifact from Japan… an actual relict from the Edo period, the golden age of the Noh theatre. But as far as Yoongi’s knowledge about traditional Japanese masks went, this very mask did not depict one of the standard Noh characters. Its eeriness lay in its simplicity. There were literally just two holes for the eyes and a slit for the mouth.

Yoongi wondered whether Pumpkin had stuck his tongue through this opening to make contact with No Face’s mouth. There were two vertical purple lines cutting through the eyes like scars. And that was all. Yet, there was something Yoongi had not noticed before. Up close, the mask didn’t look as dead anymore. Maybe it was due to the yellowish tint, the fine cracks that ran through the material like actual wrinkles… But suddenly it seemed to come alive with facial expressions. There was a personality to the… Yoongi was not even sure about the material. Was it papier-mâché? Wood? Yoongi suddenly felt the desire to touch it, run his fingers along the surface to learn more about it but he was too intimidated to even properly breathe. Nevertheless, No Face seemed to notice how closely Yoongi was studying his mask and how curiosity was on its way to outweigh fear.

“Ah”, he said with an encouraging tone to his fragile voice. And Yoongi knew he was allowed to touch the mask. Hesitantly he raised his violently shaking right hand and gently traced the contours of the white cheek with his fingertips. The surface felt old. Like an antiquity. It had this unique feeling of an object that has been touched by generations and generations of sweaty hasty fingers. Something that lay in a junk shop for ages, had been picked up and looked at innumerable times but never bought. Yoongi stared at his own black fingernails moving on the tinted material and he wondered whether No Face could see him just as well. His pores, dead skin cells, wrinkles, dark circles, chapped lips. It still seemed like there was an additional layer of fabric covering the man’s eyes behind the holes. But maybe it were just the shadows from which his pupils were prying. What was this all about? Why did he make Yoongi touch the mask? So they would get acquainted with each other? Was it like the obligatory talking scene before the action in the porn flick started? Or was it about his shaking hand? Was the fear in someone’s eyes upon touching his mask for the first time already part of the show that No Face paid for? Yoongi bit his lip. He really did. Looking up at the black holes, letting his fear show as openly as he could. If this was what the man wanted then he would get it all. He put less effort in steadying his fingers now, their trembling spread onto the mask itself, No Face would literally be able to feel his fear buzz on his face. Yoongi kept biting his lip. And it did something. The black gloved hand appeared from under the robe and closed around Yoongi’s wrist. And then it pressed down on his arm. The pressure an even clearer statement than his monosyllabic sentences. Yoongi was supposed to kneel back down. He swallowed hard while folding his legs under his body and sitting on them as if he was about to observe a tea ceremony. And he thought he knew what was coming when No Face lifted the hem of his burka. But he didn’t. Because it didn’t go further up than the knee. He was not asking for a blow job. He wanted Yoongi’s tongue somewhere else. It was in the “ah”. In combination with the inviting move of his foot it was as clear as can be. Yoongi stared down at the patent leather high heel. He could see the distorted contours of his own face in the black glossy material. Those were Louboutins. He
recognized the signature red sole when No Face tilted his ankle to the side.

“Ah.”

Yoongi rid his lungs of air and then bent down further, lowering his head. He only stuck out the tip of his tongue. And hesitated some seconds before he closed the last inch. But then he ran it along the black patent leather as though he was tasting the ice cream of someone he secretly fancied. It was – by far – the most degrading thing he had ever done in his entire life. The shoes, obviously, were not clean. He had been wearing them already this morning striding through the gravel on his way to the bathhouse. There was white dust stuck to them… and Yoongi forced himself to not even think about the bacteria as he ran his tongue down the heel that No Face practically forced into his face as he trembled the slightest bit while trying to keep his balance on one leg. Yoongi thought of Pumpkin and how he had used his body as a weapon. It made him change his posture. Prop his ass up while keeping his upper body low and he even managed to glance up at the man, giving him a wink while letting him feast on the view.

“Ah. Ah.”

No Face was wearing stockings with the heels. Fishnet stockings. The toned muscles of his calf flexed under the meshes. Yoongi licked his way up the top of the shoe, leaving a trace of saliva on the glossy material. Testing the waters, he ran his fingers up the woman’s stockings, further up under the hem of the robe. It was a pathetic try to regain control. Let’s make this a casual blowjob his fingers said as they reached the man’s thigh. But obviously this was not what No Face was up to. He took a step back to make Yoongi’s hand slide down again and indicate that he didn’t like to be touched there. At least not now and not like this. Yoongi obediently lowered his arm and sat back, hands withdrawing to his lap. His saliva still glistened on the shoe. He wondered whether he should wipe it clean with his sleeve. But No Face just let the robe fall back down and cover his feet. He then gestured towards the chair. Yoongi struggled back to his feet, moving as if he was drunk. He was so nervous that he wasn’t able to coordinate his steps anymore. He staggered over to the throne, catching himself on the armrest before propping down on the edge of the seat. His heart was slamming against his ribcage as he watched No Face move across the room, the sound of his heels echoing from the tiles, robe flowing like the shadow of a cloud on a windy day. He paused at a little side table where a carafe of the hibiscus ice tea stood prepared. Yoongi watched him pour a glass, the pink liquid swirling into the crystal. And he knew that this time there was no refusing it. The black dressed man came over to his chair, balancing the drink with both of his gloved hands. He held it out to Yoongi who took it with a forced smile. Maybe it would at least make the dry and dirty feeling on his tongue go away. Without hesitating a second, he took a sip and kept it in his mouth until the sickeningly sweet flavor had replaced the taste of dust. He took another sip for politeness and yet another because he felt like two still weren’t enough. Then he put the glass on the armrest and froze when he noticed that No Face was now kneeling in front of him. When the masked being reached for Yoongi’s foot, he had to clench his teeth in order not to jerk away. The man put it on his propped up knee and his fingertips brushed over the anklet and the little golden chains that Pumpkin had given him as additional cover for the scars. But as soon as the rings moved under his fingers, he discovered it.

“Ah”, he made and Yoongi wasn’t sure whether he imagined the concern in his voice.

Yoongi felt embarrassed about his naked feet. He usually never paid attention to them but now that his right foot was placed on the black fabric of the man’s robe, he felt like everything was wrong with it. The shape of his toes, the fact that he hadn’t cut his nails in a while, that there was some hair growing on his instep… No Face examined his foot just as closely. His fingers went between Yoongi’s toes and spread them, he touched the soles and went back to his ankle where he studied the scar all over again. Yoongi gasped with shock when the man lifted his leg even further, lifted it to his
His fingernails dug into the leather of the armrests when a human tongue darted out of the hole in the mask. He meant to protest but his teeth were glued together with horror as No Face started licking and sucking his toes. Every muscle in his body tensed, he held his breath and pressed his lips shut tight to fight the excruciating pain that came with the sensation of just how much this tickled. Barely anyone knew because nobody actually dared to try him but Yoongi was extremely ticklish. Not the good kind of ticklish, not the enjoyable one. Being touched in certain areas, including his sides, the armpits and especially his feet just downright hurt because of the hypersensitivity. He had never met someone with a foot fetish before so he had never experienced the feeling of a warm and wet tongue curling around his toes. Frankly speaking, it felt like stepping into rotten fruit or something. And it felt extra strange because time and again also the cool and hard material of the mask brushed his skin. The tongue, in fact, was the very first body part he got to see of the man. Got to feel… The urge to kick him off was almost tearing him apart but yet he endured it thinking of the Spirits. But then, from one second to the next, the feeling changed. All of a sudden, it wasn’t uncomfortable anymore. On the contrary… as if his body had suddenly gotten used to it, the pain was gone. And it was replaced with a rush of arousal. Unable to fight it, he felt himself get hard and all worked up within mere seconds. His teeth unclenched as he tried to gasp for air with an open mouth now. He felt the man’s eyes on him, he was watching Yoongi’s face as his tongue kept flicking against the underside of his foot, the two silky black hands holding it in place.

“Sir”, Yoongi breathed, letting his head fall back against the backrest of the throne. “Sir, please… stop.”

To his surprise, the man followed his request. He lowered Yoongi’s foot and placed it back on his leg, carefully… yeah… even tenderly. He looked down on it and there was no facial expression and yet he clearly was in awe. The gloves caressed it, rearranged the anklets with utter carefulness not to touch the scar. Yoongi was lying back on the chair, unable to sit up straight, cheeks buzzing with the blood that was flushing them. What was happening? This was not normal. This wasn’t him. What in the world had him this horny all of a sudden? His mouth was watering, breath shallow, eyes fogged. Despite the contacts, he couldn’t see clearly anymore with all of the blood rushing to his head. Blindly he reached for the glass again and downed the rest of the ice tea in one shot to still the thirst that felt like branches growing up his windpipe.

“Sir”, he whispered again, sweaty fingers slipping on the leather as he was trying to fully straighten in the chair again. No Face let go of his foot to allow him to move but Yoongi didn’t manage to sit up properly. He just stared at the man to his feet, panting, chest heaving as he knew that his eyes were on the swelling in his harem pants.

“I’m so…”, he whispered but the sentence didn’t need to be finished.

No Face got back on his feet and suddenly he was a lot taller than Yoongi, standing on heels in front of the chair. But maybe he had also grown. He looked intimidating. The black of his clothes wasn’t just black anymore. Looking at it felt like falling, drowning. It wasn’t a color but a hole. What was causing this? Was it his presence? Was he capable of manipulating people’s minds just like Crow? Just like this morning in the peony fields, Yoongi felt like the arousal wasn’t part of himself. It wasn’t his body in an altered state. It was like a drill penetrating his brain from the outside. A foreign kind of lust and yet it was inside him, everywhere, spreading through his every nerve and fiber. Flushing through his stomach like a vortex, making him want to throw up. No Face reached out and Yoongi crumbled, literally shrinking with fear when the hand closed around his right wrist. Were they going to bed now? But he didn’t drag his arm to make him get up. He just directed Yoongi’s hand. To his own crotch. Yoongi’s lids flung up with dismay. No Face let go of his wrist again but his message was clear. He wanted Yoongi to masturbate for him. As if to underline the words he hadn’t spoken, he took a few steps back signaling that he would not be part of this. That he was here as a spectator. Then he stepped aside and Yoongi was confronted with his own image in the mirror on the opposite
wall. His cheeks were glowing like two ripe apples and clashing with the pastel green of his hair. Embarrassed by what he saw, he turned to the masked man again, asking for help with his eyes.

“Ah.”

It was a “Go ahead”… a “You know what I want to see”.

He had been prepared to suck a dick tonight. Give a handjob. A lapdance. Had been prepared for worse. But this was even worse than sex. Because sex was easy. It was direct. In some way, it was always the same. If you give someone access to your body, they will – at least to some extent – grant you the same. How easy would it have been to just please No Face orally and get an immediate feedback through the body contact, the physical reactions that the other could not hide. But this wasn’t sex. At least not the kind of sex Yoongi was used to. This was not about giving or receiving. It was about distance. Observing from a hideaway. Yoongi was here to please. Do the best he could and then get paid for it. He was not here to please himself. This wasn’t about him. He wanted his contact lenses gone. Without them he wouldn’t have been able to see the shame on his own face in the mirror, the pathetic blush of this seizure-like arousal. It made him despise himself. The second time that he was a slave to his own body today. The third time in total. It was that look. The pathetic blush of lust that had covered his own face as he had looked at himself in the reflection in the train window. On his way back home. That night. After cheating on Hoseok for the very first time. Because he had done it too, right? He had done it first. Yoongi had threatened to do it. But then Hoseok had gone ahead and done it. It had been his right to do it, too. How else could he have kept his pride? How else could he have proven that slowly but surely losing Hoseok didn’t matter to him? Jeon Jungkook. Yoongi jerked his head to the side, disgusted by his own face. What was that? It felt as if his mind was leaking. He needed to hold back. Hold the rest of it back. There was more. More lurking in the dark corners of his mind. And No Face was bringing it to the fore. As though he was extracting the lust from his lower body and the truth from behind his eyes. The room around him blurred. There were names dancing in the red tunnel that lay in front of him now as the neon lights shone through his closed lids. Jimin. Who was Park Jimin? And he was back. Pressed flat against the white sheets on that barista’s bed. His room smelling of the fresh flowers that his roommate had given him for his birthday. And weed. And coffee beans. Because that black smell stuck to his clothes, his skin. Black like his eyes. His breath and moans tasted like coffee. Raven black.

Yoongi was woken up by his own gasps for air. It sounded as if screws and nails were rattling in his lungs. He blinked and when the room swam back into focus he was about to cry out with shock. No Face had taken off his mask. The mask with the hood attached to it.

He was a boy. A young man. Maybe even younger than Yoongi, if older then not by more than a year. And if Yoongi hadn’t already been losing his breath, he would have now. He wasn’t beautiful. He was royal. Even more than Taehyung, he emitted the presence of a prince. His skin was pale, pristine. Like a child who had grown up playing on the velvet cushions of his bed with his expensive toys. And never once in the streets with the other kids. His complexion was milky, radiating like morning dew in the first rays of sunlight. And then there were his lips. Among the peony blossoms, they were the fairest. Even plusher than Pumpkin’s sensual mouth. And they were dark. By nature. He wasn’t wearing make-up. But his lips were almost purple, of a royal blue. Maybe it was cause he never spoke. So the blood didn’t really circulate. And maybe he just wasn’t human. His hair was of a calm and sophisticated brown, a color close to the mahogany wood used everywhere in the bathhouse. His prominent thick eyebrows gave him a serious expression which was enhanced by the fact that his entire face was motionless. He stood there like a statue, mask in hand, while he was contemplating the white pearly droplets covering Yoongi’s waist and some of which had shot across the black fabric of his t-shirt. Yoongi had never felt this exposed in his entire life. Now he was shivering with cold despite the sauna-like atmosphere. No Face as an anonymous, ghostly being had been less intimidating than the human boy behind the mask. Because his face was the actual mask. Pretty but just as dead. And it was cracked. There was something like a scar running down his left
cheek. A dark zigzag line. But it was no scar. It was still open. Not open like a wound. Open like a crack in a stone floor. One that earrings disappear in. That man’s face was broken. He approached Yoongi slowly. Solemnly almost. Eyes never parting with the white liquid on Yoongi’s skin. He kneeled down in front of the chair again and placed the mask next to him on the tiles. Yoongi watched him with chattering teeth as he slipped off his gloves. His fingers were just as pale. As if made of marble. And there was another crack running along the back of his left hand. Yoongi stared at it, feeling sick to his stomach. His fingers were long and lean, nails obviously manicured, polished and shiny. Tiny white half-moons as they travelled up Yoongi’s thighs. And then his index and middle finger dipped into the liquid and started spreading it. Yoongi’s leg was shaking as though he had a cramp. No Face’s fingers left an uncomfortable cold trace where they went, he was rubbing the inside of Yoongi’s thigh like he was applying body lotion. Of course Yoongi wasn’t entirely new to come play. But it felt so misplaced here. As it was so clinical. The other man was still wearing the black robe but what was actually much worse was the fact that there was no way to tell for Yoongi whether he enjoyed what he was doing. His face gave absolutely nothing away. If only he would put the mask back on… The mask, that in comparison to his face showed signs of life. His fingers ventured into Yoongi’s pubic hair that looked so black and wiry in the bright light. Everything was visible and on display. The bumpy skin where it was growing back after he had last shaved it. The pigment disorder in his groin. He felt so unclean, so imperfect and exposed. After all, it seemed to be what No Face was after. Yoongi’s eyes widened when the young man lifted his hand to his mouth and licked his fingers as though cleaning them from something he had just eaten. More than kinky or perverted, the whole situation was bizarre. After tasting Yoongi, No Face went for a big droplet on Yoongi’s shirt. He scooped it off and then reached out and Yoongi stopped breathing when he understood it was his intention to smear it across his lower lip. He wasn’t able to keep himself from flinching, from backing away the slightest bit. No Face lips parted and his eyebrows narrowed. “Ah”, he breathed and Yoongi realized that he wasn’t pleased with his reaction. Yet, he couldn’t bring himself to lick it off. He didn’t even particularly like kissing someone who had just given him a blowjob. The imagination of tasting his own cum on their tongue just wasn’t for him. Theirs was fine. But not his own. He felt it there on his lip like… like the blob of cream that… Oh no, don’t think about Hoseok now. His eyes sought the young man’s glance and against his will it made No Face rise again. He put his hands on Yoongi’s that were digging into the armrests again and then he leaned in. No. Yoongi’s eyelids fluttered as their lips brushed and felt the pointy tongue of the man licking off what Yoongi couldn’t bring himself to swallow. Other than that, the kiss felt like needles. No Face was buzzing like Taehyung. But colder. Like thorns of ice piercing in the lower half of his face. And Yoongi welcomed them as he started to kiss back. The next second he felt No Face’s fingers dig into his cheeks. They were stone cold. Like marble. The man was made of marble. Yoongi moaned. For no reason. To please the other who kissed him like he was trying to bite off parts of Yoongi’s face. He also smelled of stone. Of wet stones, the typical smell after a summer rain. Their cheeks brushed as the kiss heated up and Yoongi felt the crack like an actual gap with a sharp edge scratch along his skin.

He shuddered and camouflaged it with another moan. “Uh”, he breathed, trying to sound sexy and needy. The arousal had died down a little after his involuntary orgasm but now it was boiling back up. It was like a parasite rummaging through his insides, tearing them open. Like a worm that somehow had gotten access to his body. It coiled in his lower abdomen, causing him to grow hard once more against his will. But then the worm was cut in half. By a flash of pain in his left arm, the hand of which No Face had been pressing down onto the arm rest until seconds before. Yoongi jerked away from the man’s lips and gasped with shock as he saw a thick red trace of blood pouring into his palm. There was a cut right above his wrist. And he did scream when No Face jerked up his arm and brought it to his lips, closing them around the wound. He was too perplex to protest when suddenly he noticed a silver ring on the tip of the man’s index finger. It was shaped like a claw, pointy like a syringe. And covered in Yoongi’s blood.
Vampires don’t have fangs and they don’t bite people. No. They cut. No Face was sucking the blood from the wound like Yoongi’s arm was a fruit and he was trying to get all of the pulp out.

Yoongi felt his blood-circulation drop but he knew it was to blame on the fear. The wound wasn’t bigger than a dime. He had absolutely no idea what to do. Obviously everything in him wanted to kick the man off and smash his face with the next best thing in reach. But the prospect of the money wasn’t his only reason not to. He knew that he wouldn’t win. And he knew it by the force that the young man exacted onto his arm. There was a superhuman strength to him. Once again he seemed to grow. His body did not alter in size but yet it became bigger, more intimidating, stronger. The adrenaline prevented Yoongi from feeling the actual pain of the wound. He didn’t even feel the pressure of the man’s lips on his skin. He just saw him drink from his arm as though it wasn’t part of his body. And then he let go. It wasn’t messy. There was a little bit of blood smeared past the corner of his mouth. When he raised his head to meet Yoongi’s eyes, Yoongi couldn’t believe what he saw. There was fear in No Face’s glance. He seemed to be much more terrified than Yoongi himself. Which made no sense. But when he reached into his robe and pulled out a handkerchief, his lean fingers were shaking. He pressed it onto the wound. It was made of white cotton and the red liquid immediately drenched the fibers. No Face gestured for Yoongi to keep it and then he put his index fingers to his lips as if to shush him. And that was when he understood. It was the one thing they were not allowed to ask from newbies. The very thing that Pumpkin had prophesied him to want in his birthday night. No Face shook his head, his glance digging into Yoongi’s eyes.

“I… I won’t tell anyone”, Yoongi whispered.

“Ah.”

“I promise…”

“Ah.”

The crack was gone. Yoongi swallowed at the sight of the even skin on the man’s cheek. There was a trace of it left. Like a scar. But it had closed, the flesh had grown back together. No Face wiped his mouth and Yoongi noticed that the crack on his hand was gone, too. He looked a lot less pale. Whatever those creatures were… they needed human blood not to fall apart.

“Sir…”, Yoongi whispered and raised his hand to reach for the man’s face. But he backed away. Once again he put his finger to his lips. His eyes were begging. He reached into his robe once more and when he pulled out one of the wooden badges – painted red and with a yellow full moon-like circle in the middle – Yoongi’s heart rose with relief.

“Ah. Ah”, he mumbled and Yoongi watched with a mixture of terror and amazement as the badge started to tremble in the man’s hands. Suddenly there were two. And then it went too fast for Yoongi’s eyes to grasp it. Badges kept appearing until the hands couldn’t hold them anymore. They started to fall onto Yoongi’s lap, between his legs on the chair. He quickly pulled up his pants with his unharmed hand and watched as the man gathered all of the badges, scooping them together like firewood. There must at least be 15 of them. But suddenly the number started to decrease again. They blended into each other until only one was left. Then - out of nothing – a number started to appear on it. As if someone was carving it into the material with the tip of a knife. 17. He had just earned 17,000 Spirits. No Face handed the single batch to Yoongi. On both of his palms with a formal gesture. Yoongi took it from him and the handkerchief slipped off his arm. The blood was already running dry. No Face glanced at the wound and then at Yoongi’s eyes.

“It’s okay”, he heard himself say. “It doesn’t hurt.”

No Face didn’t respond. His expression was back to the emotionless statue. He reached for his mask and pulled it over his head again. It was really over. The man got up and looked at Yoongi for a
couple of seconds before he turned around, cape swirling around his body. He crossed the room with a few large steps and with the door falling shut behind him a weight was lifted off Yoongi’s chest. For a couple of seconds he remained motionless on the chair, harking for the sound of the high heels moving down the corridor outside, further and further down the hall, away from the bathroom. When he was sure that he was really gone and would not return, Yoongi let out a deep breath. He got up from the chair and walked over to the mirror. It was only when he faced himself that he realized how the contact lenses masked what his eyes had to say. They were of a mysterious hazel, a transgression from brown to greenish yellow. And they looked lifeless. Just like Pumpkin’s purple gaze. A few droplets of cold sweat had gathered on his forehead and his nose. He turned away from the mirror, having seen enough. Then there was a noise at the door and he froze on the spot. It was a strange noise. A low noise, low in height. There was something brushing against the door, not exactly knocking. Every part of him wanted to ignore it but he still walked over to the door and opened it a little. It was a frog. Yoongi let him in as he noticed what he was holding in his green hands. A set of fresh clothes. A black everyday harem pants and a new black shirt, plain black boxers. And a pair of leather slippers. He bowed to Yoongi and extended the clothes as far up as he could.

“Th… thank you”, Yoongi stuttered as he took the bundle from the amphibian. The frog lowered his head again and then looked at him expectantly. Yoongi didn’t know what to do. Did he ask for a reward?

“I’m sorry I… fear I have nothing that I can give you… or do you… do you… want a cigarette?”

The frog shook his head eagerly. And Yoongi imagined an amused expression on his face. He hopped to close the distance between them and then stood on his hind legs again to pull the fabric of the midnight blue pants.

“Oh”, Yoongi made. “You want me to take the dirty stuff off?”

The frog nodded and then bowed politely. Yoongi hesitated. But then he put the bundle of clothes on the chair behind him and then pulled the stained shirt over his head. He folded it and gave it to the frog before he proceeded to take off his pants. The frog followed with a curious glance as Yoongi produced the cigarette package from the pocket and threw it on the chair as well. Could the creature really be trusted? But he had no other choice, had he? So he just pretended to be perfectly chill about the fact that he was carrying forbidden items with him and tried to cover up his awkwardness with it. Creatures less attentive than this frog would have noticed the white stains all over his clothes and the smell that accompanied them. He also smelled of sweat and blood. But the frog didn’t seem to mind. Can frogs even smell? He rolled the pants and the t-shirt together and then extended his hand again. But the frog continued to look at him expectantly. Yoongi blinked with irritation.

“The boxers as well…?”

The frog nodded discreetly and lowered its eyes to the floor. One would expect Yoongi to have lost every kind of inhibition at this point. He had just licked the shoes of an alleged vampire and accepted his invitation to taste his own cum... before getting his blood sucked by him. But here he was all embarrassed about having to get naked in front of an amphibian dressed in a light blue Kimono jacket. As he tried to keep the balance on one leg while pulling his underwear off his foot, he found himself covering his private parts with his free hand. The frog, obviously noticing how dirty they were, slipped the shorts between shirt and pants. Then he gave Yoongi’s body a once over and his glance ended up on the wound. He produced something from the chest pocket of his little Kimono and Yoongi recognized it to be a bandaid. He accepted it with a forced smile, other hand still clutching his crotch. The frog made a meaningful gesture towards the sunken bathtub before he bowed one last time. Then he turned around and wobbled out of the room. Yoongi closed the door behind him and leaned against it, rolling his eyes while letting out a sharp breath. His glance fell on
the fresh clothes on the chair. He couldn’t just put them on. He really needed to wash himself first. With another deep sigh he placed the bandaid on the cigarette pack to use it later. Legs weak from mental strain he then staggered over to the tub, catching himself on the handrail attached to the steps that led down into the water. It was boiling hot. However they did it… As soon as the water engulfed his body, his tense muscles started to unclench a little bit. He let go of the handrail and walked to the middle of the pool. He waded slowly since the water almost reached up to his shoulders. The peony petals drifted on the milky surface. Yoongi lifted some with his palm and then set them down again letting them go. There was blood flowing from his wrist. Unfurling like liquid red smoke in the white water. He watched himself bleed for a while, still caught in some kind of trance. But just like the blood, the initial relief of finally being on his own drifted off. And the anger came to life. Driven by a sudden impulse, Yoongi splashed water on his face and started to rub the makeup off, black streaks mixing in with the red on his lower arm. He wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands as they started to itch and burn from the mascara staining his contacts. He blindly grabbed for the edge of the pool, grasping to it as he submerged. Then he started screaming from the top of his lungs. So loud that it threatened to tear his chest apart and until he completely ran out of air. When he resurfaced again, he gathered his last bit of strength to hook his arms on the pool edge before his forehead sank onto the heated tiles and he started sobbing with desperation.

“Hoseok-ah”, he mumbled as the tears ran between his lips.

*

Yoongi stopped and slid behind a column close to the elevators in the main hall. The bathroom where he had met with No Face was on the ground floor and he was on his way back up to the Midnight Bar to look for either Pumpkin or Crow. He had found both. In a situation that obviously was not meant for his eyes. Anyone’s eyes for that matter. Pumpkin, still dressed in his peony Yukata, was pressing Crow against a red-painted column, fingers curled into the fabric of his collar. They were shouting at each other in whispers. Yoongi was too far away to understand what they were saying. But this sure as hell wasn’t the type of bickering he had witnessed between them a couple of times already. Pumpkin legitimately looked like he was ready to choke the raven boy who tried to jerk his arm away while staring him down with pure disgust. Yoongi stepped out of his slippers, shoved them behind the column with his foot and hurried on to the next wooden pole, his naked soles making no sound on the polished mahogany.

“I warn you… Don’t you get your hands on him. If you touch him I’ll motherfucking end you, Crow.”

“Don’t you fucking dare threatening me, bitch”, Crow spat back into Pumpkin’s face. “How dare you act up like this? How fucking dare you?”

“Don’t you think I see right through you? I know you stop at nothing to get your ass out of here. And you’re so close, aren’t you? And God knows I can’t fucking wait for you to be gone. But not like this. Not like this.”

“This is none of your fucking business, you piece of shit!”

They got into a melee. Crow tried to make Pumpkin let go of him by force but the pink-haired wouldn’t back off. It led to a lot of clothes pulling and knees colliding before Pumpkin gained the upper hand again and his fingers closed around Crow’s throat.

“Say it. Admit it! Give me the time and place!”

“Fuck off, you stupid prick”, Crow’s voice sounded pressed. He was gasping for air but failing.
Yoongi couldn’t hold back anymore.

“Let go of him!”, he shouted, revealing himself. Crow and Pumpkin broke apart the second he raised his voice. Both panting with the shock of being caught.

“Suga”, they said in one voice. Most likely the first and last time in their lives of being in complete agreement.

“I just… happened to walk by”, Yoongi tried to defend himself. Pumpkin decided to pretend as if Crow wasn’t present any longer. He hurried over to Yoongi, concern on his face.

“Boy… are you okay? Are you already done with No Face?”

Yoongi nodded. He actually didn’t feel like discussing this in front of Crow.

“Did he… did anything unusual happen?”

He shook his head. Determined not to specify anything that happened.

“You’ve been with No Face?”, Crow asked, taking a step towards Yoongi as well, obviously not very keen on closing the distance to Pumpkin again. His aura was particularly heavy. Particularly black. Yoongi could tell that inside he was still fuming.

“Well, he…”, he began but Pumpkin cut him off.

“As if you didn’t know that No Face chose him for the night! It’s written on the motherfucking board!”, he attacked Crow anew.

“I wasn’t there when the name was announced, okay bitch? I was backstage.”

“Yeah… talking to Taehyung…”, Pumpkin murmured.

“You’re not allowed to use his real name.”

“He’s my little brother of sorts. I’ll call him whatever I want.”

“You’re so stupid”, Crow mumbled rather to himself than to Pumpkin. “Really… You should mind your own business. Minding other’s might get you killed here… you know that.”

“Are you threatening me now, Crow?”

“You’re a threat to yourself, stupid idiot. Suga…”, he turned to Yoongi, black eyes piercing his with an intimate stare. “How are you? How did things go with No Face?”

“I’m fine”, Yoongi replied curtly. He wondered whether his lips and eyes were still swollen from crying. “I took a bath after we were through. A frog advised me to.”

Focused on keeping a straight face in front of Crow, he missed Pumpkin’s concerned sigh.

“Did he ask anything from you that you weren’t comfortable with?”, the pink-haired wanted to know.

“Well… nothing much… except maybe for licking his high heels.”

He said it particularly drily. As though it was a joke. Pumpkin pulled a face that was probably supposed to be a comforting smile.
“Yeah… he has one hell of a foot fetish. He has a lot of strange kinks… but it’s also a good thing depending on how you look at it. Usually he doesn’t ask for actual intercourse…”

“We didn’t have sex”, Yoongi jumped on the bandwagon. He directed the words at Crow who didn’t seem to care.

“So you are really… okay then?”, Pumpkin asked again. At this point Yoongi was sure that he was suspecting something. He felt his eyes skim over his body. Maybe he was looking for wounds.

Yoongi would have to address the blood play. Ask someone about it. But preferably not Pumpkin. And not in front of Crow.

“As I said… I’m fine.”

“Okay… you know, I… have an appointment… soon.”

“With the two couples?”, Yoongi asked, raising an eyebrow. The boy with the devil horns worried his lower lip for a few seconds but then he nodded briefly.

“Nice. You pulled them?”

“Guess so”, Pumpkin mumbled. And Crow commented it with a snort.

“So… I guess I’ll be busy for the next couple of hours but after that… We can meet in the cellar, if you want. You could spend the night with us again… I wouldn’t mind. I mean… if you wanna sleep in the dorm then it’s fine but…”

“Oh come on, Pumpkin Pie”, Crow cut in snidely. “You’re not thinking you actually have a chance with him, do you? He’s not that cheap. I’m pretty sure he can tell how easy you are.”

“Did I ask for your opinion, fucker?”, Pumpkin raised his voice. “Believe it or not but he spent last night with us. We smoked together and Bird comforted him. And that’s about it.”

“I can tell you want him. It’s written all across your face, darling. I don’t even have to read your mind for it”, Crow laughed at him.

“As if I would let you read my mind… and do you think pointing it out like that will cause me trouble and make you look better? He knows. I told him I want him. I’m straightforward when it comes to things like this.”

“It’s disgusting”, Crow snarled. “You have a boyfriend. And you don’t give a shit about him.”

“What’s that got to do with having a boyfriend? We both enjoy sex… and we both enjoy doing it with a third party from time to time. Being free to have sex with whomever I want is very important to me. And he knows that. He grants me this freedom. That doesn’t change the fact that we love each other.”

“You don’t deserve him… And believe me… Pumpkin… he doesn’t love you. He pities you. That’s what he does. Who would genuinely want to spend a life with someone who-”

His sentence was cut off by Pumpkin’s fist in his face. Crow stumbled a few steps back, hand pressed against his cheek. But his stupor only lasted the fraction of a second. Before Yoongi could even blink, the two men went for each other again. This time it wasn’t about holding the other down. They meant to attack. There were fists flying, grabbing hair and muffled cries of pain from both sides.
“Guys!”, Yoongi shouted, jumping out of the way as Crow tried to push Pumpkin against one of the columns.

“Crow, stop!”, he tried to intervene, hoping for the boy to remember the hours spent in the field this morning. But Crow was deaf to his voice. Yoongi held his breath when he noticed that his eyes had gone all black. Literally. The white of the apples of his eyes was gone. As if his pupils had extended. He looked scary, inhuman. Pumpkin’s face was flushed red. He was glowing with rage. Once again they collided in a mess of hitting arms and kicking legs. Pumpkin’s hairband landed in front of Yoongi’s feet who watched them helplessly, knowing for a fact that his physique didn’t allow him to actively try and separate them. He was much weaker than either of them.

“Stop it! Are you nuts? Pumpkin, please!”

All in all, Crow seemed to be the slightest bit stronger than Pumpkin. He was about to force him to his knees now.

“Face it, bitch. He only dates you cause he’s too kind-hearted for this world. He feels sorry for you! He deserves better. Not to be played by some random cocksucker who already screwed up his entire life. What’s your life still worth anyway? You only live at the mercy of Madame Yu.”

“Fuck… you”, Pumpkin forced out against Crow’s knee in his stomach.

“I’d kill you now, Pumpkin. But I rather wait and watch you die slowly. What do you think? How much time do you have left?”

Yoongi didn’t know what this was about. But his heart ached at the sight of Pumpkin fighting back the tears that either the physical or mental pain forced into his eyes. There was blood in the corner of his mouth. Apparently, he had bit his tongue or the inside of his cheek. Maybe Yoongi should hate him for a lot of reasons… but this wasn’t right.

“And even if… even if I die a premature death… I will die being loved by the man you could never have, Crow. Doesn’t that hurt? He loves the whore I am in your eyes. Even that whore… but he just couldn’t be bothered to love you.”

Yoongi screamed. It was a mess of black feathers swallowing Pumpkin. A cry like that of a dying infant. A gust of wind that forced Yoongi to press his eyes shut and that smashed into his stomach like a water cannon. And when he opened them again, Crow was gone. There was a black bird attacking Pumpkin by aiming for his face with his beak, his eyes in particular. Yoongi’s knees gave in. He sunk to the floor, mouth agape in the silent aftermath of his scream. The man he had slept with this morning had turned into a crow right in front of his eyes. And while he was about to lose consciousness, Pumpkin seemed to be highly amused. He was laughing snidely as he shielded his face with both of his arms.

“You’ll pay for that”, he hissed. “I’m going to make you pay.”

“Can’t wait for that”, Pumpkin snorted, rearranging his hair band that he had just picked up. “We’re not that different, boy. I know the hell you’ve been through… And even if it’s different from what I have seen… I still understand you. All I’m asking from you is to realize that you can’t do to others
what has been done to you. If we would fight on the same side… we could save a lot of innocent lives together. Why do you have to be so egoistic?”

“Egoistic? That’s something coming from you… you selfish bastard. We have nothing in common.”

“Oh… apart from the fact that you’re not even human we have a lot in common”, Pumpkin teased, tying the belt of his Yukata.

“You still don’t have enough?!”, Crow barked and was about to attack Pumpkin again but the pleading cry from the floor made him stop and turn around.

“Please stop”, Yoongi mumbled, sick with exhaustion at this point. He couldn’t process more. He just couldn’t.

“Suga…”, Crow mumbled and hurried over to him, extending a hand. “Did I… are you hurt?”

“I’m good”, Yoongi stated weakly and struggled to his feet holding on to Crow’s arm.

“You shouldn’t have witnessed that. None of it. But you must understand that… Just like this person can’t contain his sexual urges… he can’t contain his anger and keep his fucking accusations to himself. But I’m sure that… at this point… you figured him out already. And know how to judge this.”

“Yeah, it was you telling him what happened to their belongings, huh asshole? What are you even trying to do? Set him up against me? Do you really think that Suga Hyung is not clever enough to build his own opinion?”

“He did build his own opinion, Pumpkin. His opinion is coming for me in the peony fields.”

“Yeah, heard about that. And why are you after him? Cause he bears a certain resemblance to Blue Bird? Or cause you think you can use him to get your hands on No Face who has been rejecting you from the first day on? Seriously, Crow… How did No Face end up choosing Suga for tonight? Why would you take a detour over the dunes when going to the peony fields which are literally behind the village? Cause you know it’s the way he was taking at exactly the hour you told Amber to go and clean the tubs so you could pick Suga up? Telling him to wash his dick with the water from the frog well before it’s used for No Face’s sauna infusion? Don’t you think that’s fucking obvious?”

“It’s fucking nonsense, that’s what it is, Pumpkin. Having No Face as a customer is a very desirable achievement in this establishment and I like Suga… that’s why I tried to help him out. We clicked immediately. You’re just jealous cause it takes you endless hours of whoring around to get No Face’s attention every once in a while. He knows you’re all used up. You can’t give him what he wants. When will you stop trying to pretend that you’re capable like any other employee?”

“That’s all you can do, huh? Shaming someone’s weakness.”

Pumpkin wasn’t in attack-mode anymore. Ever since Crow had turned into an actual bird, he kind of seemed to see this round as won. Yoongi found himself somewhat more on his side at this point. The reason he couldn’t tell. But there was something that drew him to the horned boy. Maybe it was his invitation of joining them in the cellar later. This was where he wanted to break down now.

“Oh, there are endless possibilities of what I could attack in this situation. How about the fact that you advertised his ex to the couple you’re about to meet up with? Successfully advertised, I should add. Did you already tell Suga that you’re about to have an orgy with 3 men, one women and a certain ex-redhead.”

“You what?”, Yoongi shouted. Whatever it had been that was drawing him to Pumpkin – it was
crumbling to ashes in front of him now. Pumpkin gave him a defensive look. But it was admitting at the same time. What Crow had claimed was true.

“Maybe that’s some information he needs to build his own opinion”, Crow shrugged casually and Yoongi felt his arm around his waist. Crew drew him closer and he let him, eyes however still locked with Pumpkin’s.

“Do you really think he could fall for you? You know for a fact that Suga is still in love with Hope”, Pumpkin hissed and he directed his words at Yoongi instead of Crow.

“Yeah… and I also know why he forgot who Suga is.”

“Explain that!”, Yoongi burst out, also still talking to Pumpkin.

“I gotta go now”, the boy said with a sigh. “My appointment is in five. And if Crow thinks you need to know he will explain. Nothing I can do about it… nothing I even want to do about it.”

He gave Crow’s hand on Yoongi’s hip a defeated glance.

“If you still wanna take the offer, you can come down to the cellar anytime. Bird said so, too. Don’t get your hopes up… you won’t be able to spend the night with Crow… he’ll be busy… as usual.”

And with that Pumpkin turned away, striding off towards the staircase. Headed for a room where he was about to have sex with Jung Hoseok and 4 other people. And yet… Yoongi still felt the undefined urge to stay with him instead of Crow. Something in him knew that Pumpkin wouldn’t touch Hoseok for fun. Only if he was asked to. Or maybe it was just another false hope, another instance of wasted trust in that forsaken place.

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It had started to rain. The wet branches were slipping past Yoongi’s neck like the fingers of drowned bodies. He and Crow were walking through the garden hand in hand and the route the raven boy chose was that under the cover of bushes and trees. Yoongi’s feet were frozen in the soaked grass of the lawn. He just let himself be dragged along, his eyes falling shut from time to time, he really was about to pass out. Their final destination was a big tree surrounded by hedges that shielded it from the windows of the veranda. Crow navigated Yoongi until his back met with the trunk and then captured him as he pressed both of his hands against the bark next to Yoongi’s head.

“Baby Boy…”, he whispered softly. “I am so sorry.”

Yoongi let himself be kissed. He opened his mouth a little but he wasn’t capable of meeting Crow’s intruding tongue anymore. The raven boy eventually gave up.

“Are you mad at me?”, Crow asked. “Do you think differently of me now?”

“You’re asking whether I think differently of you? After I learned that… you are… you are a bird?”, Yoongi laughed listlessly.

“I am not a bird”, Crow whispered and his voice sounded hurt. “I’m a shape-shifter. And believe me… if I had the choice I’d never make use of this ability. I view it as a curse… A curse I’ve learned to live with… but still… I hate it. And I’m ashamed that it happened in front of you. I lost my composure because that stupid fuck didn’t stop provoking me.”

“Do you have feelings for Pumpkin’s boyfriend?”, Yoongi asked. He asked soberly. He didn’t mean to interrogate. They weren’t close enough for him to have a right to complain. He was too in love
with Hoseok to actually be jealous.

“I don’t. Don’t you believe any of that talk. Bird and I used to be close friends before Pumpkin came here. We’ve known each other for a very long time. I may be upset that I lost him as a friend. But that’s about it. I’m single and I’m not in love with anyone. Though I’m starting to develop a serious crush… on you.”

He tried to kiss him again. And Yoongi wasn’t fighting him off. It was just that he had more questions.

“What did you mean when you said that you know why Hope forgot about me?”

His fingers started picking at the bark behind his back.

“What do you think I meant? It’s the drugs, we already discussed it this morning, didn’t we?”

“When you just said it you made it sound as if Pumpkin had something to do with it…”

“You must have misinterpreted that, Baby Boy… I only meant to say that Hope apparently irreversibly lost his memory about your time together because of the drugs he did… I mean what I said earlier… You should try and forget about him. He so easily agreed to help Pumpkin out with that couple.”

“That’s just cause he wants to please… He’s always out there helping everybody…”, Yoongi replied sternly. The rain was getting heavier. Meanwhile the drops made it through the crown of the tree, they kept falling on their faces, rustling through the leaves.

“But you also went ahead and agreed to meeting No Face. Why?”

Crow’s voice was so soft. He was a different person than the one he had been only minutes ago in the entrance hall with Pumpkin.

“Was that your plan? To hook me up with No Face?”

“Why would it have been my plan?”

“Don’t know… what Pumpkin said… cause you want to use me to get closer to him. You fear him, don’t you?”

“I respect him. And it’s my duty to make sure he gets the best treatment possible here. Did he tip you off?”

“He did.”

“How much?”

“Quite a lot.”

“Really? How much?”

“17 Spirits.”

Crow’s mouth fell open. His bunny-like front teeth came to the fore.

“What did you do for him? Did he… Did he…?”

“Nothing much. I guess he just likes how shy and inexperienced I acted. Well, I didn’t even have to
act. It’s a matter of fact that I had no idea what I was doing. And I think he fancies that.”

Crow exhaled, obviously contemplating whether he should be satisfied with Yoongi’s answer.

“You can give your Spirits to me. I can keep them safe for you.”

Yoongi frowned.

“Why would you need to keep them safe?”

“Obvious reasons. There’s a lot of stealing going on among the employees… never forget. Some of us are professional when it comes to this… Trained to do it.”

“Are you saying that Pumpkin is planning to steal my money?”

“Maybe… but not necessarily only him. You can trust no one in this bathhouse.”

“That’s what I’m planning to do… why I’ll keep my Spirits.”

“You’re saying you don’t trust me either?”, the raven boy whispered and somehow the accusation ended in a rather passionate kiss that Yoongi even returned. Rain drops ran between their lips.

“That’s right, at this point I’m trusting no one… for my own safety”, he murmured when Crow let go of his mouth.

“Let me win your trust”, Crow breathed, leaning in again. He started to softly kiss Yoongi’s neck. His warm breath chased a shudder over his skin. Yoongi’s eyes fell shut for a moment, his whole body relishing the warmth. He didn’t back away when Crow’s fingers searched the way under his shirt and the tips started caressing the skin under his belly button, dipping under the waistband of his pants every once in a while. Their lips caught on to each other again and they both seemed to have the same idea when they started nibbling, biting a little. Yoongi was pretty sure that Crow was not reading his mind at this point. He felt alone with his thoughts. Alone with the imagination of the tongue curling around his being Hoseok’s. He sighed into the kiss and Crow laughed a little.

“Right now it’s just sex, you know… we’ve only known each other one day… but it can become more, don’t you think? Don’t you think we could be more?”

“Depends…”, Yoongi mumbled and lifted his arm to wipe some raindrops off his face.

“On whether you get over your ex?”, Crow asked. His face was so beautiful. So fucking alluring. Now Yoongi knew why. He wasn’t human. That blackness in his eyes was magical in the very sense of the word. A shape-shifter. Yoongi couldn’t grasp how ready to believe in this he already found himself. Witches were real. Shape-shifters were. Vampires. And they all were different from what he had read about them in Hoseok’s stupid fantasy books that he left lying around everywhere.

“It depends on what you reveal yourself to be in the future… the day after tomorrow… next week. Yesterday you were a boy. Today you are a bird. What are you gonna be tomorrow?”

“A little more in love with you than I am today”, Crow whispered against Yoongi’s ear. His fingers slipped past the elastic band and ran through his pubic hair.

“Not now”, Yoongi shook his head. “I’m exhausted.”

“You said you didn’t sleep with him.”

“I didn’t… but still…”
It was only now that it occurred to Yoongi. It was the bloodloss. He was this exhausted and dizzy because he had lost a significant amount of blood. And even greater amount of his strength had gone with it. He felt empty. That insane flash of lust that had overcome him in front of No Face seemed to have drained him. He still had no idea where it had come from.

He noticed Crow’s glance linger on his face. A suspicious glance. Was he reading his mind after all?

“Why did you get into a fight with Pumpkin?”, he asked to disrupt the sexual tension that had come with their conversation becoming more intimate.

“Because of him making false accusations”, Crow retorted and pulled his hand out of Yoongi’s pants. “I don’t want to lay all of that out to you. It’s not like it would matter… there is barely a day that we don’t clash for some random reason. Either way… if you prefer to go to sleep now you should really give me your Spirits for safekeeping.”

“No”, Yoongi shook his head with finality. “I’ll keep it safe myself. As soon as I have enough I’ll pay Madame Yu back for her efforts of treating my friends… and if she rejects the deal, I’ll keep saving until I have 770 Million spirits and then buy my freedom from Madame Z.”

For the fraction of a second Crow’s eyes were all black again.

“Who fucking told you that was possible?!”, he burst out. “Pumpkin?! Gotta be him!”

“Yeah. He told me the story of Salt and her girlfriend Owl. The story you wouldn’t give me.”

“Cause it’s a goddamn cock-and-bull story! The bullshit of her running away with Owl. It’s a rumor among the employees. Salt and her girl they are both dead and gone!”

“No!”, Yoongi yelled back. “No! I don’t believe that!”

His blood was raging. Nobody was going to steal that hope from him. What he had just done with No Face wasn’t in vain. He refused for it to be in vain. It had been for Hoseok. To get him out of here. Only that certainty was what still kept him from losing his mind. He had just prostituted himself. And he had yet to learn how to take his own body home after that.

“If half an hour ago someone had told you that the boy you had sex with this morning could turn into a crow… Would you have believed it, Min Yoongi?!”

Yoongi’s face crumbled with despair. The name Crow had just dropped sounded familiar. But was it his name? Because if so… then he didn’t remember. Min Yoongi? He had heard that before. But where?

“I told you to pick sides carefully”, Crow hissed. But Yoongi couldn’t anymore. He was done.

“I’ll see you tomorrow”, he forced out before he pushed himself off the tree and stormed off into the rain and leaves.

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Kitten was already waiting for him on the balcony. A smile brushed his lips. He was happy to see her. Her small silhouette in the full moon light, that was peeking through the clouds now, was like a milestone. He had made it through this day finally. They could have a closure cigarette together now.

“I thought you weren’t going to come!”, the girl exclaimed, laughing happily about the fact that she had been proven wrong. She wore a bulgy jacket over her crop top. Maybe it was one of those that Pumpkin had mentioned. Just like the leather slippers, their outdoor jackets all looked the same. It wasn’t her size, probably from the boy’s section.

Yoongi shrugged with a sullen smile.
“I usually stick to my words. As you can probably tell from the fact that I got you the smoke I promised you.”

He liked her. For some reason, he had liked her from the beginning. Normally, for Yoongi, it was with people like it was with songs. He had to listen to them a couple of times before he got acquainted with them. Before he was able to tell whether he liked the melody or not. Maybe it was because she reminded him of someone. If she were a song, then she was one that Yoongi had heard before somewhere. That was stuck in his brain and that he would end up singing every once in a while. The name to the face was missing. But the way her hair lined her chin… had a familiar melody to it.

“Seriously, Suga… I thought you were still busy with his majesty. I didn’t expect you to actually show up. How did things go…? You… alright?”

“I’m still breathing”, Yoongi boiled it down and took out the cigarette pack from his pocket. He opened the lid and pulled out two of the three remaining smokes, extending them to the girl like two flowers. She picked one. He put the other between his lips.

“Got a lighter?”, he mumbled around the filter and was about to put the pack away again when his eyes fell on the writing on the inside of the lid.

“Min Yoongi”, it said there. “Min Yoongi”, said Crow’s voice in his mind.

“Yo, Suga? Do you need the lighter or…?”

She flicked it and he leaned into the flame but his eyes were still on the name. Obviously, it was his. But it didn’t feel like it. Like when you suddenly find a sock in your laundry basket that you know isn’t yours. That feeling.

He let the pack slip back into his pocket and took a drag from the cigarette. The smoke burned so good in his lungs. It was like breathing in peace. Maybe because longing was such an empty feeling in the lungs. The smoke did fill them.

“Don’t you have an appointment tonight?”, he asked, trying to push his thoughts aside. Kitten shook her head.

“I don’t. I don’t have them on the regular anymore. I’ve been here for a long long time. People are not keen on dating me anymore. They enjoy my company when they drink. But that’s about it… when it comes to spending the night, they are looking for someone more exciting. Not the waitress of the Midnight Bar that they have known for ages. Their eyes and hands are used to my body at this point…”

“Oh”, Yoongi hummed, flicking the filter with his thumb even though almost no ash had built up yet. “For how long have you been here?”

“7 years”, she replied softly and took a long drag. She was pretty. Really pretty. Rather than a kitten, she resembled a little mouse. Her face was childlike even though she had to be around his age. But there lay a lot of wisdom in her honest eyes. They were painted heavily and she was wearing fake lashes but it didn’t lessen the candor of her glance.

“How old are you?”, Yoongi asked straight out.

“26.”

“You’re older than me. You can stop speaking formally.”
“You, too. You’re sharing your cigarettes with me. That means we’re friends now. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“Don’t have to… I’m glad I got some for you… after last night…”

She lowered her lids and contemplated the orange tip of her cigarette.

“What did the guest do to you?”, Yoongi asked. Out of all the people he had talked to in this bathhouse… he deemed Kitten the most trustworthy at this point. Maybe he had really found a friend in her.

“Vented his anger on me… He lost some money at the Roulette table. Then he needed to punch someone for that.”

“God…”, Yoongi whispered, frowning at her.

“Some guests are worse than others… But all of them are bad to begin with.”

Yoongi emptied his lungs of the smoke before he asked his next question.

“I heard that… some of them… have a… a… blood… kink?”

How else should he put it?

“It’s not a kink. They need blood to live”, Kitten replied almost casually but then she continued without being asked to elaborate: “They feed on it. In order not to fall apart. Imagine their skin like porcelain. They crack and then shatter if they have to go without blood for too long. Maybe you’ve read vampire stories as a child. They are nothing like it. Vampires don’t bite… they cut. And then feed. They also aren’t called vampires in case you wondered… those creatures are called Ori. They are not immortal. And they don’t sparkle in the sun. They have certain superhuman powers. Their beauty might be one of them. But apart from that… you can forget about all of the myths. Sunlight, garlic… all that bullshit. Like I said, they depend on blood. Officially it’s not a service the bathhouse offers. It’s even illegal to ask newbies for it. But there are grey zones. Of course Madame Yu counts on the employee’s desperation… They will let them feed because they depend on the tips… That’s how things work here. Superficially they protect us from the Ori… But I promise you the anklets won’t do shit when one of them is really hungry.”

“Hold on… what do you mean the anklets won’t do shit? I thought they are… shackles. That fry your leg when you try to get back to the real w… try to escape from this place.”

“Yeah, that’s one of their two purposes.”

“What’s the other?”

“They’re made of brass.”

“Yeah, I noticed that”, Yoongi frowned.

“What is brass?”

“A copper-base alloy?”

“And what does copper smell like?”, she flicked an eyebrow at him, smiling expectantly. Yoongi didn’t catch at first but then his frown got deeper.

“Blood”, they eventually said in one voice. Yoongi’s voice questioning, Kitten’s reassuring.
“Ori can smell your blood through your skin. Their olfactory senses are particularly sharp. The brass jewelry neutralizes that smell for some reason… because it has the same components.”

“Oh that’s why!”, Yoongi facepalmed. “That’s why Tae is hung like a Christmas tree! To keep him extra safe!”

“Bingo. And that’s why people like us just get their shackle. The red paint is an additional safety precaution.”

“What does it do?”, Yoongi burst out. He had been dying to find out.

“It also confuses their senses… It makes you invisible to them until you speak up so they can locate you.”

“How does it do that?”

Kitten just looked at him, waiting for him to answer the question himself.

“No…”, Yoongi shook his head. “Are you telling me…?”

“It’s mixed with blood”, Kitten nodded. “Obviously it’s magically enchanted to conserve it… otherwise it’d turn brown… But yeah… most of the rooms in this establishment… the columns in the entrance hall… the bridge… they are painted with blood. Yeah… that balcony, too”, she shrugged lightheartedly when Yoongi started at the wood behind her with a mixture of horror and disgust.

“The effect also works on humans… if a being of flesh and blood stands in front of an object that’s painted with the blood paint, it kinda blends in… That opens up the possibility to stay hidden… not reveal yourself to guests or other employees if you don’t want to. In critical cases like… with guests that are renowned for advocating blood-play… employees will ask others to accompany them to their appointments and stay hidden, as a secret guard so to speak… that’s handy. But obviously you also have to be aware of the fact that someone could potentially watch you at any time… It only makes humans invisible though. We can see the Ori at all times… “

There were two things Yoongi took away from this information. The first one was a “maybe”. Maybe that was why Pumpkin had asked Hoseok to join him. So he could act as a guard. Watch them have sex from his hiding place in front of a red wall and intervene if things got out of hand. The second one was a “certainly”. Certainly Jeon Jungkook… was not entirely human. Yoongi had not seen him standing on the bridge upon his arrival. But he had seen him perch on this very balcony last night. When he had lurked there in the dark, observing him inside the dormitory, most likely with these entirely black eyes, his animalistic side had outweighed the human boy.

“You will learn to use it to your advantage”, Kitten nodded confidently. Wasn’t that what Pumpkin had said as well?

“But make sure not to let others use it against you…Be on the watch… always.”

“But wait a minute… I saw you standing here on the balcony waiting for me, already the moment I stepped outside. When you hadn’t spoken up yet.”

“A part of your body has to touch the red paint for you to be invisible. It’s not enough to just be near it or stand in front of a red-painted object. The second you let go of it, you’ll be visible again.”

“Wait, that makes no sense… when I got here, I wasn’t touching anything on that bridge and yet the Ori couldn’t see me until I saw that frog and screamed my ass off.”
“Your feet were literally touching the bridge, Suga”, Kitten smiled, quite amused about his remark.

Then again… Pumpkin had pressed Crow against one of the red-painted columns… and he had been visible. Had it been the fact that his inhuman side had been the dominant one in this situation or rather the fact that the both of them had been talking, giving themselves away?

“Well, either way… getting back to topic. Blood-play is officially forbidden and yet eagerly practiced… just like prostitution itself.”

“What if… they overdo it and…?”

Yoongi didn’t need to finish the sentence, she knew immediately what he was trying to say.

“It happens all the time. The death rate among the employees is absurdly high. They are pushing their boundaries. Ori and employees alike. The Ori always test the waters and see who does bloodplay… as it’s called here… euphemistically. And the employees allow them to feed way more often and longer than they should because they hope to get enough money to buy their own freedom. Take this advice and never agree to bloodplay when the time has come, hear me? Don’t even start. It will get you killed. It’s not only the blood itself that they draw from you… it’s your very substance. The essence of what you are. They feed on that… If you don’t die from blood loss then you are certainly going to die from the emptiness they leave behind.”

Yoongi felt the wound on his lower arm sting as he lifted the cigarette to his mouth and the sleeve moved over it. He had agreed to blood play. And it had earned him 17,000 grand in less than 5 minutes. This, too, was an argument.

“So you don’t do it?”, he asked, wondering if she already suspected something because he felt her eyes on his arm. Maybe he made it up.

“Of course not”, she shook her head. “Why would I? Unlike you I don’t have a reason to get out of here.”

“What would be my reason?”

“You’re in love”, she smiled and blew a cloud of smoke at his face. “Only those who are in love would risk it all… either to get out and be reunited with their sweetheart… or to help buy the freedom of the one they love, not even their own.”

“How would you know that I’m in love?”, Yoongi asked, puzzled.

“You radiate”, she said like it was understood. “Only people who are in love emit this kind of light. You’re driven by a purpose higher than hope. You’re invincible when you’re in love, isn’t that what they say?”

Yoongi just stared at her, feeling exposed and yet confirmed in a certain way. But if even she could see it, after knowing him for less than a day… then why had Hoseok never noticed?

“So… is there no one who you…?”, he asked softly.

“No there isn’t”, she smiled bitterly. “Not being loved back is one thing. But having no one to love is so much worse. Even unreturned love is worth something… because it makes you human. The pain and sorrow it gives you also makes you grow. But I’m just empty… There is no one I can love… I don’t have a family… I don’t have a partner…”

“What about yourself?”, Yoongi asked, the cigarette between his fingers forgotten.
They looked at each other for longer than it took to exhale the last drag. Yoongi rarely ever did that but he was holding on to the girl’s eyes and not letting her glance go. A lot was said without words. And then she softly shook her head.

“Could you say that you genuinely love yourself, Suga-yah?”
He returned her gesture and shook his head in the same manner. And they both smiled awkwardly to the ground.

“Can I… Would you mind if I hugged you?”, Kitten asked. Yoongi’s reply was dragging her against his chest and holding her tight. She buried her face in the gape of his neck and Yoongi could feel her chest rise and flatten. It was a strange encounter, come to think of it. They didn’t even really know each other. But yet the warmth of her small body in his arms felt good. It felt genuine. They hugged for the hug itself. Which is rare.

“Suga-yah?”, she mumbled as she let go of him first and took a quick puff from her cigarette. It was almost finished. “Who told you not to drink the ice tea?”

“Excuse me?”, he asked, bewildered.
But he would never get a reply. Their conversation was cut off by someone clearing their throat. And Yoongi’s back faced the door but he didn’t need to turn around. The fear in Kitten’s eyes was enough for him to know they were fucked.

“Look at you Suga-ssi… already making friends?”, Madame Yu’s reedy voice ran down his spine. He slowly let the arm with the cigarette sink and turned around to her. The woman was wearing the same button-up blue dress and her hair still looked like a bird’s nesting site. Her glance was scornful.

“Something told me to check if everything’s in order at the dorm on my way down… and look at what I found. And here we got young lady Kitten… How long do I need to keep telling you that smoking kills before you’ll finally get it, stupid? At this point I’ve given up on you… you’ll never learn. But Suga-ssi… my sweet piano boy… I heard your first performance at the Midnight was a great success… I heard that No Face himself caught interest in you…”
Yoongi’s hand travelled to the pocket that contained his life. More than the Spirits, he was afraid of her taking the cigarette pack. But the old-looking woman didn’t make a move to roam his pockets.

“Maybe you are still receptive for a proper warning… Maybe we should help you remember the guidelines of this establishment. You come with me.”
Yoongi caught Kitten’s glance as the witch waddled back into the dormitory, expecting him to follow her.

“Probably just a piercing or something… don’t worry”, she mouthed and tried to give him an encouraging smile.

“I’ll see you”, he said. It wasn’t an empty phrase of parting. More like a desperate plea.

“Thanks for the cig”, she winked.

*

The elevator appeared to have shrunken. Since when was the space in here so narrow? Yoongi was even less able to breathe than in Pumpkin’s pink presence. Due to the lack of room, he was standing right next to Madame Yu and their sleeves were brushing. Or rather… her shoulder was making contact with Yoongi’s lower arm due to their difference in height. She smelled like herbs and some rancid perfume oil. Probably sandalwood. He kept his breathing shallow and prayed for the doors to open soon. He didn’t see which level button the woman had pressed. Her giant chest was in the way.
“My little helpers told me that you did a good job tonight. No Face, too, seemed to be very satisfied. I talked to him briefly after your date. He’s in the presidential suite now with some of his favorite girls and boys. You only were the appetizer but apparently you made him want more. Good job.”

Yoongi just nodded, not knowing what to say.

“Your hair looks better but your face is still boring. I already thought so when you got here. Where’s your make-up?’

“I… removed it when… I took a bath after…”

“You aren’t done for the night, yet. You should have returned to the Midnight after your date ended. To find someone else in need of your service. You have to convince them of you. That’s how it works for newbies.”

“I… I see… I’m sorry.”

“Madame”, Madame Yu added, correcting him.

“Madame”, Yoongi agreed with her.

“Where are we going now, Madame?”, he asked after silence had settled in again and once more the walls appeared to be growing in on him.

“We’re on our way to pimp your face a little. Don’t view it as a punishment. It’s a reward. Our guests fancy an exotic appearance. It will get you more clients in the future. Normally, I would have confiscated your tips for the night. That’s the usual punishment you get for smoking. But I won’t do that today. Because I’m a nice person.”

Yoongi was about to laugh out loud. Did she really just say that?

“Madame… is Kitten going to be punished for smoking? It was me… I gave the cigarette to her.”

“Oh my golden boy…”, the old woman looked up to face him. “Don’t make that rookie mistake. Don’t try to make friends here, don’t try to help others by taking the blame for them. It will get you killed.”

“Will she… will she get punished?”, he repeated his question. Madame Yu shot him a glance as if to criticize him for asking again. But she still replied.

“How would I punish her? This girl ain’t making any Spirits I could take from her. She’s useless. Took my boy’s precious time and energy when she needed to be healed this morning… and as soon as she can walk again she walks straight into trouble.”

And Yoongi figured he had to be satisfied with the answer. He thought about the hug they had shared and how good it had felt. If she got in trouble now, he’d never forgive himself.

“May I ask one more question?”, he started.

“How would I punish her? This girl ain’t making any Spirits I could take from her. She’s useless. Took my boy’s precious time and energy when she needed to be healed this morning… and as soon as she can walk again she walks straight into trouble.”

And Yoongi figured he had to be satisfied with the answer. He thought about the hug they had shared and how good it had felt. If she got in trouble now, he’d never forgive himself.

“May I ask one more question?”, he started.

“That in itself already is a question”, Madame Yu snorted. She really seemed to be in a particularly good mood. Maybe because the birthday event was going so well. Or maybe there was some other reason… but Yoongi definitely owed the lucky circumstance that he could keep his spirits to whatever lifted hers.

“What is it?”, she eventually granted him the question.

“Why are we not allowed to smoke? I mean… we’re of age… the both of us are in our mid-twenties… and we smoked outside on the balcony. The smell didn’t bother anyone. What’s so bad
“You should be able to answer that question yourself, Suga... you’re clever, aren’t you? Smoking makes your skin age faster... your teeth and fingertips yellow... It gives you bad breath and decreases the capability of your lungs... you’ll have a harder time carrying out tasks... Look... my employees are the goods I trade. What kind of saleswoman would I be if I allowed you to reduce your own value?”

But didn’t smoking also cause damage to the veins and alter the blood pressure? Maybe that was the real good that Madame Yu was trying to protect here. The quality of their blood. The doors of the elevator opened into what Yoongi recognized to be the entrance hall on the ground floor. He threw a glance at the spot where Pumpkin and Crow had carried out their disagreement. There were still some black feathers scattered over the floor. Madame Yu didn’t seem to notice them. She was leading the way with a determined stride and Yoongi’s heart soared a little when he realized that she was headed for the cellar. She stood there and waited for him while he quickly sat down on the steps and slipped on a new pair of leather slippers, the last one still lying behind some column in the hall. He kept losing his shoes in this place. First his Martens... then the slippers in the station hall... now the ones that the frog had given to him... And he kept changing clothes. Nothing about him was steady anymore. Except for that cigarette pack that contained his life. A name. One smoke. And a purple marble.

When he got up again, Madame Yu suddenly had a torch in her hand. Hadn’t there been lamps before? And where even did the fire come from? Was that something witches were capable of? Setting things ablaze? Well, then it would make sense for Bird to work down there and rule over the boiler room.

*  

The blue-haired man was lying on his mattress, wearing only boxers and a baggy grey t-shirt that had slipped off one of his shoulders. He lay on his back, reading a book, holding it over his head as though he was trying to block the sun that would never shine down here. He had headphones on. And glasses. Apparently he, too, was shortsighted. Yoongi’s glance came to a rest on his naked thighs that were covered in tattoos, just like the rest of his body. The pattern was so dense that it almost looked like he was wearing leggings. Yoongi swallowed hard at the strong tendons flexing when he pushed himself up looking at the open door with shocked surprise.

“You shouldn’t be working, you sloth?”, Madame Yu asked as soon as he had taken off his headphones, slipping them down around his neck.

“Crow’s just been here... he informed me that no more tubs are booked for the night”, Bird defended himself and placed the book on his pillow before he rearranged his pyjama shirt. Crow had just been here? While Pumpkin was busy with some of the guests... the two had been alone down here? Had it just been a brief visit to give orders or had he stayed a while after being rejected by Yoongi?

“What brings you here, aunty?”, Bird asked.

“I told you not to call me that”, the woman snarled. “I’m here because our newest accession... Suga... needs a little something to make his face look less boring.”

Bird met Yoongi’s eyes but then let go of them again right away. Apparently he didn’t want to let show that they knew each other. Had kissed and spent last night together in fact. Yoongi blushed as the memory hit him. And blushed even more when he remembered that Madame Yu might even be able to read his mind.
“The usual… he can choose the spot… but make sure to give him some big, noticeable jewelry.”

Yoongi exhaled patiently. He told himself that it didn’t matter. He could always take it out again. And besides that… there had been a time when he had toyed with the idea of getting a facial piercing. Had refrained from it for the same reason he had also stopped dying his hair. The fear that it might cost him a job offer. Now he was his own boss. And arguably no one in the music industry would mind his looks. But at some point, it had just lost its allure. Maybe because he was getting older and had come to see that whether one lived and died a rebel made absolutely no difference. Maybe because at this point, he was just a chronically tired pessimist. Only when Hoseok had crashed into his life to set his nerves ablaze every dawning day, he had felt the fire in his chest resparked. The hunger for life… The motivation to do things just for fun. Which maybe… just maybe… was the essence of life and the key to happiness after all. Living for the sake of life itself. In face of being forced to revisit this old dream, he found himself rather excited. His heart was beating fast when Madame Yu strut out of the room with a sassy sway of her hips.

“I won’t be available for the rest of the night, I’ve got business to do.”

Bird adjusted his glasses and winked at Yoongi the second the door fell shut behind her.

“It’s your first day of working here and you’ve already earned yourself a piercing?! If you go on at this rate, you’ll have more body modifications than I do by the end of the week”, Bird snorted and approached him, taking off his headphones on the way, dropping them on the chair that served as a side table.

“That mint hair sure is something”, he added when he stood right in front of him. But then he seemed to notice the defeated look in Yoongi’s eyes. He clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes before he wrapped his arms around him.

“Come here, Yoongi-yah… tell uncle Bird what happened.”

Yoongi felt stupid for it but he closed his eyes and savored the warm buzzing feeling of the man’s body. He didn’t want to be attracted to him. Because he was Pumpkin’s boyfriend. And he didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right about what he had said concerning the looks Yoongi had given Bird upon their first encounter. And then there was this story with Crow… Until he had found out exactly what was going on between them he figured it would be best to not get too close to the blue-haired male. But still he put one arm around the body that was holding him suspiciously tightly.

“I was caught smoking”, he then said to have a reason to withdraw.

“I don’t mean tell me why you were sent down here. I mean tell me why your eyes look like this. You look like you’re gonna break down any minute.”

And that was what Yoongi did. Break down. He fell back into Bird’s arms, biting his tongue and whole face pulled into a grimace to hold back the tears. Being chest to chest with the witch made them die back down. Bird’s grey shirt smelled faintly of Pumpkin’s peony scent. And Yoongi had to accept that it helped calming him down. For a second he wished the pink-head was here, too. Just so that he could fall asleep right here and now, being hugged from both sides again.

“Can you fix this?”, he muttered when they parted after what must have been minutes. He rolled up his sleeve and showed the cut to Bird. It had bled through the band aid.

“Oh no, you didn’t, did you?”, Bird sighed bitterly.

“Please don’t tell Pumpkin…”, was all Yoongi had to say to this.

“Come on”, Bird prompted, taking him by the arm and dragging him out of the room.
The fire was just glowing ash. Bird crouched down next to it and scooped up some soot with his fingers. Once again the shirt slipped of his shoulder and Yoongi glanced at the butterfly on his neck when he stood back up. With a quick move of his hand, he ripped off the bandaid and threw it into the remains of the fire before he started massaging the black powder into Yoongi’s skin. Yoongi watched the cut close. Today the soot didn’t look like moving animals. Just lifeless dust. But the mark continued fading until not even a scar remained.

“It’s completely gone!”, Yoongi said with amazement.

“The cut wasn’t particularly deep. Who did this?”

“I… I don’t want to…”

“Fine you don’t need to. But be aware that I’ll find out either way because Pumpkin is sure going to tell me who chose you for tonight. I won’t tell him about the wound if you want me to keep my mouth shut. But be aware that I’ll find out.”

Bird’s voice was suddenly very serious.

“And be aware that whoever went this easy on you, won’t do it next time. They constantly test their boundaries. This shit gets worse. If they get a taste of your blood once they’ll keep coming back for more. Don’t ever agree to it again, hear me?”

“Got it”, Yoongi nodded, a defensive glare in his eyes. Why was he such an open book when it came to Bird? Crow was able to read his thoughts but still the blue-haired man seemed to know more about him than he himself did even without that ability. It was just his intuition. It went shorter ways than Crow’s manipulation of thoughts. More natural ways. A lot of the communication between him and the tattooed male happened non-verbally. It was in the way their eyes met when it would have been easier to avoid the other’s glance.

“You’re thinking of doing it again for the Spirits. I know that. It’s because of your ex, hm? You want to save him… But that’s not the way…”

“Then how can I save him?”, Yoongi asked blatantly.

“Choose the right side at the right time. Things are about to change in this establishment. If you side with the right people now, you might profit from it later.”

“That sounds like you’re preparing a coup d’état”, Yoongi returned pulling his sleeve back over his arm. It was still buzzing with the aftermath of Bird’s touch.

Bird just looked at him.

“Do you happen to know a girl named Salt…? And her girlfriend Owl for instance?”

“Never had a lot contact with Salt. I do know Owl, though. She did the majority of my tattoos.”

“She did what?”

“Usually, I am in charge of tattooing people here… cause I’m good at drawing. And I kinda picked up tattooing as a hobby, learned it from the artist that used to work here. A guy named Devil. Owl and I hung out together a lot. She’s my age. She kinda was my apprentice at some point and I trusted her with her work. She did the butterfly.”
“What happened to her?”, Yoongi asked, ready to hear a third version of the story.

“We don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“There are rumors. She and Salt left the bathhouse in order to pay their ransom to my mother. Some say they escaped. Others say they never made it.”

So neither Crow nor Pumpkin had lied. There were two versions of this story. Aren’t there two versions to every story?

“So… you already made up your mind about where that piercing’s gonna go? You like the idea of getting one? I figure you’re actually the type to get a piercing out of your own free will.”

“I don’t mind it. I don’t want a tattoo, that’s all.”

“Why? Cause they’re permanent?”

“Yeah.”

“And you can’t decide on what you would want on your skin forever, hm?”

“Exactly.”

They smiled at each other.

“My ex has a tattoo”, Yoongi then said. In front of Bird, words came easy.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it while carrying him here. Don’t look at me like this… Pumpkin told me that you know meanwhile.”

“Pumpkin tells you everything, doesn’t he?”, Yoongi rolled his eyes.

“Yeah… there are no secrets between us.”

“Good for you. Well, either way… my ex has this sun and moon tattoo… It was just a dead duck thing… He got it on a vacation trip because he liked the design. Had no real meaning back then. At some point, he tried to make it about us… He always used to say that we’re like the sun and the moon… or maybe even I was the one to start it. Either way… The point is he had them both. The sun and the moon. He’s complete on his own. He never really needed me.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”, Bird smirked and crossed his arms.

“Don’t know. Cause I’m motherfucking bitter about it and because I miss him and because I’m worried what’s going on between him, Pumpkin and at least four of the guests.”

Bird blinked his words away.

“Yeah… I know”, he then sighed. “And whatever he said about being independent and taking his body with him after being done… it’s true. And I respect that. But I hate it. I fucking do.”

Yoongi threw a smile at him.

“Big mood.”

“Don’t worry though… Pumpkin won’t touch your ex just for the fun of it… he won’t try to seduce him and… steal him away from you or whatever it is you are thinking… Chances are he just asked
him as a safety guard.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about it. I think Pumpkin is pissed at me. Well, I’m no fool. I never expected him to like me or anything… but I guess things have gotten a lot worse after… we had our fair share of quarrels today.”

“I know…”

“Obviously he told you.”

“Obviously. But obviously, you have no idea how much Pumpkin actually likes you. He’s very protective of you. Has been from the first second on.”

“Then he has a rather subtle way of showing affection”, Yoongi snorted. But Bird’s words left a warm burn in his chest. Maybe he could make peace with Pumpkin after all. Maybe he had really been doing his job when he had robbed them off their belongings. Like he was doing his job now… making his boyfriend worry on a daily basis.

“Pumpkin just had a pretty bad disagreement with Crow”, Yoongi informed him.

“Yeah, I know…”, Bird nodded to himself.

“Obviously he also already told you that.”

“Crow told me”, Bird corrected him. “I haven’t spoken to Pumpkin ever since he went to prepare for the performance.”

“Somewhere along the way I thought they were going to kill each other”, Yoongi said as casual as possible. He needed to find out more about that argument. And maybe the one who would give him information out of Pumpkin and Crow… was Bird.

“They’re not particularly fond of each other.”

“You don’t say.”

“They never got along too well but lately it’s been getting worse. Pumpkin suspects Crow of certain things… things of which I personally don’t deem Crow capable. But Pumpkin keeps confronting him. You know he’s a pretty straight forward person… but so is Crow in a way. The two of them are a pretty explosive mixture. I’m trying to stay neutral… Don’t think it’s my position to get involved. Pumpkin and I rarely ever argue. When we do it’s about Crow. Obviously he wants me to side with him… help him prove that Crow is really doping something out. But as I said… I really don’t think he’d go as far as Pumpkin fears him to. I daresay that I know Crow a little better than Pumpkin does.”

“May I ask you a personal question?”, Yoongi asked, studying the brick structure that made up the walls of the boiler room.

“Aren’t we already pretty deep into personal talk?”

“Don’t know what you’d consider too personal, though”, Yoongi shrugged.

“You wanna know whether Crow and I used to date at some point, huh?”

“Pumpkin made it sound as if Crow at least had tried to make that happen at some point… and failed.”
“Let’s go lie down”, Bird said and Yoongi started at him with an open mouth and an arched brow.

“It’s a rather long story. If you wanna hear it, might as well get comfortable.”

He clapped his hands to get rid of the soot on his fingers. It only helped marginally.

“My God, will you be so kind as to fuck the hell off?”

It looked a little weird how he said that to his own fingers but all of a sudden the soot came alive. With little protesting noises it curled off his skin and jumped onto the floor, bouncing away like tiny superballs. It drew a smile from Yoongi’s lips. And suddenly breathing felt a little easier.

* 

They were lying next to each other on the mattress. Bird had his head propped up on his arm, Yoongi was lying flat on his back, staring at his face but masking it as staring at ceiling.

“Crow and I grew up together”, Bird started and let his fingers run through his blue hair. Maybe it really was his natural color after all.

“Well, he’s 5 years younger than me so you have to take that with a pinch of salt. One thing you also might not know yet is that I wasn’t born here in the bathhouse. But Crow was.”

“He was born here? Does that mean he… spent his entire life here?”, Yoongi frowned. He was looking at Bird’s piercings. The septum and the medusa. They went very well together. Sometimes when Bird smiled, the ring clicked against the little ball that lay in his cupid’s bow. In the back of his mind he was contemplating what kind of piercing he should get.

“Yeah, he did. The story of his life is pretty tragic. And I don’t want to go into detail. But Pumpkin told me that you might have a thing for him…”

“That’s how he put it?”

“No. He said you let him bang you in the peony fields and what a stupid needy whore you are to let yourself get lulled in by a fucker like Crow.”

“Yeah that sounds like something he would say”, Yoongi confirmed drily and it made Bird smile. The big nose ring clicked against the stud in his lip.

“Either way… since you seem to feel a certain affection to him, I figure you might wanna know some more about his past. Should know, actually. So… Crow was an unwanted child. A bastard so to speak. He’s the son of a former employee… and his father was one of the guests. A shape-shifter. Crow told me what happened during that fight with Pumpkin so I know you already know. Have seen him like that. Otherwise I wouldn’t tell you. But yeah… he’s half human and half crow… He always struggled with it. Until this day he can’t really control it because he never embraced it. Like… he can turn into a crow when he wants to… but it also happens without his will when he gets angry or panics. I think I don’t need to go into detail about the fact that his father never acknowledged that he had a son. He was an accident.”

“What about his Mom?”

“She died. In child bed… or maybe that’s not the right way to put it. They let her die that night… She could have been saved. But obviously families are not wanted in this establishment. Having to take care of a baby, she would have been useless. So they got rid of her when the chance presented itself. Probably also because she was getting old. She was 29 when she got pregnant. They could
make it look like there had been complications during labor. But those who helped her give birth that night tell different stories."

“When you say they let her die… you mean your aunt, don’t you?”

“First and foremost, yeah. She’s a business woman. To her, young people are goods. Nothing more, nothing less. She treats them okayish… fair even… as long as they do their job. But it’s not my intention to talk bad of her now. She did some things for me that I won’t forget. Especially by doing some things for Pumpkin that I wasn’t capable of. But that’s a story for a different day. Crow was an orphan. But my aunt decided to keep and raise him. Because hybrids between humans and shape-shifters are just as rare as hybrids between humans and Oris or humans and witches. She figured that she’d be able to make great profit with him once he was old enough. She practically raised him to become her assistant. But he already thwarted her plans when he grew up hating the fact that he could turn into a bird. That’s where I come into play. I got here when I was a teenager. I grew up at my human father’s place. But for reasons that would exceed the scope of a story about Crow, I was brought here at the age of 12. Crow was 7 back then. And we became friends in a way… Because, to a certain extent, we were dealing with the same hardships. Didn’t have a family that loved us. And we were both not exactly human. I was really upset when I got here. I was just about to hit puberty, I guess. Technically I also was still a child. I tried to act very much like an adult. But in reality, I was glad to have a younger companion to play with. This way I had an excuse to still play with toys and run around in the fields… basically just not be around the bathhouse as much as possible. Crow quickly became some sort of younger brother for me… someone I was able to take care of. I was his big brother. The one he looked up to. Who made him feel that it wasn’t a problem when suddenly he grew feathers and soared into the air when getting too agitated about something. Didn’t you notice that he and I… we’re the only ones to have bird-related names out of all the bathhouse staff? We picked them ourselves. Back then Taehyung who nowadays names everybody was still a toddler. I’m saying picked but obviously it wasn’t that far from seek to call Crow Crow. It was more like… We came up with a bird-related name for me, too, so he wouldn’t feel alone and left out anymore. There are a lot of blue birds around the woods behind the peony fields. One day we were playing there trying to shoot them with a slingshot. We never succeeded cause they were just way too fast for us. That’s how Blue Bird was born. Cause we figured how cool it was to be free as birds. Be able to escape just like that. Always be with a flock… have a warm place to fly to when it turned winter. Back then, we still used our human names. Crow’s real name is Jeon Jungkook… as we already told you. Jeon was his mother’s last name. And Jungkook was the name she wanted to give him. Some of the other employees knew because they had helped her choose it. At this point, I highly doubt that Crow still remembers this name. And I even doubt that he remembers every detail of the circumstances of his birth and the suffering he went through on his way of becoming an adult in this establishment. But all of it left behind a thirst for vengeance in him. That’s the one part of the whole story where I absolutely agree with Pumpkin. Jungkook hates this place. He’d burn it down if he could. And he has reasons for it. I… myself… am not entirely guilt-free when it comes to the hardships he went through. I broke his heart.”

Bird took a break to clear his throat and lay down next to Yoongi for obviously his arm had gotten tired. But maybe he just didn’t want to look at him for the part that now followed.

“Crow and I met as children. We were always together even though there were times when we weren’t as close due to our age gap. Well… let’s say we went through different stages of being close. Started off as child friends… went to some kind of little brother big brother relationship. And at some point… ugh… I don’t know how to put that. But yeah, it’s exactly what you think… at some point we explored some sexual fantasies with each other. The sexual aspect of our friendship has always been around… well of course not always, not at the very beginning… I think… I think it all started when Crow eventually hit puberty. He was confused you know… like we all were… confused about what was going on with his body and how he was supposed to deal with it. It’s… oh God this must
sound so weird but... I gave him his first orgasm. He asked me how it works, you know... jerking off... after having had a ton of wet dreams in a row. So I showed him... could have explained, I fathom... but I showed him.”

He turned his head to the side to throw a flustered grin at Yoongi. Yoongi returned it. One half of him understood perfectly well what kind of feelings had been involved. He had gone through exactly that. Had found himself torn between casual masturbation talk with his classmates... and secretly fantasizing about what their hand would feel like instead of his. The other half of him tried to keep a straight face while the imagination of teenage Crow and Bird getting intimate made his blood flow faster.

“Already then I was majorly confused about my sexual orientation. You know... I’d still... until this day... consider myself pretty straight. But I’m obviously bisexual... Back then I felt really really insecure about this attraction... It was just weird, you know? Being attracted to boys, being attracted to... someone I considered my little brother. Who was a lot younger than I. It caused me to keep a distance from him... at least in that respect. And I think already then Crow suffered from it. The sexual tension resparked when he was around... 18, I guess... and I was in my early twenties. We tried a lot back then... handjobs, oral... fingering... but we didn’t cross the line... We just basically stole away into the fields whenever the chance presented itself. Crow was a hormonal teenager and I wasn’t any better... He was always pretty mature for his age and I... just never wanted to grow up. I still don’t want to. At the age of 27. It’s stupid... I know. Either way... Crow was my best friend and I thought what we had... this thing between us... was like... friends with benefits, you know? Part of our strong bond. I failed to realize that... already back then... he must have been madly in love with me. I sensed that... something. I sensed something. So I kinda distanced myself again. We were still friendly with each other. But from one day to the next I just avoided being alone with him. I don’t think our love... like... our relationship... was a very healthy one... we were too dependent on each other. Crow saw in me the replacement for everything... I was his family, best friend and lover... Okay so... we grew apart a little again. Due to me ghosting him. He must have hurt a lot... but I swear I didn’t know. And then there was this one fateful night... It was December and it had been snowing for days. I was 24, Crow was 19. And there was this event... some banquet for a group of important political figures. It was Crow’s and my task to escort them back to their ship. The whole beach was covered with snow like... even the sand. We came back freezing like... it was so fucking cold that night. Crow suggested we take advantage of the whirlpools in the wellness area on the ground floor still being heated. So we ran to one of those bathrooms and...

“You had sex there”, Yoongi finished the sentence for him, scrunching his nose with a smile. Bird started smiling guiltily.

“I don’t even know if that would still pass as sex... we basically devoured each other the second we were alone. In the pool. When we started making out our bodies were ice cold and I can only recall the burning heat of the water like... you know that prickling sensation... aching even. My whole body ached so bad. For him... I... just lost my mind. There was this tension from holding back so much... keeping a distance that I didn’t want to keep after all... already at the beach when we waved the guests goodbye I could think of nothing but tearing his clothes off. For me it was the first time doing anal... with a boy. And I guess that’s the very core of the problem. For me it was lust. For him it was love. He must have thought... I had returned to him finally. Made up my mind about loving him in a different way... a romantic one. He confessed to me at that night. After sex we lay naked in this big king size bed that the bathrooms are equipped with. Have you seen them? They are ridiculously huge... His head was resting on my thigh... I remember that his hair was still damp... and he was like... I love you, Hyung... and I was like yeah I love you too, Crow-ah... to which he shook his head. That’s not what I meant. Those were the words. That’s not what I meant. The words he used to subtly confess to me... that it wasn’t the kind of saranghae we’ve been saying to each other since we were kids... it took me a few moments. I felt like I was out there on the shore in that
snow all over again. I swear, Suga… my skin froze over. Not only my skin. It was like my heart was
thrown into that icy sea… Icy. Was all I felt. I shook my head then. It was enough for him to
understand. He started crying. I wanted to comfort him… but obviously I could only make it worse
at that point. He put on his clothes and ran off. I spent the night in that room. I also cried a little. I
was so mad at myself. But there was nothing I could do, you know? Only a few days later Pumpkin
came to the bathhouse. And I was head over heels. Everything that Crow had wanted from me… I
was ready to give to this new boy.”

“Oh shit”, Yoongi exhaled.

“Now Crow was the one distancing himself from me. I wanted to keep him close, you know? Stay
best friends with him… still have him as my little brother. To me, our friendship was something that
existed beyond who we got romantically involved with. But he thought differently… It was only
then… when I saw how jealous of Pumpkin he got… that it dawned on me for how long he actually
must have felt that way without telling me to my face. In retrospect, I eventually got all the hints that
had always been there. I was an idiot. But when you don’t love someone… in THAT way… it
sometimes is the hardest thing in the world to realize they have feelings for you… because you don’t
look for those feelings… it’s the saddest truth of all… the fact that you just don’t care. But you can’t
help it… What could have I done? Pretended I feel the same for him? Lie to him? It would have been
so much worse… Pumpkin and I got together. But we had a really hard start… I was so in love with
him… but in the beginning, he kinda refused to believe that… even though he liked me, too.”

“Why’s that?”, Yoongi frowned.

“Part of the different story I may tell you some other day. It was like… whenever I got into a fight
with Pumpkin… I got closer to Crow again. There were these two weeks in which Pumpkin and I
didn’t exchange a single word. I had said something that hurt Pumpkin a lot. I could still shoot
myself right in the face for that statement… but I said it in a fit of rage… because I was so frustrated
that he still would not believe… ugh… nevermind… well, during that time I guess Crow got his
hopes up again. But when Pumpkin was ready to forgive me and we got together again, Crow kinda
lost it. He… did something very impetuous… something that was meant to cause me harm. I think I
deserved his anger to a certain extent… but what he did was… rather crass…”

“What did he do?”, Yoongi asked. They were both lying on the side, facing each other, heads resting
on their arm. They talked in a confidential way. Time and again Yoongi missed to use the honorative
and Bird didn’t seem to mind at all.

“I don’t think you need to know… I forgave him eventually. I know it wasn’t him… It was just… a
manifestation of the anger he felt inside… “

“This afternoon, Pumpkin said something to me about not having the right to mistreat someone only
because you’ve been mistreated yourself.”

“And you can be 100% sure that he was talking with this incident in the back of his mind. I
understand why he would warn you about Crow. There is… something dark in him. But I refuse to
believe that he will ever let it take over. What do you think…? What kind of person is he in your
eyes?”

“I don’t think that I can fully judge about his personality already.”

“Then give me your first impression.”

“I feel attracted to him… maybe it’s exactly this darkness… he is… he is the total opposite of my ex,
you know? Dark, mysterious, secretive… Hoseok… oops… I mean…”
“You can say his name down here… Yoongi”, Brid gave him a heartfelt smile. “Be aware what you say in red painted rooms. But down here there’s just good old bricks… nothing to worry about. So… what were you going to say about Hoseok?”

“He’s so… right in your face… all over the place… loud. Bright. Funny. Exhaustingly funny.”

“All of which are pretty attractive qualities if you ask me…”

“Whatever you say”, Yoongi rolled his eyes to not let show how much he actually agreed with Bird. “But yeah… you’ve heard it from Pumpkin. We had sex in the peony fields this morning… and I think that says it all… It all went way too fast… it’s just sex… he said it himself… It’s an affair, nothing more, nothing less.”

“It sounded different coming from him”, Bird mumbled, indicating a shrug with the arm he way lying on.

“Sorry?”

“He talked about you when he came here to give his orders. On a professional level of course… Informed me that our new members are all doing pretty great and did a convincing job at No Face’s birthday party. He mentioned your piano skills. And he said that you are handsome.”

“Did he?”, Yoongi asked and felt himself blush a little. He awkwardly lowered his eyes.

“These days we don’t talk on a private level anymore. We are forced to brief each other about work issues, though. Ever since he became my aunt’s right hand we basically have to exchange a few words on a daily basis. But since that incident… we’re like strangers. What happened… that night was… played down as an unlucky encounter. Only very few know the truth. My aunt pretends she doesn’t know, but she does. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have given Crow his burn mark.”

“What burn mark?”

“His face tattoo. The thing that spreads over his cheeks and the back of his nose. It may look like an ordinary tattoo… but it wasn’t inked. It’s a witch’s mark. We call it a burn mark… because obtaining it is equally painful to being burned with a hot iron. It’s basically the process of transferring a pattern… from somewhere… for example a decorative item or something like a stamp… onto someone’s skin. Most of the tattoos you see here were inked with a customary tattoo gun… or hand-poked… Devil was really good at Irezumi… but yeah… Crow’s is a burn mark.”

“Crow got this mark as a punishment for what he did to you?”

“Yeah.”

“So that’s why Pumpkin likes to emphasize just how ugly it is…”

“Bet he does”, Bird snorted and his glasses moved a little on the back of his nose. They were pretty big and their golden rim was hexagonal, made him look intellectual. Like an art connaisseur.

“What did Crow do… tell me.”

Bird shook his head and the golden ball of his tongue ring appeared between his lips. He played around with it for a little while before he was ready to reply.

“No… It’s enough that he’ll be reminded of it on a daily basis… whenever he looks into a mirror… I forgave him. And I think part of forgiving someone is letting their wrongdoings rest. I still hope for
him to find his way. And I want to give him the chance to. Maybe he’ll find a way with you. What happened between me and him should not determine what you think of him. I hurt him. So he hurt me back. I guess that’s life… but it doesn’t necessarily have to mean that he will hurt you as well. According to Pumpkin he might be the devil… but to me he’s a bird with broken wings. Who deserves a second chance.”

Yoongi thought about what Pumpkin had said about how being broken did not justify being a monster. But after all Bird’s words counted more, didn’t they? He was the reason why Pumpkin despised Crow. Or at least the main reason. But Bird had chosen to forgive him. Whatever it was that he had done. Yoongi would need to find out before he judged. If anything, then Bird had introduced him to Jeon Jungkook’s human side. The fragility behind the black veil. And Yoongi found himself even more curious about this side than about the mystic sexual adventures his company promised. It was like Pumpkin had said… once you dig into a person’s past you come to understand their present peculiarities.

“And one day they will turn against you”, he heard the horned boy's voice echo in his mind. But it faded away when Bird raised his voice again.

“I know you still have feelings for your ex… and I know it’s probably way too early to even address this… but should you ever find yourself interested in more than just Crow’s body… then…”

“Then?”, Yoongi asked.

Bird let his teeth capture his bottom lip and worried it for a few seconds.

“I don’t even know… I guess what I’m trying to say is… I’d be happy… I’d be happy if finally someone would love him in the way that I wasn’t capable of.”

“I can’t promise that…”

“I know you can’t. And I’m not asking that from you. It’s just… I never stopped caring about him, you know?”

“I know”, Yoongi whispered. Because this pain is universal. Just like Bird had never stopped caring about Crow, Yoongi had never stopped caring about Jung Hoseok.

Silence spread over them like a blanket. Whenever Yoongi pretended not to look at him, Bird studied his face and vice versa. Eventually, their eyes accidentally met.

“I’m worried sick because of Pumpkin”, Bird suddenly whispered, his glance intruding into Yoongi’s soul.

“Why...?”

“If there is someone that could finally provoke Crow’s dark side to take over… then it’s him… Pumpkin…”

“Do you really think Crow would touch him even though he knows how much you love him?”

“He would do so precisely because he knows… Pumpkin’s latest tries of convicting Crow for certain things… if he is wrong… and the wrong person learns about his suspicions… the consequences will be fatal.”

“It’s about Tae, isn’t it? Pumpkin believes that Crow is deliberately advertising him to the guests to gain profit from their tries of getting their hands on him, right?”
Bird indicated shaking his head.

“It’s worse. What Pumpkin thinks is that… Crow is not only advertising Tae… but that he’s eventually going to sell him off.”

“That’s absurd, isn’t it?”

“I hoped you would say so…”

Once again they fell silent. But still, Yoongi’s eyes were drawn to Bird’s lips. He recalled the feeling of kissing them last night. The boost of energy and happiness it had caused in him. But that wasn’t the only reason he longed to taste them again right now. He felt so weak and tired. And craved the hug of two strong arms, the body warmth of someone who wouldn’t let go for the rest of the night. He was always alone and trained to fight. Trained to cast off everything that life threw at him on a daily basis. But at this point, he was too overwhelmed to mimic his cool and distanced self. His fascination for the tattooed fingers grew so big that he reached out to touch them. And also Bird seemed to be giving in to some physical urge when he drew him closer and ran them through his hair. It was more than a hug but less than a kiss. Their cheeks brushed when they awkwardly tried to navigate their lips away from the other’s mouth. But there was something buzzing between them. And it was not just Bird’s aura. Yoongi breathed in the smell of his blue hair. That was the smell of fire and a faint hint of his boyfriend’s perfume. Too embarrassed to lay still, they kept moving, bodies touching and Yoongi felt Bird’s lips ghost along his earlobe. His fingers clawed into the fabric of the elder’s grey shirt to keep them from venturing somewhere else. But he couldn’t hold back the question.

“Can I kiss you again?”, he mumbled under his breath and felt Bird’s body freeze under his hands. The man held his breath for a few seconds and then withdrew to look at him.

“Just to… you know… because last night it worked so well and…”, Yoongi tried to make it sound as though he had just asked for it for health reasons.

“You know I… totally wouldn’t mind but… I’d prefer if… if he was present.”

He was Pumpkin.

“I’m sure he’d be okay with it… but we have this rule that… we only… get intimate with someone else if the other is in the same room. Except for work situations of course… but yeah… so…”

Now they were actively avoiding the other’s glance. Yoongi sat up, not really able to hide his embarrassment after having been turned down. Bird followed his example and Yoongi jumped with surprise when he leaned in in one fluent movement. He felt Bird’s lips press on his forehead. The sensation that accompanied the kiss was intense. It was like a needle intruding his skull. A soft, buzzing, electrified needle injecting heroin. It spread through his entire forehead like water skaters moving through the stale water of a pond. Bird’s fingers ran into Yoongi’s mint hair to hold it back as he started kissing his way up, placing one pack above the other until he had reached his hairline. When he made a move to withdraw, Yoongi caught his shoulder and his eyes popped open just a little, still remaining lidded with the desire he still felt coiling in his lower abdomen.

“Well, shit…”, Bird whispered as he forced their lips to collide and actively helped Yoongi to climb on his lap, both trying to force maximum proximity. Yoongi smiled as he felt Bird’s tongue slide between his lips, the piercing ball colliding with his teeth as he hadn’t opened his mouth wide enough, unprepared for Bird’s bold move. It was like the reflex of drinking once the water bottle touches your dry and thirsty lips. Yoongi started rocking his hips as his tongue roamed Bird’s mouth for more of that exuberant joy that was pouring down his throat, spreading into his chest. Bird’s
hands were on them, guiding him, encouraging him to grind against the bulge in his underwear. Yoongi was ready to admit that part of what fueled his boldness was the thirst for revenge. Most likely Pumpkin and Hoseok were doing the exact same right now. Putting on a show for the guests but still enjoying it recklessly. If Pumpkin enjoyed Bird’s dominance, then he would love Hoseok’s big hands that he always used with the same confidence he laughed with. Loud and straightforward to grab what he wanted. And how could Hoseok not fall for that angel face with the demon mind? Objectively speaking, Pumpkin was the prettiest boy in the entire universe. Who was Yoongi to deny this fact?

Bird withdrew. A smile on his lips but a very serious look in his light brown eyes. They almost were of the hazel that Yoongi’s contacts tried to imitate.

“You’re a fucking great kisser, Yoongi. But we really shouldn’t be doing this”, he chuckled.

“They are doing it too right now… Imagine them… Pumpkin on all fours, Yukata off his shoulder, propping his ass up for one of the guests to fuck him… or maybe there are even two to-”

Bird’s smile turned black.

“Yeah or imagine your ex fucking his mouth. He’ll be acting like he’s doing it for show to please the guests but you know just how much he’s going to enjoy that sinful mouth of my boyfriend.”

“Fuck you”, Yoongi returned the smile and another deep kiss heated up between them.

“No, fuck you”, Bird whispered into his mouth as he squeezed his butcheeks so hard that Yoongi gasped at the pain. But then he withdrew again, this time with finality in his eyes.

“Knowing that others do it, is not a justification to do it yourself. And now back topic. I’d go for a nose ring. Left side. Let me get a needle.”

* Yoongi could feel the ring when he breathed in and see it when he squinted down. It enclosed his left nostril and the only sensation was that of a foreign object. He felt no pain whatsoever because the wound itself was already healed. Bird had used soot to sterilize the needle and the jewelry and as soon as it had pierced Yoongi’s flesh, the drop of blood had run dry. One caressing touch of Bird’s magical hands later and the stinging sensation had been gone, too. The excitement that still lingered in his body caused him to take two steps at a time. He was on his way up the basement stairs, headed for the Midnight Bar again. He was looking for Crow. After the conversation with Bird, he felt the need to talk to him again before going to bed. Say sorry for ditching him in the garden. Assure him that the incident in the entrance hall didn’t change anything between them. That he had come to terms with the fact that his sex friend was a shape-shifter. Maybe ask again whether it was possible to spend the night together. Extinguish the fire that Bird had set to his body. Maybe even - there was a crowd of people in the entrance hall. Yoongi let the curtain fall shut behind him and stepped between the columns, hurrying over to the group of employees that was gathered around something on the floor. There was something coming from them. A feeling, like a cold wind. Something that made Yoongi’s heartbeat double with anxiety. Something that had happened. Something bad. He knew by instinct. By the way their cold whispers pierced into his ears. They got louder. Louder. She was dead.

At first, Yoongi didn’t recognize her. And when he did it wasn’t because of her face. Since it wasn’t recognizable anymore. It was by the way that her a-line bob curved around the side of her face like a melody that he knew it was Kitten. But also now that he knew, he still didn’t recognize her face. It
was blue. And her mouth was gaping open in a silent scream. All of her veins were visible, traceable under her skin like an underground map. There was blood running from her eye sockets. A little bit running from her mouth as well. And apart from that there was nothing left. They had drained her. Drained her of her life. And left an empty shell behind. At that moment, something was also leaving Yoongi’s body. The shock deprived him of any kind of reaction. He just glanced up from her corpse and was met with a pair of purple eyes, tears spilling from them. Pumpkin’s lips were shaking, swollen, his nostrils quivering as he was struggling for words, arms extended to keep those behind him away from the dead body on the floor. There was reproach in his glance.

Yoongi whirled around. He made for the stairs and was already three floors up the next time he blinked. There was only one thing on his mind. His friends. Nothing in this world mattered anymore. Only the certainty that Jung Hoseok and Kim Namjoon were alright. This time he saw the entrance to the Midnight bar already from far across the corridor. This time he wanted to find it. But when he threw open the door, there were only a handful of people left. Obviously none of them aware of what was going on downstairs. A few guests drinking at the bar. Some staff members already busy cleaning up the banquet. So he would try for the dormitory next. Maybe they were already off work. Pumpkin was back. So Hoseok’s appointment was over as well. He popped out right next to the big Ming vases. But when he was about to turn on his heel, there was sound. A sound that made his heart double-over. He froze and listened closely. Pressed his lips shut tight and tiptoed over to the door of Madame Yu’s office. He heard it again and this time he was sure. About to go blind from his rapid heartbeat, he approached the door and peered through the crack. There was a young woman bend over Madame Yu’s writing desk, holding up the skirt of her blue vintage dress. Her golden hair was tied up in a knot that resembled a bird’s nesting sight. Crow was moaning with an open mouth, his face painted with pleasure as he did her from behind.

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed the chapter please take a minute to leave feedback since I really worked my ass off for this. I would be highly appreciated… <3
Marbles Part 1

Chapter Notes

Hey guys...

I'm super grateful for the latest increase of feedback. I haven't gotten around to replying to all comments but I'll work my way through my inbox eventually... My life is a not so beautiful mess atm and I'm planning to talk about all that in an INSTA life on May 5th, 7 PM (CET) @iamspringday_fiction. I'll also be addressing this story, the BTS comeback and everything of interested so I'd be honored if you tuned in...

About this chapter... if you're all about SOPE, you might wanna get your tissues ready... It's a pretty sad one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yoongi was sick to his stomach with fatigue. His eyes kept falling shut every few seconds but yet his
glance remained fixed on Jung Hoseok’s hand. It was resting on the tatami mat, sticking out from under the woolen blanket. He was lying in a different row than Yoongi, the beds next to his had already been occupied when Yoongi had finally gotten back to the dormitory. The foul light of a rainy morning was already creeping through the paper sunscreens in front of the big windows. And Yoongi was really literally aching with exhaustion. But still he forced himself to stay awake and watch over Hoseok and Namjoon, the latter of which was lying across the room but in Yoongi’s row. They had both already been fast asleep when he had stumbled into the dorm, about to blackout from all the impressions that had imprinted themselves onto his retinas. Like switching TV channels, the images were skipping in his mind. Kitten’s lifeless face. The blood running down her temple from her empty eye sockets. The expression on Crow’s face as he hit his orgasm. Back to the bluish veins on Kitten’s skin. The pulsing ones on Crow’s neck as threw his head back with pleasure. Darkness. He would not let himself fall asleep. Whatever it took. He needed to stay awake. Stay alive. The worst nightmares are not those you can’t wake up from. But those you can’t fall asleep in. He had played it through in his head. Every possibility. Tip-toeing back to Madame Yu’s office to steal the keys for the anklets from the pocket of her blue vintage dress. Maybe she was sleeping now. All exhausted, curled up on Crow’s chest. Already back to her old self. A tiny wrinkled grandma in the black wings of the raven boy. But it weren’t just two people sleeping. Those were magical creatures. With the ability to shape shift, read minds, mend and destroy objects and people. He could not risk being caught again. Because now he knew what punishments meant in this establishment. There was a cool little metal ring sitting angst his nostril because he had smoked a cigarette. And the girl he had shared said smoke with was just as cold now. The blame lay on his body as if it was her corpse. As if her dead body was hugging him still, cold blue arms wrapped around his neck. Her chest not heaving anymore. Silence. It was senseless to ask what had killed her. Whether it had been an Ori feeding on her… a magic spell cast by Madame Yu or whoever else possessed witchcraft in this place… Min Yoongi had killed her. The boy whose name was written inside the cigarette package was the culprit. He had put her up to smoke. Despite Pumpkin’s urgent warning of “Don’t you ever give her a cigarette”. One of the recurrent images was Pumpkins teary stare. It had been there in his eyes… despite the cold purple lenses… Yoongi’s guilt had reflected in them. He, too, deemed him guilty. Yoongi tossed the blanket aside for a sudden heat wave washed over his body. He went from shivering to sweating within a matter of seconds. All the tries to ground himself had failed. He had forced himself to stick to his old habit of counting to ten. But by ten she still had been dead. His sweaty fist was clenching around the purple marble now. He kept holding on to it as thought it contained Kitten’s soul and this way he could keep her here. It was all he had. The cigarette pack was just a shell… a container. The marble was the only solid content. It wasn’t even his but he would keep it safe. As a totem. To help him tell reality from dream.

There were footsteps coming down the hall. Irregular footsteps. Someone was staggering towards the dormitory. And Yoongi could really already tell by the way the naked feet stomped on the ground. It was Pumpkin. The way he moved when he wasn’t dancing, almost clumsily for someone who was light as a feather on stage, was so distinct. Yoongi’s fingers clenched tighter around the marble and he listened as the sliding door was pulled open, ripped open rather, and the arrhythmic jingle of anklets chimed as the boy navigated through the rows of occupied futons. Yoongi heard him plunge down somewhere close behind him where there were the last empty beds left. And then he heard him snuffle. Turning on his other side slowly to not make any sound, he pressed his lips shut tight when he saw that Pumpkin’s shoulders were shaking. He lay with his back to Yoongi but he was evidently crying silently. Yoongi’s brain shortcut when he got up on his elbows, leaned over and touched his shoulder. Pumpkin sat up with a start, his breath stumbled as he tried to swallow a cry of surprise.

“Shhh”, Yoongi murmured, his fingers still clasped around Pumpkin’s shoulder. Even though the bluish morning twilight rendered everything softer and he had finally taken out the contact lenses, he could see that Pumpkin’s face was puffy from crying. Allergic to the salt in his own tears, his lips were swollen and a red half-circle had formed above them. There was no make-up on his face
The tears had washed it all away. He looked at Yoongi with some sort of reluctance, defiance even.

“What’d you want?”, he muttered, vocal chords muddy with mucus. He snuffled again, swallowing what ran down his throat. He hiccupped. Yoongi noticed that his breath smelled of wine. Maybe he had tried to drown the sorrow about Kitten in alcohol.

“Please…”, Yoongi breathed. “Can we talk?”

“What’s there to talk about?”, Pumpkin retorted with a slur.

“Please”, Yoongi insisted, tightening the grip on Pumpkin’s shoulders.

“Fine then. We’ll go the kitchen”, the younger mumbled and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

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The kitchen was the room at the very end of the corridor. Right next to the dressing chamber Yoongi had done his make-up in earlier. It looked nothing like the rest of the bathhouse. And it looked nothing like a kitchen. The walls were painted light blue. And there were transparent yellow curtains hanging in front of the big window, they were not drawn shut. There were three black leather sofas gathered around a low tea table that was cluttered with empty dishes, magazines, books and some cards were lying around. The part of the interior that had earned the room its name apparently was a very small kitchenette that consisted of nothing but a sink, a cooking plate and a small cupboard that was hung on the wall above it. What was this place? It looked like the backstage area of club that Yoongi had performed in a couple of times in the course of some Hip Hop battles. No red curtains, no velvety pillows, no incense smoke. Just the smell of cold coffee… and a faint hint of weed. Just like those of the dormitory, the windows overlooked the sea. If there had been a sunrise, they would have been able to watch it from here. But this was one of the days that just turns different shades of grey, a sadder one with every hour. There was something to this kitchen. It felt like a safe-haven… a piece of normality within this house of different shades of red.

Pumpkin hiccupped again and let himself drop down on the sofa next to the window. He reached for a half-empty pack of tissues on the table and blew his nose as loudly and clumsily as he walked.

“Why are you crying?”, Yoongi asked and shoved his hands into the pockets of his harem pants. He let the marble drop back into the cigarette pack after fumbling with its lid for a few seconds.

“None of your business”, Pumpkin blocked him off and grabbed one of the black leather pillows that belonged to the sofa. He pressed it against his chest and then drew his knees closer to his body.

Yoongi walked over to the sofa and sat down next to him. Not too close. But close enough to see him clearly without glasses. And to touch his arm.

“No reason to bitch around now. Tell me the reason you’re crying.”

“Tell me a fucking reason not to cry”, Pumpkin snorted and wiped his cheeks on his own shoulder for his shirt to catch the tears that were still spilling from his eyes.

“Cut that. Tell me”, Yoongi whispered. And the plea in his voice made Pumpkin see reason. He sighed and his facial features relaxed a little. He shook his head and rolled his eyes but it didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to tell Yoongi. It was just an expression of how done he was at this point.

“Well, it’s obvious isn’t it…? I got into a fight with my man. Would be sleeping in the cellar otherwise.”
“I see”, Yoongi replied. His heart skipped a few beats. But he figured that if this fight had been about him making out with Bird in Pumpkin’s absence, the pink-head would not be sitting here facing him like that now.

“He’s such a motherfucking idiot… I love him… I fucking do. But I could fucking punch his face right now. And if he’d lose some teeth I wouldn’t even be sorry.”

“Was that fight about Crow?”

Bird had told him. If he and Pumpkin got into a fight, it was always about Crow. It seemed to have some sort of impact on Pumpkin that Yoongi could immediately tell. It seemed to appease him as much as it stirred his anger back up at the same time.

“That shit-eating little maggot… How can Bird be so motherfucking blind? Not blind. Ignorant. He’s fucking delirious to any reason at this point. All because he’s romanticizing some fucking memories. Wonder what else has to happen before he accepts that his little baby raven has turned into a cold-blooded killer who would murder us all in our sleep.”

“Pumpkin… I need answers. I… I need you”, Yoongi said before he could hold back. Pumpkin shot him an irritated glance. His whole face was still swollen but the tears had run dry.

“Please stop with these implications now. Let’s have a straight talk”, he elaborated further to play down his last sentence. Making this personal and telling the boy that he needed him definitely wasn’t the smartest idea. As much as he wanted it gone, Pumpkin apparently couldn’t do without the competition of egos. And Yoongi didn’t want to grant him the satisfaction of seeing this battle as won.

“You need me”, Pumpkin mumbled to himself, smirking through the veil of sadness. “Now that’s something coming from the boy who wanted to rip my head off for doing my job a few hours prior.”

“Can you stop being such a bitch?”, Yoongi hissed, his words lacking the bite he intended from them to have.

“Sorry, it’s part of my nature”, Pumpkin shrugged.

“I don’t like you”, Yoongi mumbled weakly.

“A whole fucking mood”, Pumpkin laughed through his nose without actually smiling. “I don’t want to raise false impressions either. I think you’re hot. And I wouldn’t mind you in our bed. But I don’t like you… either.”

He said it like a child in kindergarten insisting that he was the first to play with the blue toy car and that Yoongi couldn’t take it from him now.

There was a certain something between them. An unsmiled smile, if you will.

“I feel like I’ve known you for longer than I actually do… feels like I’ve hated you for ages at this point”, Yoongi mumbled not looking at Pumpkin. But from the corner of his eyes, he saw the corner of the boy’s mouth twitch. And he himself couldn’t keep his cheek from twitching a little. Despite all that. There was a laugh lingering between them in the air. Like the first ray of sunlight even though the sky was gray. And it filled Yoongi’s heart with gratitude. And his eyes with tears.

“Oh, come on!”, Pumpkin intervened when he noticed them sparkle on Yoongi’s waterline. “You’re not gonna be a fucking crybaby sissy and wheeze about the fact that we just kinda made friends on… on the basis of our mutual hatred for each other.”
Yoongi turned to him, tears streaming down his face.

“I fucking killed her”, he sobbed and wiped his face with his black sweaterpaws.

“The fuck?”, Pumpkin frowned, tilting his head to the side. “Killed whom?”

“Kitten!”, Yoongi burst out. Now really mad at Pumpkin for being this sluggish.

“Fucking bullshit that is, boy! For real, Suga… as if. As if the cigarette you gave her had made the big difference… She was doomed way before. They wanted to get rid of her for a while now. It would have happened either way. They would have found a reason eventually. We were all trying to avoid those reasons. Me first of all. She was my friend. I did everything I could to make her see reason. But she forced it… Saw it coming and didn’t step out of the way. She knew what she was risking when she accepted that fag from you. You didn’t… how could you have know what was at stake?”

“I could have listened to you when you said that I’m not supposed to give her cigarettes… ever.”

“Blimey! That I live to hear that from your mouth…”, Pumpkin shook his head. It was when Yoongi noticed that he wasn’t wearing the devil horns. Most likely they were still in Bird’s cellar. Maybe they had already gotten ready for bed… had made love… before getting into a fight so bad that Pumpkin had ran off, crying his heart out. His bangs fell over his forehead in almost a heart-shaped arch. He was so picture perfect even in this state of sorrow and exhaustion. Yoongi kept looking for a few more seconds. Taking in Pumpkin’s beauty was like the guilt you feel upon taking the last cookie. You know you shouldn’t be so greedy… but you just can’t help it.

“Say… who knew about your plans of smoking with Kitten? Knew that you were in possession of cigarettes… except for me?”

Yoongi swallowed his own saliva and stared at a half-empty coffee cup on the table that someone had left behind.

“A few”, he finally said to buy time. There was an answer he didn’t want to give. But knew he had to eventually.

“Hope knew about them… he was with me when I found them in a pack I was about to throw into the trash… you know… in this private room you told us to clean up together.”

“Who else?”

“Crow”, Yoongi said what the other wanted to hear. “We smoked after having sex in the fields. And he suggested the balcony. Said it was safe around 1 in the morning…”

Pumpkin raised both eyebrows at him dramatically and Yoongi avoided his glance on purpose.

“That proves absolutely nothing”, he added even though it wasn’t what he thought. There was no way around suspecting Crow at this point. He might have set him up to that time and place on purpose. And then leaked the information to Madame Yu.

“But there also was a frog…”, Yoongi suddenly said, surprised by his own realization. “The one who came with fresh clothes. He watched me transfer the cigarette pack from my old pants to the fresh ones he brought. And I also offered a fag to him…”

“Why… would you offer a tobacco to a frog?”, Pumpkin asked with a bemused smile.
Yoongi shrugged.

“Don’t you ever brain-fart…?”

“In case you didn’t know yet… Crow is the head of the frogs. But I sent that particular one to you. I told him to keep an eye on the door of that bathroom and bring in new clothes once No Face had left. It’s the very same frog I sent off with the note for Bird in case you remember… I trust him. He is my frog so to speak…”

“Then… at the end of the day… you’re more suspicious than Crow”, Yoongi mumbled his lids flinging up to cast Pumpkin a glance. He got a reproachful look in return.

“You serious?”

“You told me not to trust you…”, Yoongi defended himself. “Twice. Reaffirmed it even.”

Pumpkin didn’t reply to that. He leaned over the table and fished for the handle of the coffee pot that was standing right in the middle and shook it a little when his short and stubby fingers had finally gotten hold of it. The sound of liquid swirling around in the container told them that there was still some coffee left. Pumpkin eyed the dirty cups and went for one that at least was empty. He poured some coffee and Yoongi found himself inhale the bittersweet scent as deeply as he could. It reminded him of something. A faint memory… white sheets… and peonies in a flower vase. But like a single sheet ripped from a paperback novel, he didn’t know where it belonged. The rest of the scene was missing.

“Want some?”, Pumpkin asked and then took a sip. He pulled a face as soon as the liquid unfurled in his mouth. “Ugh… there’s nothing worse than half-hard dicks and lukewarm coffee.”

“Word”, Yoongi smirked bitterly but still accepted the cup from the younger. He made a point of turning it a little so they didn’t have to drink from the same spot and then gulped down a few sips, never minding the inconvenient temperature. The black taste made the memory rise up again. Like a kite it soared but quickly flew out of sight. Lost in thought, he nibbled on the rim of the cup staring into space, oblivious to the sharp glance that rested on his face. Pumpkin eyed him with an intrusive attentiveness. For whatever reason.

“That Suran died is not your fault, hear me?”, he said with a cold voice.

Yoongi blinked with irritation.

“Suran?”

“It’s Kitten’s real name… I refuse to call her by that stupid nickname now that she’s gone. She was nothing like a cat… Cats are stealthy and smooth… She was this little elephant galloping into her own demise.”

He smiled and caught some tears that welled up in his eyes again.

Yoongi was too baffled to be affected by the sadness in his words. Suran. That melody. He had heard that name before. Just like her face, her name was a like a song resounding in the back of his head. The familiar sigh of her hair… the warmth of her little body that had not felt foreign in his arms. His incapability of actually grasping the memory and pinning it down made him groan with frustration. Pumpkin apparently mistook it for an expression of disagreement.

“It’s okay… stop blaming yourself. I wish all the people could finally fucking stop blaming themselves for the mistakes others make… my man… Bird… he’s just like that. Still thinks it’s his
fault that Crow did what he did… does what he does… It’s ridiculous. As if that fucker didn’t have Suran’s blood on his hands as well.”

“What did Crow do to Bird that earned him his burnmark?”, Yoongi asked, looking straight at Pumpkin’s face lowering his coffee cup. The other pulled down the corners of his mouth.

“Can’t tell you. I promised him not to tell anyone. Sorry… but the only thing that’s bigger than my hatred for Crow… is my love for Bird. And that means I’ll keep my word.”

“Can I guess and you just agree when I come up with the right answer?”, Yoongi ventured. Who else would tell him if not Pumpkin? He was his only way to this crucial information. But the younger shook his head.

“No. The chance is too big that’s you’ll guess right at the first try.”

“Does it have something to do with the scar on his throat?”, Yoongi asked. Pumpkin rolled his eyes and looked to the side, he didn’t answer. Just dragged his tongue along the inside of his cheek.

“I slept with Hoseok”, he then suddenly said.

His words forced a blunt dowel into Yoongi’s heart. He doubled over with pain, resting his elbows on his knees to exhale the pressure. He knew he didn’t have the right to be jealous after what he had done this morning. But he was. He fucking was. Pumpkin must have noticed that he was clenching his jaw, grinding his teeth. For he took a deep breath and then went on.

“We were asked to. It’s not even like Crow said… I didn’t really advertise him to them. They asked. Because we did the performance together… figure it fueled their fantasy… But the two couples didn’t engage with us. Only with each other. They wanted us as some kind of live action porn to inspire their dynamics. They asked us to do it on the table. That’s where he did me… on the table top.”

Yoongi clenched his fists and started counting. He gave up at five. At ten he would still want to punch something.

“Why are you telling me this?”, he pressed out between gritted teeth.

“Cause last time you were giving me hell for not speaking up when you thought I should have. Wanna avoid that kind of situation in the future.”

He said it gruffly but Yoongi wasn’t stupid. He was very much able to decipher that situation as what it actually was. Pumpkin meeting him halfway. Acknowledging his wish for truth. Or was it just Pumpkin showing off how easily he had gotten laid by the man that he knew Min Yoongi loved with every part of his being?

“How was it?”, Yoongi forced out. The syllables blended into each other because he tried to get it out as quickly as possible.

“Say what?”, Pumpkin frowned.

“The sex. How was it?”

“You sure you wanna-?”

“Fucking tell me already”, Yoongi burst out, raising his voice.
“Was… good. Yeah… good, I guess. If I may say so…”

“Gimme the details”, Yoongi demanded against his will. This was one of the ways in which his masochist tendencies showed. If there was an inconvenient truth he needed to dig down to the bottom of it.

“He was pretty gentle with me… Don’t get me wrong… we put on a whole show… he was very dominant but… in a very natural and caring way. Others would have used that situation shamelessly. They asked Hoseok to fuck me senseless… and that’s what he could have done, I guess… But whenever they weren’t looking, he reassured himself that I was still comfortable. It wasn’t that easy, you see… I had to act all unwilling and shy… The “Please don’t, Oppa!” shit… you know… Guess it wasn’t easy for him to tell whether I was really alright. But he did a pretty good job. He’s a decent partner to work with… knows how to use lube and condoms… He… he made sure I came as well even though he wouldn’t have needed to. He’s a good man… You should have kept him. If I was you I’d try to win him back.”

There was a sour taste on Yoongi’s tongue and it wasn’t the coffee. He cracked the knuckles of his fingers and started to floor, the worn out dark blue carpet that was full of crumbs and fluffs.

“Did… did he come?”

“Yeah… he threw me a smile when he did. That’s when I knew he wasn’t faking it for the audience. We used protection… don’t worry.”

“God”, Yoongi wiped his face harder than necessary. It made him see stars for a few seconds.

“Hey… I’m just being honest with you… You wanted straight-talk. I wouldn’t have touched him if it hadn’t been called for… since I know how you feel about him. I might be a hoe… but I’m not a fucking asshole. I don’t touch someone else’s man. Only if given permission.”

“I give you my permission”, Yoongi whispered to the floor.

“Say what?”

“I’d rather he sleeps with you than with someone of the guests… some other employees I don’t know.”

His sentence led into a long silence.

“Are you for real?”, Pumpkin asked eventually.

Yoongi just shrugged. But then he lifted his head again.

“Can you hook us up?”, he then asked.

“Hook you…? Oh. You mean whether I can arrange that you get to… work with him?”

Yoongi nodded.

“It depends on the guests’ choice… but I’ll see what I can do…”

Yoongi just nodded instead of saying thank you. He didn’t know whether he really wanted that. But it was a chance, wasn’t it? The ultimate chance to get close to Hoseok after all… He imagined himself in a private room with him and some faceless guest. Hoseok treating him on a professional polite level as he had treated Pumpkin today. Making sure he came, too, because he always cared
about others. Would it make a difference? If he entered his body would he remember? And what if the guest asked for Hoseok’s blood? What would Yoongi do then?

“Thank you for your trust… I like Hoseok. When we practiced for the fan performance earlier we got along pretty well. Clicked immediately. He’s a fucking great dancer. I see him as some real competition. Not as a threat, though. Our styles are very different. But I love to work with someone this professional. He has… he has very nice hands. The way he steadied my hips made me feel I could completely trust him. It was… a nice change for once. I’m always terrified while having sex with the guests. Beforehand I told him about my limits… and limitations, if you will. And he was very understanding and paid attention to all of it when we were in the situation. He’s a powerful young man… hopeful.”

Those last words hurt way more than the information that both Pumpkin and Hoseok had experienced a climax during their staged intermezzo. Yoongi knew how easily Hoseok could make people cum with the self-confident touch of his warm hands. But he knew oh so painfully well how much a smile of his could do to a soul. It was more than an orgasm could do to the body, after all.

“I’m sorry he… forgot… I mean… that things between you are like that now… I’ll see what I can do about hooking you up with him. Maybe you can win him… anew.”

“How about a change of subject?”, Yoongi asked and handed the cup back to Pumpkin who drank from the same spot Yoongi’s lips had occupied for quite a while.

“What was the fight with Bird all about?”

“Crow. Even after I gave him a detailed description of the effect Tae’s performance had on the crowd, he still refused to believe that Crow is up to something. I… I can’t with him sometimes.”

“When I… ran up to the Midnight Bar to look for Hope and Moon after… discovering Kitten I… I caught Crow… I mean I… spied on him… he had… sex with…”

“The old witch?”, Pumpkin flicked an eyebrow at him and placed the empty cup back on the table.

“Dunno… It looked like her but… you know the girl wore her dress and her hair looked similar and it was in her office and-”

“Rejuvenating spell”, Pumpkin said in a bored voice. “Lasts for about an hour. Well she wouldn’t last longer anyway… but I think it’s very considerate of her to use it… Not that I would grudge that motherfucker doggy-styling her in her true form but… ya know… kinda considerate of her.”

“So they… have sex on the regular and you know about it?”

“Fucking everybody knows about it. They are not being exactly discreet about it. Once I walked in on him doing her on the fucking buffet tables in the Midnight… I almost lost my eyesight. It was disgusting. But it gets her off I figure… having everyone know that she fucks a man who looks 150 years younger than her.”

“He… he looked like he enjoyed it quite… a lot”, Yoongi mumbled voicelessly, staring at the sheer yellow curtain. The expression he had seen on Crow’s face while he had been with that woman was not one he had seen during their hours in the peony fields. Crow had enjoyed his body, visibly. But with Madame Yu, he had basically looked like he was on a fucking transmigration of souls or something. Was he heterosexual after all?

“Oh, I can tell you from experience… it’s hella great fucking a witch… And I’ve only gotten to experience half the deal so far… Being with Bird is one thing… when he’s really into it sometimes
even his energy is too much for me… like… the signals his body sends off then… this buzzing… it’s too intense… I can’t even imagine what it must be like to sleep with the most powerful witch out there… well… second most powerful. Most powerful would be Taehyung…”

“Isn’t it… disgusting of her to force him into that kind of… relationship?”

Pumpkin burst out laughing.

“Force him? You fucking kidding me, Hyung?”

“What’s so funny about this? It’s a fucking serious question.”

“The question here is who’s being more disgusting… Do you really think Crow is the one suffering in this relationship? Do you really think he lets himself be forced into something against his will?”

“You mean he has a thing for older women?”

“Yoongi… please. Tell me that you are kidding. He has a thing for her magic skills. The power it gives him. Have you already forgotten what we told you about having sex with a witch? Their energy is transferred onto the people they physically engage with. How else do you think Crow is able to read people’s minds and work all different kinds of other magic? She might use him for his looks and his youth. But he sure uses her to get more powerful than the rest of us. Shamelessly.”

Yoongi buried his head in his hands and sighed. A new wave of exhaustion washed over him and he clenched his stomach at it. It roared.

“You hungry?”, Pumpkin asked and shifted a little in his spot on the couch.

“Never mind… I’m just fucking tired, I… I can’t think straight anymore… It’s just…”

“It’s too much”, Pumpkin took the words out of his mouth. “You’ve been through a lot today. You should rest now.”

Yoongi leaned back and let his head fall on the backrest of the sofa. It was morning already. They had talked all the way through dawn. But the sky behind the yellow fabric was still gray.

“Where is Kitten’s body now?”, he asked in a hoarse voice, facing the ceiling.

“We have a morgue here. Her body is gonna be burned tomorrow. That’s one of Bird’s jobs… as the fire keeper. It’s not really well-received here… but I will make sure she gets proper obsequies. She’s not the first we’ve seen off at the shore.”

Yoongi swallowed thickly. He pressed his eyes shut before the tears could spill over his waterline.

Minutes went by without either of them raising his voice again. Yoongi listened to the distant sound of waves crashing against the building’s lower levels. The smell of the coffee calmed him… or maybe it was the faint hint of weed. No… it was the pink smell… the peony scent that got more intense by the second. And suddenly he knew why. Pumpkin’s head had fallen to the side and when it finally sank on Yoongi’s shoulder, he found himself engulfed by a sweet, sedating cloud of flowers. Gently and little by little he let his cheek sink into Pumpkin’s fluffy lavender hair. A relieved breath escaped the younger’s plump lips. Yoongi bit back his own sigh and let his eyes fall shut. The minutes passed, only filled with quiet breathing. But suddenly Yoongi’s lids popped open again when he felt Pumpkin’s hand on his thigh. He was making a fist, extending his stubby pinky finger. Yoongi glanced down at it with a frown on his face, cheeks still buried in the younger’s cotton candy hair.
“Mh?”, he asked, drowsily.

“Promise me…”, Pumpkin mumbled, his voice already sedated with sleep.

“Promise what?”, Yoongi replied.

“That you won’t die in here…”

“That’s… not up to me, though”, Yoongi laughed drily.

“It is…”

His finger was still extended, expectantly.

“Then how do I not die in here?”

“This place…”, and while he spoke he turned his head a little, suddenly Yoongi could feel his words against his neck. “… is the night. The Midnight Rose. We are all part of the night in this bathhouse. And so are you. You’ll have to be your own light to make it out of here. Promise me to be your light. Light as in daylight… Light as in sun.”

Yoongi’s pinky finger curled around Pumpkin’s and they both held on tight for a few seconds before their hands relaxed again. Their fingers stayed hooked to each other, though. Yoongi meant to say goodnight. But he drifted off to sleep before he could find his voice again.

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Yoongi’s whole body was shaking with sobs. He was sitting on the dormitory’s balcony, back resting against the glass window. It was around noon and he had stayed behind on his own when the other employees had gone down for late breakfast. Through the red-painted wooden bars of the balustrade, he could see the ocean. It was gray as well and blended in with the sky. Just like his sobs blended in with the constant patter of the rain. It covered them, gave him an excuse to not hold back anymore. Finally he was alone with all the things he needed to sort out.

This bathhouse had taught him to cry. It was his third day here and he had already cried more often than in all of the last year. Just like the clouds had been too heavy with rain, his heart had been about to burst with sorrow. He couldn’t hold back anymore. Needed to let it all out. His whole body hurt. His neck was stiff from sleeping upright on that couch. Pumpkin’s odor had soaked through his clothes, the presence of the boy was still with him even though Yoongi had woken up to him being gone. Maybe he was downstairs, making up with Bird. Hopefully. When they had arrived here, it had been the middle of summer. And now the earth was drowning in autumn rain. Yoongi bit his arm, buried his face in his sleeve because he felt the sobs distorting his face. The situation was just too messed up. Every hope he tried to forge up led to a dead end.

In his memory, it was raining as well…

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The raindrops were chasing each other down the shop window of the café in Sinchon, Seoul. Yoongi was lounging in one of the two armchairs that were separated by a little round coffee table. He had his Airpods in but no music was playing. The tip of his boot was nervously tapping against the tabletop from below. His eyes were fixed on the door to keep himself from looking at the counter. It was a fucking stupid idea to meet here. But he couldn’t have voiced that. So he had accepted Hoseok’s suggestion. Let’s talk. Why? They had broken up weeks ago. What was there still to talk about? They could have talked at home. In the room they once used to share. Or on
neutral grounds. In the kitchen or on the living room couch. No need to meet up in this café that smelled of memories more than it smelled of freshly roasted coffee beans. Their love had started in winter. And all of those couples who start dating in winter have some café stories to tell. Stories of hot chocolate cuddles and shared pieces of cake. Min Yoongi and Jung Hoseok also looked back on moments like these. And a great deal of them had played out in this very café. The Black Leaves. Too bad that not all of them had ended in cinnamon kisses and holding hands in the snow. There was one story that had started in this café that couldn’t be recounted just like the others.

It was a story Jung Hoseok had begun… and Min Yoongi had finished… and he hadn’t gone for a happy ending.

He shot the barista a brief glance and regretted it immediately. Of course his eyes were on him, too. Yoongi had never seen eyes that black. They were like shiny black glass marbles and his pupils were so big that they seemed to fill the whole sockets of his eyes. He was so fucking gorgeous. The way his arm biceps flexed under his skin tight black shirt when he handled the coffee machine and wiped the bar with a cloth. There was golden jewelry jingling around his arms and dangling from his ears. He had a thing for gold. And had the money for it. Yoongi didn’t know him well. Not at all. But he knew that he was a student at one of the most expensive private universities in Seoul. And he didn’t work as a waiter to pay his tuition… no no. He worked as a barista because he liked coffee. The Black Leaves was famous for its slow, dripping coffee that took ages to brew. They also served cold brew and coffee from the tab. To Yoongi, coffee was something he poured in his head to keep his motor running. He didn’t drink it for the taste but for the caffeine flash. And for the young barista it was a science… a lifestyle… something he showed off in front of his sophisticated friends. At this point, he knew that his name was Jeon Jungkook. But he hadn’t heard it from him. He had been in his life as the nameless black barista for a long time. The nameless black barista that Hoseok glanced at every once in a while when they were here and he felt neglected by Yoongi who was always busy replying to client’s e-mails. They had given him the nickname Crow. Because Hoseok’s imagination was a little too vivid and he enjoyed assigning spirit animals to people he met. It had made Yoongi particularly soft to be called his “Kitten” in very intimate moments when he had crawled into bed, eyes already heavy with sleep and what Hoseok figured to be a cat-like expression. He had always just snorted and shaken his head in disbelief about the name. But he had loved it. And had been very ready to agree with Hoseok that the boy behind the counter in their favorite café looked like a raven prying down from the gallows, spreading its silky wings while croaking down at the man who had just been hanged. He was always wearing all black, head to toe, a small apron around his hips and a little pouch clipped to his belt that held the café wallet and his phone on which he was always texting his fuckboys while working. He was texting Yoongi now.

“Ey sexy… Didn’t think I’d see you again round here. Busy tonight?”

Yoongi ignored the message until the display went dark again by itself and made a point of propping his head on his hand, acting unmoved and idle.

He had read his name on his birthday cake. The day he had taken him home. It was also because of his birthday that they had been forced to make it quick. Because he was supposed to attend a party that friends threw for him at a sky bar in some high rise building in Gangnam later that night.

Jeon Jungkook, it said in black letters on the white frosting. The day he had slept with Min Yoongi. The cake had waited on the desk in his room of the apartment that he shared with a friend. Next to a bouquet of peonies, his favorite flowers as he had briefly commented before pushing Yoongi into the white sheets of his decadently big bed. There had been the faint smell of weed lingering in the room, apparently he had smoked with his room mate last night, waiting for midnight and his birthday to start. But very soon it had been overlaid with the pink odor of the flowers and the black coffee smell that the boy emitted, that seemed to cover his golden skin, his
raven black hair. He had played Yoongi like a love song. Not asked any questions, just read in his eyes the very obvious fact that he enjoyed it. Enjoyed cheating on his red-haired boyfriend that he had seen him exchange subtle kisses with at times when the café had been empty enough for them to feel comfortable. Jeon Jungkook knew that Yoongi had still been in a relationship back then. And he had not given a flying fuck. And back when he had dug his black-painted nails into the pristine white sheets, giving the black-haired boy every moan that he had been holding back in front of Hoseok, he had deemed it as rightful. He had relished the feeling of the plump peony blossom running over his skin. Finding out just how ticklish Yoongi was, Jungkook had been quick to pull one flower out of the vase and tease him with it. And Yoongi had very much enjoyed the thought that he received a special treatment. That it was his goddamn right to let himself be consumed by the tempting darkness this boy was. Turned out it was not. But then again… even if you know that someone else is doing it… does that mean you have to do it yourself?

That day he learned. That rainy day in the café when Hoseok came to talk to him, reach out to him for this one last time. Expecting them to make up eventually… wanting it from the bottom of his heart… that was way purer than Yoongi had thought, after all.

Hoseok looked around as soon as he entered the café, umbrella still only halfway closed. Big droplets of rain were dripping down from it onto the mahogany floor boarding, leaving darker stains on the already dark wood while the redhead’s eyes scanned their past usual spots. He was clearly afraid that Yoongi might not be there. There was relief washing over his face when he spotted him at the table next to the window, the one they had chosen on their first ever date here. Yoongi observed Hoseok fumble with the umbrella that didn’t seem to close at first. When it finally he did, he threw it into the umbrella stand with an unnerved roll of his eyes. He avoided glancing at the bar, too, and just marched towards Yoongi’s table, taking big steps, filling the room with his loud presence.

Jung Hoseok had never carried around an umbrella. The one he had brought here today was Yoongi’s. It had been this thing between them. When the weather forecast announced rain, Yoongi had always made sure to remind Hoseok of packing an umbrella. His ex had always nodded but never actually bother to really act on the advice. But Yoongi had meant it when he said he didn’t want Hoseok to get drenched and catch a cold. He had meant it when he said that the boy needed to get his act together and start behaving like a proper adult. His argument that his jacket was equipped with a nice big hood was such a childish thing to say. Grown-ups didn’t want their hair disheveled and their clothes soaked. So Yoongi had always slipped the umbrella in the sports bag that Hoseok took to work.

“Look at you… you actually learned to take an umbrella with you?”, Yoongi greeted him with a snort. He couldn’t say that it sort of touched him.

“It’s pissing!”, Hoseok exclaimed in an unnecessary loud voice for other guests to turn heads and again rolled his eyes dramatically.

“Did that ever bother you?”, Yoongi asked.

“Lately it does”, Hoseok sighed gravely and let himself drop down on the chair opposite to Yoongi’s so they could face each other. “I don’t even know… the shitty weather lately really gets to me… mentally.”

“Are we here to talk about the weather?”, Yoongi asked and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. Silently he wondered whether it was an implication that he still wasn’t over their breakup. That the gloomy weather darkened his mood even more… No rain ever had the power to ruin Hoseok’s sunny attitude. What was with that weather talk all of a sudden?

“I don’t know… It’s… exhausting somehow. Feels like I constantly have to brace myself against
something… to stand tall.”

Yoongi raised an eyebrow.

“What are you having?”, he finally asked when he decided that he didn’t know what to return to Hoseok’s confession of feeling that way. But oh man was he right, it was exhausting… Looking at his face every goddamn day, knowing that he had screwed this up. Not knowing how to approach him. Win him back. Unable to stab his pride and make the first move, obviously also incapable of making the second one now that Hoseok had initiated a talk.

Hoseok briefly scanned the menu card that lay on the table between them only to go for what Yoongi hoped he was going to pick. What he had always picked.

“A vanilla Latte and a blueberry muffin”, he mumbled and pulled out a tissue to wipe his face that was sprinkled with raindrops despite the umbrella. Because having learned to bring one and learning to use it were two different things for Jung Hoseok.

“I'll go and get that. Was just about to order an Americano”, Yoongi made a move.

Hoseok nodded to himself, a little confused as it seemed and got up to fumble for his wallet in his back pocket.

“I got this”, Yoongi stopped him. He got up and made for the counter before Hoseok could even protest. He tapped his black-painted nails on the dark wood, waiting for Jeon Jungkook to turn around from the record player that stood next to the old fashioned coffee machine. He had gone for a Beatles record. Norwegian Woods. He really was that kind of hipster. When he kept skipping through the records, Yoongi cleared his throat, very sure that Jungkook was just pretending not to have noticed him. He just wanted to see how Yoongi called for his attention. Eventually, he turned around with a vicious little smile on his particularly pretty lips.

“Ignoring me?”, he whispered and Yoongi was immediately struck with a flashback of the weight of his body on his own. The taste of peony petals unfurled on his tongue.

“I’m busy”, Yoongi returned curtly. “Can I get an Americano, a Vanilla Latte and a blueberry muffin?”

“Sure you don’t want something else?” Jungkook smirked to himself and typed his order into the counter. Yoongi didn’t bother to answer his question and just collected some coins to avoid the situation of waiting for his change.

“Will you still be busy with him tonight?”, Jungkook asked, making no move to accept the money from Yoongi. “Did you guys break up? Haven’t seen you around ever since that night…”

That night of staining his sheets with the liquid of smushed peony petals. The rest of which Yoongi had spent in a bar high above the lights of Seoul. Feeling the starless night sky press down on his body as he glanced at it through the glass ceiling. It had been a night of people in masks. People not showing their real faces, people as fake as Jeon Jungkook who had been busy walking around, clinking glasses with everybody at the buffet. He had found the time to do him again that night, though. On the grand piano in a sideroom of that bar, apparently the storeroom where it was taken when it wasn’t needed. And after that he had sent Yoongi home because he was planning to spend the night with someone else. They would not sleep together.

“Don’t see how this is any of your business”, Yoongi snapped again, still tapping the wood with his nails to pressure Jungkook which he knew would have zero effect.
“Awww… why so snappy?”, the raven boy asked, dragging the coins over the counter in what felt like slow-motion to Yoongi. “I missed you, honey boy. Still think about it from time to time. I rarely ever had someone this needy in my bed. God… I could swear you were almost crying when you came. When I caressed you with that flower… you were so sensitive, remember?”

Yoongi’s eyelids flung up.

“Seriously… I’d prefer not to”, he hissed and then bit the inside of his cheek.

“It’s human nature”, the boy winked and Yoongi could swear his eyes were so black it was like getting stuck in fresh tar. He was everything that Hoseok was not. Mysterious, that bottomless black hole you could lose yourself in. And who was Yoongi to claim that it didn’t attract him? But sometimes it’s not just about that. Sometimes it is about having found home in a person.

“I’m free tonight… Would you be in for some drinks and… how about I eat you out again after that? You really seemed to enjoy that last time when you were up on all fours on that piano.”

“Please stop”, Yoongi shook his head.

“I’ll serve you at the table”, Jungkook just winked and then turned around to prepare the ordered drinks.

“I miss you”, Jung Hoseok blurted out the second Yoongi was seated in his chair again, he was about to fold his legs and his right thigh remained in mid-air until his brain had fully processed the sentence.

“Say what?”

“I miss us… just… you know… what it was like… I mean we fought a lot and… I get how we just don’t work out but… and you’re right when you say that we are better off now but… you know…”

Yoongi frowned at him. He felt tears well up in his throat like hands climbing up a jute rope. He looked away and blinked, contemplating his answer. And he knew already that took up way too much time. Hoseok had hoped for a spontaneous reaction. An outburst of feelings. Which Yoongi tried to repress frantically. He never cried. So how in the hell could he allow himself to cry in a public café?

“You know…”, he started awkwardly, looking for words that communicated how he kinda felt the same but how he still stuck to his original opinion that it was better that way.

The tray that Jeon Jungkook shoved onto their table brought him around the rest of his sentence. Yoongi swallowed so hard that it was audible all across the room he felt.

“I figure the pitch black Americano is for you, huh?”, Jungkook chuckled and shoved the cup over to Yoongi. “So the Vanilla Latte must be for your sweetheart then, right?”, he threw an exaggerated smile at Hoseok who just pulled up the corner of his mouth with irritation. Yoongi was looking for it. The hint of intimacy between them in either of their eyes. Who would let it show first? Apparently it wasn’t Hoseok. He really seemed to be somewhat taken aback by Crow’s flirty approach. And also the raven barista didn’t act like he knew Hoseok particularly well.

“Do you share the muffin?”, he asked playfully to which Yoongi just violently shook his head and pointed at Hoseok.

“Speaking of sharing…”, Jeon Jungkook started the sentence and Yoongi held his breath. “If you rejected my offer for a little repetition because of him… He’s invited, too. I always had a thing for
him as well, you know? You guys are very different from each other… Like fire and water. But each has his own charm. Now that I got to try one, I’d also like to get a taste of the other. Would you be in for a threesome?”

This was how Yoongi had learned that Jung Hoseok had not slept with Jeon Jungkook. That his loudly voiced plans to get the attention from someone else had been nothing but an empty threat.

“Where are you going, huh?!?”

“Black Leaves. The place where I get more suggestive glances from the barista than from my so-called boyfriend who’s mentally always in his goddamn studio. Give me one good reason not to enjoy myself with him.”

“Go. Go ahead, enjoy yourself with him!”

“Fine then… see you tomorrow… maybe.”

Hoseok had not come home that night and they hadn’t seen each other in the morning either. Yoongi had avoided leaving his studio after he had heard the apartment door being unlocked around noon. But when he had gone to the kitchen later that day to grab a yoghurt, he had seen Hoseok sit on the couch and text with a big stupid grin on his big stupid horse face. And he decided not to ask.

But this had also been how Jung Hoseok had learned that Yoongi had used their next big argument two weeks later to go to the Black Leaves on his own. Sit at the counter and make a point of sucking at his straw while forcing eye-contact with the blackest pupils in the entire world. Jungkook hadn’t lost a single word about Hoseok that day. Meanwhile Yoongi knew why. Because there wasn’t anything to say. Because Hoseok had just tried to make him jealous, had probably spent the night at one of his girlfriends’ place.

“You’ve slept with him?”, Hoseok had asked in a small voice after Jungkook had left them with a cocky smile and his fateful offer. Yoongi would never forget the helpless disappointment that had washed over his ex-boyfriend’s face that very minute. There had been something final to it. Something that could not have been saved or repaired. Like a petal that drifts to the ground for good and can never be reattached to the blossom.

Yoongi had just nodded. Looking at that petal in the dirt. Mourning it.

“Before or after we officially broke up?”

Before. The night he had slept with Jeon Jungkook, he and Hoseok had ignored each other’s texts but on paper they had still been together. It was only a couple of days after, that another particularly nasty disagreement about Hoseok wanting to go out and Yoongi wanting to stay home and work had made them both see that there was no use in this anymore.

“Before”, Yoongi had said to the Hoseok’s untouched muffin in order to avoid his eyes. “It was the night you went to the movies with Namjoon and the girl he was dating back then.”

“I see.”

It was the emptiest words Yoongi had ever heard Jung Hoseok say. The one and only time he had shown no emotion whatsoever. Yoongi had expected an outburst. A storm. But he hadn’t even gotten a wind. Hoseok had stood up from the chair and all Yoongi had been able to look at were the holes in his jeans, the ones around his knees because he didn’t dare to raise his eyes up any higher.

“Thank you for the coffee and the muffin”, Hoseok had mumbled and then walked off. And he had
left Yoongi’s umbrella in the stand.

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He had lost Jung Hoseok that day. And now he had lost him for good. There had been comfort in the thought that Hoseok, too – willing or not – did remember them. That he, too, saw flashbacks of their shared moments when he looked at Yoongi’s face. In a certain way, their love had lived on in those memories. Even if Hoseok had decided not to cultivate it, feed the memories with daily reminiscence like Yoongi did because he was gravely hurt… there had been at least some scenes, moments, glances and smiles that he would not have been able to forget. Yoongi had decided to never clear the situation up. Never address it again. Because there was no excuse. Even if Hoseok had really slept with Jungkook… it had not given Yoongi the right to do it, too. He could have read in his words that the threat of sleeping with him had been a repose of defiance, a scream for Yoongi to wake up and finally show some feelings, the interest Hoseok felt he was lacking in him. This had never been about who was cheating on whom. But about Yoongi having failed as a boyfriend. Failed to give Hoseok the love he deserved the way he deserved it. It was better for him to think that Yoongi was cold. Hate him for the fact that he had cheated on him. “I thought you had done it too”, was no excuse. Because they could have talked. Could have cleared it up. Yoongi should have faced him instead of running from his problems. Hoseok had always been a little too loud, a little too direct. But Yoongi was a coward. He had not given up on winning Hoseok back because he didn’t want him anymore… but because Hoseok deserved so much better.

Yoongi had found stability in the thought that he at least was part of Hoseok’s past. Something he had secretly taken pride in. But it, too, had been robbed from him. That last thing he had clung to. In a way, it had been taken from him by this place or at least that was what he kept telling himself… to mask the fact that Hoseok himself was to blame. He had taken it from Yoongi. Taken himself from Yoongi. With his carelessness… the drugs. Either way… Yoongi was alone now. Alone with a heart full of love. That burned brighter than the sun. Love doesn’t evaporate if two people part ways. The truth is, sometimes it grows stronger. It was as if Hoseok’s memory was with him now. He had to keep it safe. He would. In his heart there stood a golden shrine. Filled with the fragments of their shared laughter, greedy kisses and all the words they should have said… he should have said at the right time.

“Fuck this”, Yoongi croaked and clenched his fists between his thighs. He was exhausted and still the tears kept pouring down his cheeks as if it was raining from his eyes, too.

“Suga Hyung.”

The raspy voice drove through Yoongi’s core like a blade. He froze in his position and glanced up at his ex-boyfriend. Jung Hoseok leaned against the half-open sliding door and contemplated Yoongi with a worried frown. He was holding a baozi wrapped in a paper towel.

“What’s wrong?”, he asked with great concern. Yoongi couldn’t speak. He just stared up at him, knowing his face to be a swollen, deformed mess at this point. His nostrils flared and he gulped heavily. Then he shook his head. Hoseok kneeled down beside him. They looked at each other, neither apparently knowing what to do. But then Hoseok came up with something. With a hug. He doughtily reached around Yoongi’s back with one arm and pulled him against his chest, the steaming bun still in his other hand. Yoongi looked down at it, too perplexed to react at all. Now he was crying out of shock. It was a place he thought he had lost forever. The place in Jung Hoseok’s arms. Not even home could feel this painfully familiar. It was like returning to your place of birth after having won a war. Or maybe lost it… only to find that those you stayed alive for at the front were all gone now. It came so unexpectedly that he was still in the middle of realizing it when Hoseok withdrew to look at him with a questioning look that was the worst of all. He had no fucking clue
that Yoongi was crying about him.

“Hyung… tell me… What the hell happened?”

Yoongi had to hold back not to reply with “you happened”. He just pushed out some air through his nose and cleared his throat, feeling a whole new level of pathetic.

“Didn’t you hear about it yet…? A girl died last night… part of the staff. She… we…”

He sighed and forced back the image of Kitten’s bluish face. “I liked her a lot and we were starting to become friends… I hung out with her only an hour before… her death. I… I’m still coping. I was there when she was found. Her body…”

“Oh my God”, Hoseok whispered. “You knew her? I’ve heard about it… Everyone’s talking about her. It’s the girl who served drinks at the Midnight Bar last night, isn’t she? The one with the kitty ears… I didn’t really get the chance to talk to her but she brought me some ice tea backstage after the performance. She was really nice… I’m so sorry to hear that… the two of you were close… I… oh my”, he shook his head in genuine dismay. Yoongi’s glance got caught on the purple streak in his dark-dyed hair. It looked so wrong and misplaced. Good… but Yoongi’s heart was missing the red in the same way he was already missing the embrace that had just happened.

“If… they talk about her… what do they say about how she died?”, Yoongi asked, voice shaky. He wiped his cheeks with his thumb. As if it would make a difference.

“She was found with a cut throat”, Hoseok whispered gravely. Yoongi frowned at him. He hadn’t even seen that… His whole attention had been on her face. The face… that hadn’t been hers anymore. An image of Bird’s scarred neck flashed through his mind. Cut throat. Vampires do not bite… they cut. There was pattern to this.

“The guests are…”, Hoseok began and Yoongi held his breath in anticipation of what he was going to say. “They are… potentially very dangerous. Have you already heard about it?”

“Yeah. I heard that… some of them… even ask for it during hookups”, Yoongi tried to test his knowledge further.

“They do?”, Hoseok asked, astounded. Yoongi exhaled with relief. So he hadn’t done it yet.

“Listen to me… don’t you ever… agree to it. It will get you killed. Just like her.”

“I would never”, Hoseok gaped at him with eyes and mouth wide open. It looked comical. In all the seriousness of the situation he… again… always… was over the top.

Yoongi nodded and the corner of his mouth sparkled a tiny smile.

“I mean it… just… don’t.”

You don’t need to. I will do it for you. You go earn money with your dancing…

“So… they say it was a guest?”

“They rather say that a guest wouldn’t do it just like that… out in the open… leaving her body behind as an evidence… But obviously an Ori was part of that… they said so… that’s what it looks like when they drain you. What I heard is that… it could have been avoided, you know? Like… Nobody did anything against it while they knew it was going on… and there’s another thing… seems like her Spirits have been taken from her…”
“What?”, Yoongi forced out, voice muffled with disgust. “You mean like… somebody took the money from her dead body?”

“Nobody seems to know the details. Maybe she and the Ori fought about the money… She can’t tell us anymore. Have you seen her? What did she look like? Did she look like she died fighting?”

Yoongi just shook his head.

“You don’t wanna know…”

He recalled the scenery. And like the contours of someone in the dark, an ugly thought began to take shape in his mind. Pumpkin had been standing there, extending his arms, keeping the rubbernecks off the corpse. Did that mean he had been the first at the crime scene? Crow’s words about the employees stealing from each other found their way back into his brain. And he just angrily blew out the thought like smoke between his teeth.

“Why do you look so pissed all of a sudden?”, Hoseok asked. He then raised the hand with the steamed bun as though it had just hit him that he was carrying it around.

“I brought this for you!”

“You did what?!”, Yoongi snapped, angry with surprise.

“I was holding out for you at the breakfast table. I figured that maybe you were still asleep… last night I saw you leave the room with Pumpkin... or rather this morning. I assumed you still had some business to do and were too tired to come down and eat together with everybody else. Thought you might be hungry… was a long night.”

Yoongi felt a gust of wind blow the cool drizzle against his heated and still swollen cheeks. For a moment he asked himself whether he had made up the last few sentences. Whether it had been his mind, his wishful thinking, playing tricks on his hearing. But Hoseok was holding out the baozi with a sweet inviting grin – it was a grin, not a smile because he always had to overdo it. So he had sat there down in the hall around the breakfast table with the others and he had thought about him… Suga… the boy he had met yesterday when they were assigned the same room for cleaning. Something about this first impression… this second first impression had apparently stuck with him. And made him wonder whether Yoongi was okay… whether he was hungry.

“Thank you”, Yoongi gulped and snatched the bun from the familiar hands. He was fucking starving. His stomach was still burning with the sourness of the cold early morning coffee. He sunk his teeth into the soft dough and looked up from it to check Hoseok’s facial expression, check why he was chuckling.

“Glad to see you enjoy it”, he smiled and the way his pearly white teeth showed made it feel like the sun had found its way through the clouds eventually.

“Chew well though… don’t want you to choke on it”, he added and lowered his glance, picked at the golden embroidery on his black pants. His glance fell on Yoongi’s cigarette pack that had slipped out of his pocket and lay next to him on the wooden floorboards. He gave it a flick with his fingers as though he wanted to reassure himself that it was really there.

“Did you already smoke the cigarettes we found yesterday?” he asked curiously, not having the slightest clue what he was probing into. Yoongi stopped mid-bite and then swallowed around nothing.

“There’s only one left”, he finally mumbled vaguely. He didn’t want to tell the story to him. Not
suffer through it again. He was clinging to what Pumpkin had said about the cigarette just adding the final drop to a barrel that he, Yoongi, had not filled.

“You shouldn’t smoke so much”, Hoseok raised his eyebrows, glance making a point of what he said as it had always been.

“I know”, Yoongi nodded and took another bite from the bun. It was filled with pork and onions in a rich brown sauce. Right now it tasted like the best thing he had ever eaten. “I won’t smoke the one that’s left”, he added, truthfully. Obviously he wouldn’t dare to touch a cigarette in this establishment ever again.

“Why, though?”, Hoseok asked, never satisfied with a simple statement. He always needed elaborations, details, reasons.

“I’ve decided to quit”, Yoongi said, looking directly in his eyes. The new Hoseok had no idea what that sentence meant said between them. But Yoongi still did.

“Awesome. I’m happy for you. Best decision you made today”, Hoseok winked. “How about you break the last one? As a symbol for a new beginning?”

That was so him. Everything had to be symbolic. If things didn’t have a meaning, he made one up. Just like with his sun and moon tattoos.

Yoongi finished the last bite of the bun and wiped his mouth with the side of his hand. Then he let his tongue run over his teeth to check whether they were clean. He couldn’t use a cooked onion between his front teeth right now.

“If that’d make you happy”, he shrugged and reached for the red and white Marlboro package. He quickly got the cigarette out, unwilling to tempt Hoseok to a second time of asking who this Min Yoongi was. He then held it out in front of him, still painfully aware of the fact that this was what he should have done months ago. But you can’t just quit for another person… you have to quit for the sake of your own life. He broke the cigarette open in the middle holding out the two equally sized pieces to Hoseok. He took them from his palms and threw them over the balustrade. The wind caught them and Yoongi wondered whether they would ever make it to the sea.

“I’m proud of you”, Hoseok beamed. Yoongi just scratched his nose and then wiggled his head.

“Whatever”, he shrugged. Hoseok’s smile faded as his glance travelled into the distance, losing focus on Yoongi.

“It’s strange…”, he finally mumbled and Yoongi really couldn’t tell what he was talking about.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t remember anything like… not even the smallest detail from the life before… I woke up here. I mean… I’m really grateful that Madame Yu offered me this chance and… that she still has faith in me after what I… apparently did. But… You know… I just feel… I feel so… lost.”

Yoongi glanced up at him and Hoseok met his eyes briefly before his glance retreated onto Yoongi’s nose.

“You didn’t have that nose ring yesterday, did you? Is it fake?”, he leaned in a little to take a closer look and Yoongi held his breath.

“No I… got it last night”, he murmured, trying to avoid breathing in Hoseok’s face.
“I like it… the fact that it’s golden… doesn’t make it that obvious”, he reached out and touched the small ring with his fingertip. Yeah. He had to touch everything he saw. His hands. He could never keep them to himself. His ever moving hands, the fact that they never held still while he was talking, had been the first thing Yoongi had hated about him the day he had come to apply for his room. And it was one of the things that he still loved the most now. Yoongi crunched his nose and a little dent formed in his chin. Did he make that up or did Hoseok’s smile return at that?

“What did you just say about feeling lost? Mind telling me more about it?”, he asked.

“You know… it’s just… I keep thinking that maybe it was for the better… if that makes any sense. Maybe it’s a good thing that the old person I used to be sort of… died, you know? But… It’s just… I feel so empty… They call me Hope… but the truth is… I don’t even remember my own name. The clothes I’m wearing aren’t mine… I’ve taken on this job that… Don’t get me wrong… I’m grateful for that opportunity… and I don’t really mind what I’m doing… I love… I love to dance. This I know for a fact. It’s like the only thing I remember. And I… God that must sound so… shallow but… I also like sex… a lot so… Last night I… worked with… Pumpkin and it was… I had a lot of fun… I’m really okay with doing what I’m doing… but I wish I had something… to remind me of who I was… before…”

Yoongi’s eyelids opened slowly.

“What…. If I told you that I knew you before? And that I still remember who you are?”

Hoseok chuckled. He obviously didn’t even take believing him into consideration.

“You can’t even imagine how much I secretly hoped for that because… and this must sound so creepy but… I feel like I know you… it’s just… I mean I can’t even pinpoint it… It’s just that feeling when I look at you… your face is familiar. That’s why – in retrospect – I find it kinda funny that you mistook me for someone else that first night. Because it feels like that’s what I’m doing myself. Mistaking you for someone I know.”

Yoongi would not tell him who he mistook him for. Do I kinda look and sound like one of your ex-boyfriends? Oh no. All that was left in Hoseok was this vague feeling of recognition. The faint hint that there was something between them. And Yoongi would not cut that thin thread by telling him when and how they had broken up. Remind him of the very fact that he had cheated on him. Hoseok had thought about him during breakfast… that boy that gave him this indefinable familiar feeling. And decided he liked him enough to bring him food and check on him. Even if it was with the subliminal intention of maybe learning something about himself in the course… it was a basis to work with. Yoongi would go from here. He would not tell him who he himself was. But he would give him back his identity.

“It might surprise you but… We may actually know each other… I remember your name. I don’t remember my own… but for some reason… I remember yours.”

Yoongi had to smile a little while he watched Hoseok’s face cloud with confusion just like it had happened at their first encounter. When Yoongi had not been able to hold back a laugh and had clearly been laughing about him not with him.

“Your name is Jung Hoseok”, he then said, shaking a strand of his mint hair off his forehead.

“Hoseok?”, the young man in front of him repeated, his face now fogging with incredulity.

“Yeah.”
“Are you sure…?”

“I am sure.”

“It doesn’t ring a bell, though.”

“I’m still sure”, Yoongi whispered softly and clenched his teeth to bite back new tears that were welling up in his eyes. Hoseok didn’t seem to notice just how close to crying he was but he apparently sensed a change in the atmosphere to which he reacted with raising his voice and readjusting the bright grin on his face.

“Either way… I wish I just had something to… hold on to… something to take care of… like your cigarette pack… It’s so weird owning virtually nothing… neither memories nor something material.”

Yoongi reached for said cigarette pack. He opened the lid again and shook the only remaining content onto his palm: the purple marble.

“Here… you can keep it. It’s a present. View it as a new start… you can build an empire of both memories and material goods from here…”

When Hoseok’s fingers closed around the marble he froze in mid-motion.

“Min Yoongi”, he said with a frown so deep that it almost seemed to cut his forehead in half.

“Say what?!”, Yoongi breathed, voice a whisper, heart screaming.

“I…”, Hoseok shook his head. “That name just popped into my mind but… it’s the name that’s written in the lid of your cigarette pack, isn’t it?! Who’s Min Yoongi? Why…? What even?”

They blinked, glances altering between the other’s eyes and the marble on Hoseok’s palm. Until Yoongi had arranged the words he was going to say.

“Min Yoongi is… a friend of mine. Who once made a very big mistake. I carry his name around to remind myself not to screw up the same way he did.”

“What did he do?”, Hoseok asked, curiosity lighting up his eyes. Yoongi’s glance caressed the sun tattoo below his ear.

“You don’t need to know…”

He smiled, tiredly.

Hoseok’s finger played with the purple glass marble, rolled it around, proving that every part of his body could come up with a spontaneous choreography.

“It’s so strange… Suddenly I have this image in my head. You’re sitting opposite of me… in a moody lit room… could be a café… the memory tastes of vanilla latte”, he mumbled and the marble stopped between index- and middle finger.

* 

“Young Master!”, Yoongi was shouting the words as he rushed towards the billiard table in the Midnight Bar. He had met Pumpkin on the stairs and he had suggested looking for Taehyung in the Midnight that was closed today just like the rest of the bathhouse. It was a day off to clean up the mess from last night’s party, a day of rest before the next one. Taehyung’s 18th birthday that was tomorrow. The boy had been playing pool with three employees that Yoongi hadn’t been introduced
to yet. Now he was standing there, cue propped against his hip as he watched Yoongi approach with surprised delight.

“Suga Hyung! Do you wanna play with us? I won the last round!”

“Congrats!”, Yoongi forced out, short of breath after running up the stairs like hell. He caught himself against the table and ran his fingers through his mint hair, accepting that the boy was – again – dressed in a cropped top, this time a long sleeved one and that the waistband of his purple mirror-work harem pants didn’t exactly cover his belly button.

“Could I have a little one-on-one with you?”, he asked and sent a smile after his words. It jumped over on Taehyung’s lips immediately. His crown sat a little lopsided and Yoongi couldn’t deny just how cute and sexy it looked in his untamed platinum hair.

“You want to be alone with me, Hyung?”, Taehyung smirked and his fingers ran up and down the billiard cue. Yoongi gulped and scratched his neck.

“If you… if you wouldn’t mind… I’ve got a question… or two”, he threw an apologetic glance at the other staff members who were also waiting for the game to continue. But Yoongi figured that they couldn’t complain if the young master himself kept them waiting.

“I’ll be right back”, Taehyung cooed at them and – very much to Yoongi’s relief – handed the cue over to his team mate before he followed him over to the bar. The glass shelves with the expensive alcohol bottles weren’t lit and all of the stools were empty. Taehyung climbed on one right in the middle and Yoongi stood next to him, facing the stage.

“I like the nose ring”, Taehyung smiled brightly. “I want one, too. But my Mom wouldn’t let me… She says I’m not supposed to look like the employees. She doesn’t even want me to dye my hair.”

“So this is your natural color?”, Yoongi asked. “This metallic purple… grayish… silver…?”

He didn’t really know what to call it. But he sure knew that the way to Taehyung’s heart, which also was the way to the truth in this case, was showing interest in him. Maybe even flirting a little.

“Yeah, this is my natural color. Just like my cousin has light blue hair… all witches are born with this type of… metallic pastel hair. I don’t like it… it’s not bright enough.”

“Your hair looks… gorgeous”, Yoongi returned and he didn’t even have to fake it. It came out pretty convincing. His hair was gorgeous. Rarely ever had Yoongi seen something so erotically messy. The curls seemed just as loaded with want as the boy’s chest. He was about to burst with sexual energy. Yoongi could feel his buzzing on his own skin despite the inches that still separated them.

“Do you really think so?”, Taehyung breathed and one of his hands wandered into his strands, the curl bounced back up after he pulled at it.

“The color is fascinatingly beautiful”, Yoongi reinforced his statement and allowed their eyes to meet for a few seconds. He couldn’t deny that it flattered him the slightest bit just how openly Taehyung let show how much he wanted him. The problem was that he wanted everybody this way...

“Listen… Tae…”, and he watched with satisfaction how the nickname made the boy’s eyes sparkle. “I really need to ask you something… you like to play with glass marbles sometimes, don’t you? I mean you taught me this game of picking them up and…”

Taehyung reached into his pocket and produced a hand full of marbles from it. And Yoongi was pretty sure that they hadn’t been in there a second ago.
“You mean these marbles?”

They were held in the colors of the Midnight Rose. Reds, blues but most of them were purple and pink. They all had their individual swirl pattern inside but most of them were very similar to the one he had given to Hoseok.

“Yeah… exactly. Are they… are they magic marbles?”

“What do you mean by that?”, Taehyung smiled, puzzled.

“Whether they have… a magical effect on people when they touch them.”

“What kind of effect did they have on you?”, Taehyung breathed, blinking slowly. How could a smile be that suggestive? It was already half a touch. Was he bewitching him? Because it almost felt like there were invisible hands drawing him in. And that beauty mark on his honey brown skin seemed to become more enticing with every waking second. He’s 17 for fuck’s sake, Yoongi scolded himself. Only for a few more hours but still. You’ll keep your hands off this boy. Especially before midnight.

“Not me… I mean… just tell me. Did you… put a spell on them or something? You can multiply them, can’t you?”

Taehyung wiggled his hand and when Yoongi was done blinking, twice the amount sat on his palm. He did it again and already the multicolored glass beads threatened to spill from his hand, one fell and hit the ground next to Yoongi’s naked foot. Then Taehyung tilted his palm and the noise of the glass balls jumping away in all directions of the room made all heads turn around to them. Taehyung watched the marbles roll away with a smile before he made a move like pulling at a rope. And they all came back. Gathered in his palm and melted into each other until only five of them were left. Taehyung shrugged.

“Wow”, Yoongi whispered.

“They are not enchanted though… I can multiply them and do other tricks… but here… go ahead and touch them…”

Yoongi brushed over the remaining five with his fingertips. Except for a slight buzzing sensation from their owner’s skin, there was nothing.

“They are really just glass marbles.”

“When you… the day we… my friends and I arrived here… you were playing outside and were the first one to notice us, right?”

Taehyung smiled guiltily.

“I liked you from the beginning… sorry I touched your neck on that carrousel without showing myself to you… but it was so much fun to watch you get all confused. It was fun touching you and seeing you blame it on the wind.”

Yoongi sucked in some air.

“Never mind”, he then sighed. “What I’m driving at is something else… That table where we lost consciousness… could it be that you lost one of your marbles there?”

The expression on Taehyung’s face changed a little. There was some actual guilt creeping in.
“Well… I’m not supposed to talk about what happened there.”

“I already know. That Pumpkin and Bird took our belongings and… that you went through our bags and snatched my friend Moon’s Rubix cube. It’s fine. You can keep it. I just need to know whether the marble I found there was one of yours.”

“Possible. I crawled around under the table to pick up your bags… might have fallen from my pocket. Why? What did my marble do. Where is it now?”

“I… I used to keep it in my cigarette pack but… I gave it to Hope. Because he wished for something that he could call his own. It was… the only thing I had on me… so…”

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. You can keep it. He can keep it. I have enough of them!”, Taehyung reassured him. “But why would you think it’s a magic marble?”

“Because… when Hope accepted it, he… remembered me.”

From the way Taehyung’s jaw moved, he could tell that he was biting his tongue. He waited for Yoongi to go on.

“Like… the second he touched it, he remembered my name… couldn’t really sort it out… didn’t really take it seriously… but it was like the door to his memory had opened just the tiniest crack. I… Can you explain that? Do you know anything about it? Is there a way to make more of his memory come back…? With the marbles?”

Taehyung worried his bottom lip from inside. He was contemplating something. Then he raised his glance at Yoongi rather arrogantly.

“It might have something to do with the marble that he suddenly remembered things, yeah. And there is a way to make his memory come back.”

Yoongi’s heart caught fire.

“For real! Tell me, Taehyung! Please… This information is crucial for me… you know he… Hope he… means a lot to me.”

“I know”, Taehyung nodded slowly. He stressed every single syllable. Humming the words rather than just saying them. “What do I get if I tell you what I know?”

Oh no.

“Well… what do you want?”, Yoongi asked.

“Oh, you know what I want… Suga Hyung.”

His smirk was a touch. That ran along Yoongi’s intestines.

“No… what is it?”

“I want you.”

Yoongi exhaled slowly.

“Think about it, Hyung… My Mom will go to the village later this evening to order food for my birthday tomorrow… She won’t be here… I’ll be playing in my room then… If you come to play with me, I’ll tell you the secret of that marble.”
Once again, your feedback would be highly appreciated. Please reach out to me if you follow this story and share your thoughts, it means the world to me.

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